



# Understanding Islam

by DAVID GUNN

The sun dawns. A new day has begun. Before the magnificent flaming celestial orb tinges the clouds pink at sunset, the name *Allah* will have been spoken hundreds of millions of times. As muezzins across the globe issue the call to prayer, devout Muslims bow toward Mecca, praising Allah and bringing their petitions before him. Recitations extolling Allah's virtues are repeated throughout the day, both for comfort in times of distress and as expressions of celebration in moments of victory. "Allah is great!" one adherent shouts. "Allah is the light of the Heavens and the Earth," another intones. The words of the *Shahadah* ("there is no god but Allah; Muhammad is his prophet") spill effortlessly and habitually from the mouths of the Islamic faithful. They are whispered into the ears of sleeping Muslim infants. They are earnestly confessed as the final words of countless who are dying.

The impact of Islam on the world could scarcely be overstated. Boasting more than a billion adherents, it is the planet's second-largest religion, and one of the fastest-growing. But Islam's relationship with Western cultures has been long and complicated. Events such as the Crusades (11th–15th centuries), the conquest of Constantinople (1453), the Barbary Wars (early 19th century), and various terrorist attacks and retaliatory strikes in our day have tended to cultivate deep resentment between Islamic and Western civilizations. This is not universally true, of course. Due to multiculturalism, tolerance of and respect for other religions and traditions are at an all-time high. Still, most Christians have only a passing knowledge of Islamic history and theology at best. Some react with fear and hostility to the presence of Muslims in their neighborhoods, while others are content to ignore them entirely.

Operating under the assumption that God would have us "make disciples of all nations" (not just the non-Islamic ones), and understanding the truism that a people group must be understood before it can be communicated with, this article is offered as a brief introduction to Islamic history and theology.

## Origins

It was a cold night in Arabia. Within a dark cave on the mountain Jabel al-Nour, a few miles northeast of Mecca, Muhammad slept. He had made a tradition of venturing to this mountain for extended periods of solitude and meditation, a common practice among the religiously minded of his day. But on this night, in AD 610, something extraordinary would happen. It would set Muhammad's life, and the flow of world history, on a brand new trajectory.

Exactly what occurred in the Cave of Hira that night is impossible to determine with certainty. But according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad was suddenly wrested from sleep by the sensation of a terrifying presence. A creature, whom Muhammad later identified as the angel Gabriel, joined him in the cave. He seized Muhammad and issued a single command: "Recite!" Muhammad protested, "I am unable to recite!" After all, he was relatively uneducated and did not at that time consider himself a prophet. The angel repeated the injunction twice more, and finally Muhammad's tongue was empowered to proclaim new revelation from Allah. Under this ostensibly divine influence, he spoke the following words: "Read aloud! In the name of your Lord and Cherisher, who created—created man, out of a mere clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And your Lord is Most Bountiful."

Muhammad was utterly terrified. He had had several ecstatic experiences previously, but none had been as tangible and overwhelming as this one. Deeply disturbed, he rushed home to be comforted by Khadija, his wife of 15 years. Muhammad feared that his vision had been instigated by demons, but Khadija and her cousin, the scholar Waraqah, assured him that it was of God and that he had been visited by Gabriel. Muhammad came to accept this, and shortly thereafter began his prophetic career. He was 40 years old.



Convinced that Allah was the one and only God, Muhammad began to denounce his culture's widespread polytheism. At the time, Mecca was a major center for idol worship. The Kaaba, a cube-shaped building in Mecca, was a shrine for hundreds of idols representing the provincial deities of the various Arabian tribes. Unsurprisingly, Muhammad's campaign against idolatry raised the ire of his neighbors. Fellow Meccans became increasingly hostile toward him, and when his uncle and protector Abu Talib died in 620, it became necessary for Muhammad to flee. He relocated in 622 to Medinah (then called Yathrib), where he found a populace eager to hear his new teachings. Muhammad's flight to Medinah (the *Hijra*) is so significant in Islamic history that it marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Within a brief period of time, Muhammad became Medinah's spiritual and political leader. In that role he was able to build a massive army with which he expanded his politico-religious control over all of western Arabia. In 630, just two years before his death, Muhammad returned to Mecca and conquered it. On June 8, 632, Muhammad died of natural causes. He was buried in his home in Medinah.

