

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

An Introduction to Islam

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Islam is the proper name of a religion; it is not pronounced, Izlam, with a "z" sound. The first syllable is pronounced like the end of the word, "bliss." The Arabic word "Islam" means submission in peace, and in practice it is understood to mean submission in peace to the will of God Almighty. It is also understood to mean total peace that comes from surrender to the will of God Almighty (Allah).

The people who profess the faith of Islam are called "Muslims," not "Islamics." The word "Muslim" is not synonymous with the word "Arab." Islam originated in Arabia and many of the Arabic speaking people (Arabs) are Muslims, however most of the Muslims in the world are not Arabs. Islam is not a racial or ethnic term. There are Asian, European, African, American and Middle Eastern Muslims, just like there are American, Italian, Polish or African Catholics or just like there are Russian, German, Polish or American Jews. Similarly, there are Muslims of all colors and races.

Islam is truly a universal religion. There may be 6 to 8 million Muslims in North America, over 30 million Muslims in Western Europe and 50 to 60 million live in different parts of the Republics that were once a part of Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Albania and others). Significant Muslim minorities live in the Far East (such as China, The Philipines, Thai Land, Viet Nam, Burma, Sri Lanka) and in Eastern Europe (Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina). Islam prevails in countries like Egypt, Syria, Jordan Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sudan, Lebanon, etc.

MOHAMMAD--THE MESSENGER OF GOD

Mohammad (Peace be upon him) was the man through whom Allah (God Almighty) transmitted the teachings of Islam to the mankind. He was born in Mecca, a city on the Arabian Peninsula, in 571 AD. He was orphaned before his birth and his mother died when he was six. He was raised by his grandfather till he was nine when his grandfather passed away and his uncle raised him. He did not

have the benefit of education and was an unlettered man. As he grew up he worked as a shepherd and as a trader in the caravans.

At age 25 he was hired by a rich widow, Khadija, to manage her business and trade. Khadija was impressed by the young man's intelligence, hard work, honesty and integrity. They grew to esteem each other's qualities and got married. Mohammad was married to Khadija for twenty-six years and they had five children. Later on Khadija would be the first person to accept Islam, and she is the epitome of a faithful and devoted wife in Islamic history. The society at that time was rife with polygamy, sensuality and sexuality; temporary marriages were a norm amongst the well to do. However, Mohammad remained faithful to his wife Khadija.

Mohammad grew up in an atmosphere and society of cruelty, lawlessness, war and treachery. He grew up untouched by these prevalent evils. He became famous for his truthfulness, uprightedness, charity and helpfulness. He was a man of kind disposition and was loved by all who knew him. He was deeply troubled by the inhumanity that he saw around him and would leave the city to meditate in a cave on a nearby mountain. One day, when he was 40, he received a message from God Almighty that he had been appointed the Messenger of God.

He spent the rest of his life in an unending effort to deliver the message of God. He remained a messenger the rest of his life, and he had no misunderstandings about his role and mission. He said, "God has not sent me to work wonders, He has sent me to deliver His Message," and, "I never said that Allah's treasures are in my hand, that I knew the hidden things, that I was an angel, I am only a messenger of God's words." Like all other prophets who were sent by God before him, he suffered for delivering the God's message. He was ridiculed and persecuted, and the opposition was so intense that Mohammad and his followers left the city of Mecca and migrated to the city of Medina, which is 270 miles North. This migration is an epochal event in the history of Islam. It took place in 622 AD, and it marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. Mohammad had been invited to Medina by the citizens to assume leadership. He established a city-state, gave it a written constitution and proved to be a very successful politician, statesman, warrior, general and ruler. When he migrated to Medina, the number of fellow Muslims was approximately 5000. When he died at age 63, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula was under the fold of Islam and at the time of his last pilgrimage, at the city of Mecca, he delivered his famous Farewell Address to 150,000 people who had come to Mecca as pilgrims. Within a hundred years, Islam became an established religion in the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.

FAITH AND PRACTICE

For the purposes of discussion and for teaching, Islam is studied under two broad headings, namely, the articles of faith and the acts of worship. Much is so interrelated in these two headings that they are really inseparable. However, they are perhaps the best way to study the religion and the Islamic system of life.

