

Islam—Part One

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Islam means “submission.” A follower of this religion is called a *Muslim*, “a submitted one.” Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic faith, was an Arabian trader from Mecca who was born around 570 and died in 632. As Christians measure history from the birth of Christ, so Muslims set the hinge date of history at 622, the year Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina. This *Hijra* (*hijj* means “flight” in Arabic) marked Muhammad’s turning point of submission to God and his proclamation of a new revelation from God. Muslims believe Muhammad to be the last prophet of God, superseding Christ, the prophet who was before him.

Muslims believe in submitting to the one and only one God, named *Allah*. They are categorically opposed to the Christian belief in the triunity of God (the Trinity). To believe that there is more than one person in God is an idolatry and blasphemy called *shirk*.

Beliefs

The Word of God.

Although Muslims hold that God revealed himself in the Jewish Law (*tawrat*), the Psalms (*zabur*), and the Gospels (*injl*), they claim that today’s Christian Bible is corrupted, or *tahrif*. They assert that the *Qur’an* is the final Word of God. It is divided into 114 chapters or *suras* and is about the size of the New Testament.

Doctrines

There are five basic Muslim doctrines:

1. There is one and only one God.
2. There have been many prophets, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.
3. God created angels (jinn), some of which are good and others evil.
4. The *Qur’an* is God’s full and final revelation.
5. A final day of judgment is coming, followed by heaven for the faithful and hell for the lost.

Besides these five central beliefs, there are five basic pillars of Islamic practice:

1. All that is necessary to become a Muslim is to confess the *shahadah*: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.
2. One must pray the *salat*, usually five times a day.
3. One keeps an annual fast (*sawn*) through the ninth lunar month of *Ramadan*.
4. One gives alms (*sakat*) to the needy, one-fortieth of one’s income.
5. Every able Muslim must make one pilgrimage during life to Mecca.

Muslims also believe in jihad or holy war, which some radical groups have exalted to the level of a pillar. While this may involve killing infidels for their faith, more moderate Muslims think of it as being a sacred struggle with the word, not necessarily with the sword.

Many doctrines are shared with Christianity, such as creation, angels, heaven, hell, and the resurrection of all people. As for Christ, they affirm his prophethood, virgin birth, physi-

cal ascension, second coming, sinlessness, miracles, and messiahship.

Muslims deny the heart of the Christian message, namely, that Christ died on the cross for our sins and that he arose from the grave physically three days later.

God as Absolute One

Allah is described by Muslims in terms of several basic attributes. Fundamental to all is the attribute of absolute unity. Of all the Islamic God's attributes, the most important is his undivided unity. To deny this is blasphemous.

The Islamic God is his absolute and indivisible unity. In sura 112, Muhammad defines God in these words: "Say: He is God, The One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, Nor is He begotten; And there is none Like unto Him." This sura is held to be worth a third of the whole *Qur'an*. The seven heavens and the seven earths are founded upon it. Islamic tradition affirms that to confess this verse sheds one's sins as a man might strip a tree in autumn of its leaves" (Cragg, 39).

Two words are used in the *Qur'an* to describe the oneness of God: *ahad* and *wahid*. *Ahad* is used to deny that God has any partner or companion. In Arabic, this means the negation of any other number. The word *wahid* may mean the same as the first word or it may also mean "the One, Same God for all." That is to say, there is only one God for Muslims, and he is the same God for all peoples. God is a unity and a singularity.

God's Oneness is such a fundamental aspect of Islam that, as one Muslim author put it, "Islam, like other religions before it in their original clarity and purity, is nothing other than the declaration of the Unity of God, and its message is a call to testify to this Unity" (Mahmud, 20). Another Muslim writer adds, "The Unity of Allah is the distinguishing characteristic of Islam. This is the purest form of monotheism, that is, the worship of Allah Who was neither begotten nor beget nor had any associates with Him in His Godhead. Islam teaches this in the most unequivocal terms" (Ajjola, 55).

It is because of this uncompromising emphasis on God's absolute unity that the greatest of all sins in Islam is the sin of *shirk*, or assigning partners to God. The *Qur'an* sternly declares "God forgiveth not (the sin of) joining other gods with Him; but He forgiveth whom He pleaseth other sins than this: one who joins other gods with God, hath strayed far, far away (from the Right)" (sura 4:116).

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