After Muhammad's death, Islam spread rapidly beyond the confines of Arabia. Over the next century, Muhammad's successors conquered regions of modern-day Israel, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Libya, Spain, and India. Today, vast swaths of Africa and Asia lie under Islamic control.

## Beliefs and Practices

Islamic sources of authority include the Qur'an, sunna, and *ijma*. The Qur'an is the supreme holy book of Islam, and is accepted as such by all Muslims. They believe it was dictated by Allah to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, then written down by Muhammad's followers. The Qur'an is divided into 114 sections, called suras. They are not arranged chronologically, but in order of decreasing length (except for Sura 1, which is introductory in nature and comprises only seven verses). Apparent contradictions between Qur'anic verses are explained away by the doctrine of abrogation: whenever two passages seem contradictory, the passage written later

supersedes the earlier one.

The sunna is the rule of life drawn from the extra-Qur'anic accounts of Muhammad's life and teachings. Sources for sunna include the hadiths (collections of written tradition about Muhammad) and the *sira* (early biographies of Muhammad).

The *ijma* is a very broad term denoting the consensus of the Muslim community on theological matters. It is viewed as a valid authority by Sunnis but is generally rejected by Shias.

## Denominational Distinctives

Sunni and Shia are the two major Islamic denominations. Sunnis constitute the majority, claiming somewhere from 75 to 90 percent of the world's Islamic population. Shia Islam commands the allegiance of approximately 10–20 percent. But while these are familiar terms, many struggle to understand the distinguishing characteristics between Sunni and Shia thought. This is unsurprising: compared to the doctrinal differences between Christianity's manifold denominations, the differences between Sunni and Shia Islam seem relatively minor.

It all began in 632. With Muhammad's passing, the question of his rightful successor became a burning issue. Many of those who had been closest to Muhammad held that the most qualified candidate should be elected by a group of prominent Muslim leaders. This resulted in the appointment of Abu Bakr to the caliphate the same year. But there were those who disagreed with this decision. They believed that Muhammad had designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his rightful successor. Sunnis stand in the tradition of Abu Bakr's followers, while Shias stand in the tradition of Ali's. Although Ali did eventually ascend to the caliphate in 656, he was assassinated five years later by a fellow Muslim. This led to the decisive Sunni/Shia split in 680 at the Battle of Karbala, in which Ali's son Hussein tried to retake the caliphate. Hussein was injured during the battle and tried to retreat, but an enemy combatant named Shimr tracked down and murdered him. This created a deep rift between Sunnis and Shias that has never fully healed.

The major differences between Sunni and Shia Islam are as follows:

- Sunnis view authority as residing within the consensus of the Muslim community, informed by Islam's holy

texts and traditions. Shias centralize authority in the hands of the Imams, whom they view as the spiritual successors to Muhammad, Ali, and Hussein. Shias believe that the Imams are sinless and infallible.

- Islamic rituals vary somewhat in their particulars as exercised by the two groups.
- The two groups differ on which hadiths and works of *sira* are valid sources for sunna.
- Sunnis believe that Allah's predestination encompasses everything, while Shias view it as limited only to certain events.

Another group is Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam. Sufis seek to perfect their worship through asceticism. By turning away from worldly attachments, they believe they can achieve total devotion to Allah. It is important to note, however, that Sufism is not a denomination in the same sense as Sunni and Shia Islam. Rather, it is a branch of Islam that incorporates both Sunni and Shia in its ranks. The whirling dervishes, practitioners of the sacred dance, are perhaps the most recognizable expression of Sufism to Westerners.

### The Six Articles of Belief

It is helpful in discussing theology to differentiate between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right behavior). A good overview of these two theological prongs in Islam is provided by the six articles of belief (orthodoxy) and the five pillars (orthopraxy).

*Article 1: Belief in God.* This belief entails far more than simply that there is a God (theism). It further prescribes that Allah is the only God and that he is absolutely singular. Putting anyone or anything else on the same level as Allah (called *shirk*) is regarded as an unpardonable offense.

*Article 2: Belief in angels.* Like Christianity, Islam teaches that multitudes of invisible heavenly beings, angels, exist. Allah is believed to have created the angels from light. The Qur'an makes frequent mention of angels, usually in connection with the delivery of Allah's revelation to one of his prophets. Muslims also believe in an evil rank of invisible created beings called jinn, which were supposedly created from fire (Sura 15:27).