Articles of Faith--Beliefs

All Muslims profess acceptance of God Almighty (Allah) as the One and Only God and Mohammad as the last and final messenger of God. Muslims believe that angels are spiritual beings who carry out the will of God, that Qura'n is Allah's eternal word, that prophets are messenger of God and that there will be a day of judgment and accountability with resurrection, at which time, those subservient to the will of God will be rewarded and those who failed to observe their obligations will be punished. Muslims also have an understanding of destiny as an essential belief.

One and Only One God

The belief in the existence of One God is the first article of faith. God is the most High and Exalted, the Creator and the Sustainer of all that exists, and He is far above possessing any creaturely attributes. He is not bound by any of limitations of the human being, or of anything else that He has created. He has no body nor form, no physical attributes or characteristics. He has no beginning and no end. He does not beget nor is He begotten, and He has no physical dimensions like hunger, sleep, rest, procreation, etc., for He is the one who gives such attributes and dimensions to His creatures.

The Qura'n has described God's attributes in many places, e.g. "God is He than Whom there is no other deity, He knows the Unseen and the Evident. He is the Merciful, the Mercy-giving. God is He than Whom there is no other deity--the Sovereign, the Holy one, the Source of Peace, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Mighty, the Irresistible, the Supreme. Glory be to God, high is He, above the partners they attribute to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the most beautiful names. Whatever is in the heaven and on earth glorifies Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise" (Qura'n 59:22-24), and "No slumber can over power Him, nor sleep" (Qura'n 2:225). There are 99 attributes of God in the Islamic traditions, however, most Muslims remember God as The Merciful and The Beneficent.

Islam proclaims that God is infinitely beyond anything that the human mind or senses can grasp or comprehend, imagine or explain. He is the Originator and the Fashioner of the whole universe and all of its perfect systems, which He sustains according to His infinitely wise plans and laws. Islam proclaims that God alone is Divine and no one else shares His Divinity.

The Angels

God created angels as beings with intellect, but unlike human beings the angels have not been granted free will, and they are subservient to the will of God and carry out God's commands. They are engaged in His service and prayers. Angels serve as protectors of man, and they convey God's messages to man. They also carry out the punishment as God wills. Angel Gabriel (Jibreel in Arabic) conveyed God's revelations to the prophets, including prophet Mohammad. Muslims believe that two or more angels are assigned to each human being to keep a record of all of the deeds and actions until death. This account will be presented on the day of judgment, and the person will not be able to deny its accuracy.

The Revealed Scriptures

The Islamic teaching is that Islam as a religion has been practiced by the righteous since the creation of mankind and that all the prophets of God preached the same message. Many prophets were given scriptures to guide their nations and communities. Muslims believe in the scriptures that were revealed to the prophets before prophet Mohammad, particularly, The Psalms of David, The Torah and The Bible. However Muslims believe that the last revealed scripture is The Holy Quran, and it is the only revealed scripture that has not been changed by human additions or deletions since its revelation 1400 years ago. The Qur'an (The Koran)

According to the Muslim belief The Qura'n was revealed to Prophet Mohammad through the angel Gabriel in small parts over a period of 23 years. Mohammad had several scribes, and the text was recorded concurrently. The Qura'n has 114 chapters that vary in length from four to 286 verses and it contains about 78,000 words. The Qura'n is believed to be the word of God, spoken through the angel Gabriel and recorded by Prophet Mohammad as God willed it to be. The Qura'n regulates every phase of the Islamic law, religious practice, culture and morals. A common Muslim has no doubts about the origin of the Qura'n and does not believe Mohammad to be the author. The Message originated with God Almighty and Mohammad was the chosen man who delivered the Message. The Quran spells out specific commands, but it also lays down the principles for many of the tenets that Muslims have to abide by. All of these principles are not fully explained in the Qura'n itself, but in another body of the Islamic literature that is called The Hadees

(also written as Hadith). There are six such collections and each collection has multiple volumes. The Hadees, or The Traditions, is a recording of the actions, words, and deeds of Prophet Mohammad. For instance, The Qura'n commands that the Muslims should pray and worship, and pay in charity; the Hadees explains the method of prayer, worship and the acts of charity. The Hadees and The Qura'n are complimentary, but the source of all the principles is The Qura'n.