*Article 3: Belief in holy books.* Muslims acknowledge the Torah of Moses (*Tawrat*), the Psalms of David (*Zabur*), and the Gospel of Jesus (*Injil*) as divine revelation. However, they believe that the texts of these revelations as contained in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures were corrupted and altered over time. This necessitated the revelation of the Qur'an. It is regarded as the final and perfect revelation of Allah, which abrogates all previous holy books and corrects their alleged textual corruptions.

*Article 4: Belief in holy prophets.* Islam acknowledges 124,000 prophets, including Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and Muhammad. These were righteous men whom Allah chose to be channels for his self-revelation to mankind. Muhammad is viewed as the last of the prophets, after whom no more shall arise. Muslims believe that Muhammad, not

the Holy Spirit, is the fulfillment of Jesus' words in the Upper Room Discourse: "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper" (John 14:16).

*Article 5: Belief in the Day of Judgment.* The Day of Judgment in Islam is the time when Allah will judge every person on the basis of his or her deeds. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter eternal bliss in paradise, while those whose bad deeds outweigh their good deeds will be consigned to eternal torment in one of the seven levels of hell. Only Muslims will qualify for entrance into paradise; all who do not believe in Allah will be damned. (The second and third levels of hell, *Laza* and *Al-Hutamah*, are reserved for the eternal punishment of Christians and Jews respectively.) However, merely being a Muslim is not enough to guarantee entry into paradise. Muslims must also strive to live in a manner pleasing to Allah, or they will be consigned to the first level of hell, *Jahannam*. For repentant Muslims, Jahannam will be temporary (functioning very similarly to purgatory in Catholic theology). For unrepentant or exceedingly wicked Muslims, consignment to hell may be permanent.

*Article 6: Belief in predestination.* Sunni Muslims believe that all things have been meticulously predestined by Allah. Nothing ever happens apart from Allah's having willed it to be so. This has given rise to the expression *inshallah* ("if Allah wills"), frequently found on Muslim lips. It is often used to express acceptance of a difficult turn of events. It is important to note that Shia Muslims do not hold to meticulous predestination, and so reject this sixth article of belief.

### The Five Pillars

*Pillar 1: Recitation (Shabadah).* "There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is his prophet." This is viewed as the foundational confession for all of Islam. If a Muslim performs all of the prescribed daily prayers, he or she will recite the *Shabadah* a minimum of 14 times per day.

*Pillar 2: Prayer (Salat).* Five times per day Muslims are required to perform *salat*, a ritualistic prayer involving complex bodily movements and the recitation of various Qur'anic passages. Muslims must undergo ceremonial washing before performing *salat*, or the *salat* is invalid. In *A Muslim Primer*, Ira Zepp explains, "These daily acts of worship have the effect of sanctifying the whole day. They punctuate the daily routine with five remembrances of God, which hopefully substitute a consciousness of God for care and anxiety."

*Pillar 3: Fasting (Sawm).* This pillar finds its actualization during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar year. For the entire month, Muslims must abstain from eating, drinking, and sexual relations during daylight hours. These activities may be resumed after sundown each day. In addition to the mandatory ritualistic fasting during Ramadan, Muslims may choose to fast of their own volition anytime throughout the year. This is thought to have a sanctifying influence on the faster.

*Pillar 4: Almsgiving (Zakat).* Muslims are required to give 2.5 percent of their accumulated finances annually. Usually these funds are given to aid the poor or needy. This 2.5 percent is drawn from net, not gross, income.

*Pillar 5: Pilgrimage (Hajj).* Provided they are able to do so, all Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime. Various rituals are prescribed that must be performed in Mecca during the pilgrimage. These are designed to reenact the story of Islam and assert one's solidarity with Abraham and Muhammad.