The language of The Qura'n is very different from the language of the Hadees and the difference is obvious to all readers. A complete and detailed account of the life of Prophet Mohammad has been preserved in the Hadees, and it is believed to be unparalleled. It deals with the most personal matters of his life, as well as the conduct of war and the affairs of the state.

The Messengers of God--The Prophets

In Islam the word "Prophet" does not mean the one who prophesies the future, but it means the messenger of God, and it is denoted by the Arabic word Nabi. The Qura'n states that God sent a warner or a guide to every community, nation or tribe of people, and it mentions the names of many of them, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. According to The Qura'n, Adam was the first prophet and from Abraham came a long line of prophets through his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the forefather of the Arab people and thus of Prophet Mohammad, and, from Isaac descended a number of prophets, including his son Jacob, grandson Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus. The Qura'n tells that Moses, David and Jesus were given written scriptures by God, and only scattered portions of the originals remain today.

Islam teaches that Jesus was one in the line of prophets sent to the children of Israel. He brought the message that reiterated the need of submission to God Almighty and obedience to God's law as had been given to Moses. The Qura'n states the miraculous birth of Jesus to the virgin mother, Mariam, by the command of God Almighty. The Qura'n also compares the birth of Jesus without a father with the creation of Adam, who was born without the presence of any parent. The Qura'n states that Jesus was a human being, who delivered the message of One-ness of God and taught that God should be worshipped. The Muslims believe in all the prophets that God sent to guide their people, and The Qura'n proclaims that Mohammad is the last of all prophets of God and that he has been given God's final and complete guidance for all mankind.

The Accountability--The Hereafter

Islam teaches that God created human beings and endowed them with immortal

souls. Each soul is an individual soul. Each individual is valued and has an eternal soul, where as the body has a transient existence, the soul has permanence.

Each individual is differentiated from every other by the quality of uniqueness that is bestowed on each by God. The duty of each person is to work out his or her own destiny, and each is responsible for his or her own actions. The Qura'n says "If any one sins, he/she alone is responsible for his/her sin" (Qura'n 4:3). Islam has given freedom of choice to individuals, but this does not mean a license to do whatever one wills; it indicates freedom from the egoistic and selfish desires of anything.

Life on earth is considered to be a minute part of the totality of existence. The life in the hereafter is of infinite duration. Every individual is accountable for his performance in the worldly life and is answerable in front of God on the day of judgment after resurrection. The Qura'n has many moving and rather graphic descriptions of resurrection and the day of judgment. God will raise every one from dead and will reward or punish individuals based on their record; those rewarded will enter paradise and those punished will suffer the torment in the hell.

An average Muslim believes that God gives life and death and that death may come at any time; thus, every one should try to send on ahead for future existence good deeds that will earn the pleasure of God. With this perception, a Muslim has to live a virtuous life all the time.

The Divine Decree--The Destiny

Islam teaches that every thing that is or happens in the universe, from the smallest to the greatest events, is controlled by God and is a part of His eternal plan. There is no such thing as random or chance events, and nothing happens without His direction or command. This belief is coupled with the perception that all events, happy or sad, in ease or suffering, are a part of God's wise plan and are for the ultimate benefit of mankind. In the face of an adversity, this belief gives the Muslim a tremendous degree of confidence and peace of heart.

In every situation, the task of a human being is to make a sincere effort and strive to do his best. Islam discourages it's followers to sit in resignation; however, whatever results from effort is to come from God's decision and should be received with patience and acceptance. The Qura'n says, "What God grants to men out of His mercy, no one can withhold, and what He withholds no one can grant apart from Him" (35:2).

The Hadeeth teaches "When you ask anything, ask it from God, and if you seek

help, seek help in God. Know that if the people were to unite to do you some benefit, they could benefit you only what God has recorded for you, and if they were to unite to do you some injury, they could injure you only what God has recorded for you."

Another perception of destiny is illustrated by a well known story. A man came to Ali (one of the first four rulers in the history of Islam) and asked him to explain destiny to him. Ali asked the man to stand on one leg and the man did so. Ali then told him to raise his other leg without lowering his first leg. The man said he could not do that and Ali explained to him that was the concept of destiny; man could do certain things by the will of God and there may be certain other thing that he could not accomplish by the will of God.