*Pillar 6: Jihad?* While not officially recognized as one of the pillars, jihad plays a major role in Islamic conduct. There is significant difference of opinion over what constitutes religiously valid jihad. Some scholars distinguish two levels of Islam: greater jihad (struggling against oneself to live a life devoted to Allah) and lesser jihad (struggling physically in Allah's cause against someone else). There is a tendency among those on the left to downplay the military aspect of so-called lesser jihad and to insist that Islam permits it only for self-defense and in the pursuit of religious freedom. The opposite tendency exists among some commentators on the right, who view Islam as a purely violent and militaristic religion. Both of these tendencies are overly simplistic and serve only to caricature Islam and Muslims. The truth regarding jihad is more complex. Some terrorist groups, such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Hamas, interpret jihad militaristically and pursue it with single-minded fervor. Many Muslims (including, at present, the majority of Muslims in America) oppose militaristic interpretations of jihad and view the actions of these terrorist groups as moral atrocities. Still other Muslims, especially among those in certain Middle Eastern regions such as Lebanon and the so-called "Palestinian territories," support militaristic interpretations of jihad and sympathize with these terrorist groups. Sweeping generalizations are therefore reductionistic and unhelpful. Whether militaristic interpretations of jihad are supported by Islam's sources of religious authority is a hot topic that researchers continue to debate. There are certain Qur'anic passages and Islamic traditions (Sura 2:216; 9:5ff.; Sahih Bukhari 4.52.44, 85; etc.) that, taken at face value, seem to support a militaristic, expansionistic interpretation of jihad. But many scholars dispute this interpretation, and the purpose of this article is not to settle that debate.

### Compared with Christian Theology

Islam is not totally dissimilar to Christianity. Both are monotheistic and supernaturalistic, both trace their religious roots back to Abraham, and both share certain themes and emphases. Nevertheless, there are also deep, irreconcilable differences between these two faiths that render them incompatible. Even a brief comparison of major Christian and Islamic beliefs renders these differences obvious.

*God.* The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most basic touchstones of Christian theology. Put simply, it teaches that although there is only one God, He exists eternally as three distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In contrast, Islam holds that God is one both in nature and person. Muslims categorically reject the doctrine of the Trinity, believing that it is tantamount to tritheism (belief in three separate gods). The Qur'an explicitly denounces the Trinity in Sura 5:73: "They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God." It is possible

that Muhammad did not truly understand the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and was reacting against a mischaracterization of what Christians actually believe on this point (see Sura 5:116). It should be clear from these observations that, contrary to the politically correct multiculturalism of our day, Allah and Yahweh are not the same deity.

*Jesus.* Islam affirms of Jesus that He was a prophet, a miracle-worker, sinless, virgin-born, and the Messiah. However, it flatly denies Jesus' deity, crucifixion, and resurrection (Sura 4:171, 157). Christianity regards these doctrines as not only important but absolutely essential for doctrinal soundness and even for salvation (John 1:1-5; Col. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:3-8, 17-22).

*Sin.* The concepts of original sin and total depravity, so central to the Christian metanarrative, are utterly absent in Islam. Instead, mankind is conceived of as basically good but prone to make mistakes. Muslims believe that humans sin frequently, but that Allah can forgive those sins by fiat if the sinner sincerely repents. In Islam, no blood atonement is necessary for divine forgiveness, as it is in Christianity (Heb. 9:22).

*Salvation.* In Islam, entry into paradise is bestowed only upon those who earn it. A person's righteous deeds must outweigh his or her evil deeds in order to escape condemnation. Islamic eschatology offers only one opportunity to bypass the Day of Judgment and gain automatic entry into paradise: the Muslim must die as a martyr. This approach is totally alien to Christianity, which insists that salvation comes only by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:12; 3:16; Eph. 2:8-10). Further, those who so believe are instantly transferred out of the domain of darkness and granted eternal life, which will never be revoked (Rom. 8:1, 33-39; Eph. 2:1-7; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9).

### Evaluation

As Baptists, we are absolutely committed to the sufficiency, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture. We further recognize Christ Jesus as the one and only Savior (John 3:18; 14:6), and must therefore conclude that Islam is an aberrant, false religion, and Allah is a false god. Recognizing that Yahweh is the author of all human life and that it is therefore sacred, we further denounce as sinful the violent actions of militant jihadists and the human rights violations frequently perpetrated in certain Islamic countries.

But that does not mean we hate Muslims. We are not to stand in judgment over them, nor to adopt an attitude of smug superiority. Rather, we are to recognize that they, like we, were born in a state of fallenness. They, like we, were so highly valued by God that He gave His only Son to die for their sins. And they, like we, stand in desperate need of divine forgiveness. May we, like Christ, love our Muslim neighbors enough to take the time and effort needed to understand them. May we value them highly, and with God's help seek to reach them for Jesus. **B**

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