Acts of Worship

The basic principle of worship in Islam states that every action of an individual that is carried out to fulfill God's will and is to seek God's pleasure is an act of worship and will be rewarded. According to this principle, for a Muslim to go to work to earn a living, for a father or mother to provide for their children, for a spouse to love and care for the spouse, for parents to raise their children and even to play with their children, and so on, is an act of worship that will be rewarded by God.

In addition, there are five obligatory acts of worship, which are also called the five pillars of Islam. The purpose of worship is to remember God, to strengthen the individual's faith and submission to God and to solidify the individual's character. This process is to make the individual a better and more useful member of the society.

These acts of worship are obligatory to all Muslims at all times and places, except when someone is unable to perform them because of age, sickness, lack of financial resources or the fear of persecution.

Declaration of Faith

Declaration of faith is the first act of worship when it is done with full sense of sincerity and commitment. The declaration that "There is no other God but One God (Allah) and Mohammad is His Messenger and servant" is the simple statement that makes a person become a Muslim and is required to be said once in life time with full conviction and understanding. In practice the Muslims may be saying it several times a day.

The Prayer--Salat

The prescribed prayer is called salat in Arabic. It is the most visible act of worship and it constitutes the second pillar of the practice of Islam. Prayer is to be offered five times a day (at the break of dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, at sunset and at dusk after dark.) All able bodied Muslims are to pray five times every day, however there are exceptions. A person who can't physically perform the act of prayer because of sickness is exempted without any feeling of guilt. A traveller can offer half of the prescribed prayer. There are magnificent mosques all over the world, yet a Muslim is not required to pray in the mosque. It can be done anywhere, and in practice the whole world is a mosque for a Muslim. However, it is more meritorious to pray in the mosque with fellow Muslims. Before the prayer, the person has to wash their hands, face, forearms and feet, and a person should be as clean and as pure as possible.

The prayer is offered directly to God Almighty without any intermediary, and Muslims all over the world face towards The Ka'ba, which is in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The grand mosque, Ka'ba was originally built by Prophet Abraham. This practice symbolizes the unity of Muslims and is a respectful remembrance of Abraham.

In addition to the five daily prayers, Friday noon prayer is an obligatory congregational prayer. Muslims are required to pray in the mosque with the congregation on Fridays, but they are permitted to get back to their normal business after the prayer. In practice, across the Muslim world Friday is observed as a weekly holiday.

In the mosque, people stand next to each other in straight rows to offer congregational prayers. There is no seating arrangement and people sit as they please, generally the first comers get in the front rows and the late comers get to sit in the back. There is no preferential seating in the mosque, all being equal in the sight of God, and there is no membership to belong to a certain mosque. All Muslims are welcome to all mosques.

There are people who devote their life to the study and teaching of Islam and they are called the scholars (in Arabic; Ulema). There is no hierarchy in this system and people may be appointed to lead the prayers in the mosque. The leader in the prayer is like a coordinator for everyone to pray together and every individual in the congregation is praying directly to God Almighty.

Fasting

Fasting is the third act of worship in Islam. Muslims fast in the month of Ramadan

every year from the break of dawn till sun set. In addition to physical fasting, Ramadan is the month of spiritual activity at a heightened level.

The Ramadan

The month of Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. Muslims fast in Ramadan every year, and it is also called The month of fasting. Only those adults are required to fast who are physically able to fast. Those who are too weak or ill are not required to fast. Fasting is also not ordered for young children. People who are travelling are not to fast. They can fast at a later date to make up for the missed days of fasting.

The fast starts at the break of dawn, which is usually about 90 minutes before sun rise. The fast ends at the time of sun set. At the time of fasting the person does not eat or drink or smoke or have sex with the spouse. A fasting Muslim is expected not to speak ill of others, not to cheat or lie or commit other sins.

A fasting Muslim feels very good, because it pleases Allah very much. Muslims all over the world feel united as one people in the act of fasting. Everyone feels the same way and begins and ends the fast in the same way. People share the same experience and are nice to each other.

Fasting teaches self-control as a person learns to control desires. This can help the person fight and stay away from bad habits like drugs, alcohol or smoking. The person's character also improves as the person learns in the month of Ramadan not to lie or cheat or steal.

During Ramadan the family is together at the time of activities. They eat together before the break of dawn, fast together until the sun set and break their fast together at sun set. Praying is also done together as a family. The fasting in Ramadan makes the person experience hunger and the person then feels more compassion for the poor and the hungry.

God has made Ramadan a month of blessings. Every good deed a person does is rewarded many times more than any other time of the year. Prophet Mohammad said that the month of Ramadan is a month of great forgiveness from Allah swt; its beginning is mercy, its middle is forgiveness and its end is salvation from hell fire.

Taraweeh is a special prayer that is performed in Ramadan with Isha prayer. Eid is celebrated at the end of the month of Ramadan.

Eid ul Fitr

Eid ul Fitr is celebrated after the month of Ramadan. This is a day of enjoyment and it marks the beginning of normal activities after a month of fasting. The sighting of the new moon, which is called The Hilal or the crescent on the last day of Ramadan signals the day of Eid. On Eid day the Muslims make preparations to go for Eid prayer by taking a shower in the morning, dressing up in new or clean clothes and putting on perfume or cologne. The Eid prayer is offered at a central place in a big gathering (congregation). The Khutba or the sermon is given after the prayer. Following The Eid prayer, people visit each other, sit and eat together, and exchange gifts.

A few days before Eid, Eid Charity or Sadqat ul Fitr has to be given to the poor and the needy, so that every one can celebrate the Eid. Sadaqat ul Fitr is essential for every Muslim to pay before the day of Eid.

On the day of Eid, Muslims must patch up their differences and forgive each other's mistakes. Eid is an occasion that reflects the unity of all the Muslims of the world as one people and as one nation. Every one looks forward to the day of Eid for enjoyment and festivities and the joy of sharing and participation.

Charity--Zakat

The fourth pillar of Islam is charity or the poor's dues. In simple terms, the rich and the well-to-do are obligated to pay in charity to help the needy. This obligatory tax is called zakat, and it is paid out of all assets that the individual possesses, at the end of every year, above and beyond the individual's personal and family needs. It is calculated at a fixed rate of two and one half percent per year.

This plan incorporates elements of old age pensions, social security and all other welfare needs. Zakat is mentioned in The Qura'n almost as often as the salat or prayer is mentioned, and most of the time they are mentioned together. Islam asserts that to meet the needs of other human beings is more important than to pray to God. The Qura'n says, "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West (in prayer), but righteousness is belief in One God and The Day of Judgment, and the angels and the scriptures and the prophets and to give wealth out of love for Him, for kinsmen, orphans, the needy, the traveller, those who ask and to ransom captives and establish salat and give zakat (2:177). At another place, The Qura'n says about the righteous, "They would sleep but little at night and in the early dawn they would pray for forgiveness, and in their wealth was remembered the right of him who asked and of him who was prevented (from asking, although needy) (51:15-19). The person who gets Zakat does not have to be told that he or

she is receiving Zakat. It can be given as a gift. Zakat cannot be given to the wealthy, to the parents, children or the husband or the wife.

Haj--Pilgrimage to Mecca

The Haj or the pilgrimage to Mecca is an essential duty of all Muslims. This duty has to be performed once in a life-time. Only those people are required to go for Haj who are in good health (healthy), who have the money (wealthy) and the means to travel to Saudi Arabia (capable). Haj is performed by visiting Mecca in Arabia at the annual time of Haj. The person who travels to Mecca and carries out the prayers and procedures in and around the grand mosque of Kaba at the time of Haj is called Haji (or the pilgrim). Every year more than one and one half million Muslims from all parts of the world perform Haj at Kaba. This large gathering of Muslims of all races and cultures promotes the international brotherhood and reflects that all Muslims are alike and equal in the sight of God.

The Haj is performed in the month of Zulhijjah, and it comes two months and ten days after Eidul Fitar. When Haj is being performed at Mecca, the Muslims in the rest of the world celebrate the festival of Eid ul Adha.

Procedure of Haj

A person who is to perform Haj wears two pieces of white garment. One piece is wrapped around the upper half of the body and the other piece of cloth is to cover the lower half of the body. The head is left bare. Thus every one is dressed in similar clothing. Everyone walks around the Kaba seven times. (It is believed in Islam that The Kaba was built by Prophets Ibrahim - Abraham - and Ismaeel). This is called the Towaf. During Towaf, the person prays to Allah swt and asks for forgiveness, mercy and guidance.

In the next part of the Haj, every one walks between two hills in Mecca seven times. These hills are called Safa and Marwa. This part of the Haj is called Sa'ee. This is to commemorate the tradition of Hajera (Hager in the Bible). Hajera, the wife of Prophet Ibrahim, along with her infant son, Ismaeel, were left in the valley of Mecca by Prophet Ibrahim between the two mountains. Hajera walked between Safa and Marwa in search of water seven times. God sprung a spring of water at that site, and the valley of Mecca still has that spring. So, in this part of Haj people trace the footsteps of Hajera and pray to God. The third part of Haj takes pilgrims to a place called Arafat. This is very close to Mecca. People stand in Arafat and pray to God and seek His Mercy and Forgiveness any time between noon and sunset. This part of Haj is a reminder that on the day of judgement, everyone will be standing in front of God Almighty and wait for His judgement.

The fourth part of Haj is performed at Mena. This place is also close to Arafat. This day people throw rocks at the devil. This is a symbolic rejection of the devil. Prophet Ibrahim had thrown rocks at the devil when the devil tried to tell him not to obey God.

An animal is killed at this time and the meat is given to the poor to eat. This is to follow the tradition of Prophet Ibrahim. He was told by God to sacrifice his son, Ismaeel, but God replaced it by a ram and the ram was sacrificed. Prophet Ibrahim followed God's orders. By obeying God, he passed the test and pleased God.

In the final part of Haj, the pilgrims go back to Mecca and circle around Kaba in prayer.

Importance of Haj

Haj is an act of obedience to Allah swt. The first Haj was performed by Prophet Ibrahim, and thus the tradition of Haj has been carried out for thousands of years. This journey of Haj is an act of purification in which a person washes away all their sins and becomes as innocent as a newborn. So the Haj is a new beginning in life, and God has promised to forgive all the past sins if the person stays straight afterwards. Haj reminds people that they have to face God one day; it is a reminder that all mankind is equal and one should learn to control one's evil desires.

A pilgrimage performed during other parts of the year is called The UMRA or the minor Haj. This is almost similar to Haj and can be done in any part of the year.

Eid ul Adha

There are two very festive holidays in Islam, the Eid holidays. Eid ul fitar is celebrated at the end of the month of Ramadan. Eid ul adha is celebrated in the month of Zul hejjah or the month of Haj. When Haj is being performed at Mecca, the Muslims all over the world are celebrating Eid ul adha.

The day starts with a congregational prayer (Salat e Eid) at a central gathering place in every town or city. Everyone dresses in new and clean clothes and attends the Eid prayer. This is followed by visiting friends and family, exchanging gifts, and eating and dining together. This holiday is celebrated much like the day of Eid ul Fitr, however Muslims, who can afford to buy a sheep or a goat, offer the sacrifice. The meat of the killed animal is given to the needy and poor people, some of it is eaten by the family and some is given to the friends. A cow or a camel or a bull can be sacrificed for seven adults.

This tradition of the sacrifice is to commemorate the memory of Prophet Abraham, who was asked by God to be ready to sacrifice his son, but God replaced the son by a ram. This act of supreme obedience and the sacrifice reminds Muslims of their responsibility of submission to the will of God.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ISLAM

Islam is a complete way of life. This is denoted by the Arabic word Din (Deen). It embraces the spiritual, social, moral, economic and cultural life of its followers, as well as their belief in God. It is concerned with the total person, and all acts receive their justification and direction from the teaching that is embodied in Qura'n. The laws that govern the daily practical affairs are given in The Qura'n, because Islam is vitally concerned with how people interact with each other as a community and in the spiritual and material welfare of the individual. The equality of the individuals, race relations, the treatment of men and women, marriage and divorce, family life, justice, conduct of war and health are some of the subjects that have been dealt explicitly in Islam.

Contrary to what has been portrayed by some Western writers in the past, Islam is neither anti-Jewish, nor anti-Christian. In fact Islam teaches religious tolerance, and it explicitly directs its followers to respect all other religions and faiths. Islam recognizes the truth that is contained in the doctrines of Judaism and Christianity, and confirms Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others as true prophets who preceded Muhammad.

Western writings, historical and religious works that were compiled in the past, often imply that Islam was spread by the sword: but this is far from the truth and the modern scholars admit that. By any account, the followers of Islam cannot be implicated in spreading Islam by the use of force; there may be rare examples in the history of Islam, but those are exceptions and not the rule. In this regard, Muslim zealots pale to nothing in comparison with the disciples and zealots of many other faiths in the history. Muslims adhere to the teachings of Islam and The Qura'n says, "If it had been your Lord's will, they would all have believed--all who are on earth--Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe" (2:256), and "Unto you be your religion and unto me mine" (109:6). The Qura'n also says, "Defend yourself against your enemies, but attack them not first, for God does not like transgressors" (2:190).

Islam's achievements are monumental. It gave equal rights to all human beings,

regardless of race, color, sex, nationality, status or lineage. Throughout its 1400 year history, Islam changed barbaric people to civilized people. (The most well known example of this transformation is the conversion of the hordes of Mongols to civilized Muslims).

Islam taught respect for other individuals and their rights. It gave rights to women, who had almost no rights in the history of mankind before that time. Islam set family laws and made rules for inheritance. It discouraged and eliminated slavery. It made the state responsible for the basic needs of all of its citizens, regardless of their race or religion, and the state is responsible to protect the legitimate rights of the citizens.

Islam encouraged the acquisition and propagation of knowledge. In the dark period of the Middle Ages, Muslim scholars carried all the advances in the fields of science and social subjects. There is a very significant contribution of Muslim scientist and scholars to the subjects of chemistry, physics, mathematics, astrology, anatomy, physiology, medicine, navigation and many other fields. Medical schools were active in Baghdad and later in other parts of the Muslim world in the times of the Dark Ages in Europe. Medical schools had a rigorous curriculum of four years.

Muslim astronomers measured the circumference of the earth with surprising accuracy, approximately eight hundred years before Europe recognized that the world was not flat.

The most outstanding contribution of Muslim scholars to the human knowledge is in the field of mathematics. The Muslim scholars introduced the use of zero and, with it, the modern system of writing numbers in tens, hundreds, thousands, millions and so on. They replaced the clumsy Roman system of numerals with the Arabic numerals that are used in our every day life today. All modern mathematics is founded on these discoveries.

The Muslims invented the sciences of algebra and trigonometry, including logarithms and trigonometrical ratios, and the relations of sine and cosine, tangent and cotangent. All of this learning was widely known by people in the Muslim countries. The Muslims introduced the manufacture of paper on large scale. This in turn reached Europe from Arabs in Spain and Sicily. In the ninth century, when Baghdad was the seat of the Caliphate, the city had hundreds of bookshops. As a result of the wide acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, even the peasants and farmers in Muslim Spain could read and write, whereas, the dukes and princes in Europe were mostly illiterate.

Muslim navies commanded the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and the merchant naval vessels plied to Indonesia and Far East. At a time when the wealthy in Europe kept their treasures and possessions in the form of sacs of coins, the Muslims had a well developed banking system. The businessmen could write notes and cheques in Canton, China on their bank accounts in Baghdad or other Muslim cities. Similarly, they had reservations in Canton, just as Europeans did in nineteenth century in Shanghai.

Other important examples include the silk and cotton industries, embroideries, carpets, satin, velvet, muslin, and damask in textiles. Weapons, inlaid gold and silver work, glazed colored tiles, pottery lustre and glass are other noteworthy developments. There are numerous architectural wonders of their time that are still preserved across the Muslim world.

In the words of Sir John Glubb (In The Life and Times of Muhammad), "for five centuries after Muhammad, the Muslims dominated the world both culturally and militarily as completely as Europe and America have done for the last two hundred and fifty years".

A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR FURTHER STUD

This writing is based on the author's understanding and knowledge of Islam as a Muslim. The concepts are drawn from the core teachings of mainstream Islam and are based upon the practice of Islam by present day Muslims across the world. The following sources/references have been drawn upon in the preparation of parts of this paper and will, in the author's opinion, serve as useful references for further study.

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