



22. What Is Islam And How Does It Relate To Christianity?

'Islam' is an Arabic word meaning 'peace' or 'submission'. *Muslims* are those who have embraced Islam, have submitted to God, and so have peace. 'Jihad' can mean both the inward struggle to achieve Islam, and also the outward conflict with enemies of Islam.

To become a Muslim one must recite the Islamic profession of faith, the *shedadah* - 'There is no God but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God'. From this, there can be no going back or falling away. The *Shedadah* is the first of the five pillars of Islam; the others are prayer (five times daily), almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan, and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca if possible. What follows in this article is not a complete account of Islamic faith and practice.

Muhammad was born in Mecca about 570 AD. Mecca was a religious centre for the Arabs, as well as a trading city. Muhammad was a trading agent and seems to have had some limited knowledge of both Christianity and Judaism. He became dissatisfied with the traditional polytheistic religion and took to making meditative retreats in the desert. It was during one of these, in 610 AD, that he had the first of the revelations which continued throughout his life and were eventually written down and collected into the *Koran*. Each revelation (or *Sura*) was written down separately by Muhammad's disciples and, when these were collected after his death they were arranged, not in date order but in order of length, which makes the reconciliation of inconsistencies difficult.

Muhammad's preaching of his monotheistic faith was at first rejected in Mecca and he and his disciples were persecuted. They withdrew in 622 AD to a nearby city, now called Medina, where there was a substantial Jewish colony. War ensued between Mecca and Medina. This was resolved by the Meccans accepting Islam, while Muhammad for his part made their city the centre of worship in his theocratic state and instituted the *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca as a binding obligation for Muslims. .

As well as the Koran, further traditions about the life and sayings of Muhammad, were collected after his death as the *Hadith*. The Holy Law of Islam, the *Shariah*, is based on the Koran and the Hadith, and is binding on all Muslims. There are four different systems of interpretation of the *Shariah*; a *Fatwa* is an authoritative ruling on a point of law. Islam does not recognise any distinction between religious and secular law. Traditions about Muhammad's practice are called the *Sunnah*. The Koran, the Hadith, the *Shariah* and the *Sunnah* together make up the basis

of Sunni Islam, the majority community in the Islamic world.

As the Koran is held by Muslims to be the word of God transmitted to mankind through Muhammad but not composed by him, it is the Koran and not Muhammad that in Sunni Islam takes the place of Christ. The Arabic text of the Koran is sacred; to criticise or question it is sacrilege - hence the offence caused by Salman Rushdie's novel 'The Satanic Verses'.

Muhammad died in 632 AD without a designated successor, or *Caliph*. The Caliph was both the political Commander of the Faithful, and their *Imam* or spiritual leader. Following the death of Omar, the second Caliph after the Prophet, in 644 AD, there was a dispute over the succession. The leaders elected Othman, a Meccan aristocrat, but many thought Ali, the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima, was the rightful Caliph.

In 656 AD Othman was murdered by followers of Ali, who was elected as his successor. In 661 AD Ali himself was murdered. He left two sons, Hasan and Hussein. Hasan renounced his claim to the succession; on the death of the Caliph Muawiyah in 680 AD Hussein was defeated and killed in battle.

Ever since then there has been a division in Islam between the Sunni majority and the *Shia*, the party of Ali. The Shia believe that the authentic or 'rightly-guided' Imams of Islam possessed direct and secret knowledge of God. Which Imams are to be considered as 'rightly-guided' is a matter of dispute between the various Shia sects. (For Sunni Muslims, the Imam is the title given to the prayer-leader in a mosque - Islam has no priesthood. A Mullah is a preacher - perhaps not unlike a Reader?)

Shi'ism is the majority faith in Iran and in some parts of India; and an important minority elsewhere. Some Shi'ites believe in a 'Hidden Imam' or Mahdi who will one day return to lead the faithful to Paradise.

Muhammad had learnt from that the Jews regarded the Arabs as the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar. He assumed that the revelations he had received were from the God of Abraham, and that he had restored the true and original faith of mankind, which he was to transmit to the pagan world. He was, he believed, the last in a line of prophets inspired by God, of whom Adam, Noah, Moses and Jesus were also members. He accepted that Jesus was virgin-born of Mary, but denied that he had been crucified. Jesus, he said, was taken up to Heaven by God, and would return again on the Day of Judgement, but he was not the Son of God.

When Muhammad found that neither Jews nor Christians would accept his revelation as divinely inspired, he was both mortified and indignant. Once the Arabs had united in a theocratic state, Islam embarked on a programme of conquest. Pagans had a choice of conversion or death; for Jews and Christians (and the Zoroastrians of Persia), there was a third option. As 'peoples of the Book' they could submit, and continue to practice their faith as subject peoples on payment of a special tax.

For the Christians of Syria and Egypt, who had been persecuted as heretics by the official Church, Muslim rule was welcome; the tax burden was lighter than that they had been paying to the Roman Emperors. The same was even more true for the Jews.

At first conversions to Islam by the subject faiths were discouraged, since Muslims were exempt from state taxes (but not religious contributions). The Caliphs, now based in Damascus, were on the whole tolerant and made use of the talents of all their subjects, of whatever faith they might be (the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is said to have been built by Christian architects and craftsmen).

However, in time non-Arabs demanded to be allowed to convert in order to share the privileges of Muslims. With the fall of the line of Caliphs of Damascus, more discriminatory and humiliating laws were introduced. In addition to being forbidden to bear arms, Christians and Jews were might not ride horses and were required to wear distinctive clothing. In 1006, the Caliph al-Hakim ordered the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Soon thereafter, it became clear that the Caliph was mad, but the damage had been done. Stories of the persecution of the Christians in the Holy Land found their way back to Western Christendom and led to the Crusades.

Relations between Muslims and Christians took a turn for the worse. Hitherto, in scholarly and scientific matters it had been Muslims who had preserved ancient Greek culture and transmitted it to the West through the courts of Sicily and Spain. The Byzantine Empire had long had contact on a civilised level with the local Muslim powers, whose culture it shared to a great extent. (The inferior status and seclusion of women was, in origin, a Greek rather than an Arab custom.) But the coming of the Crusaders introduced the Muslims to a different kind of Christian. These Westerners were dirty, disease-ridden, drunken, and above all uncouth, ignorant and intolerant.

As the Crusaders departed, in the thirteenth century the Mongol hordes arrived, destroying everything in their path. At the other end of the Muslim world, the Spanish Crusaders uprooted the Islamic civilisation of the Moors. Muslim culture turned in on itself and became defensive and intolerant; the religious

leaders of Sunni Islam declared that 'the gates of ijtihad (independent reasoning) are closed'. Speculative theology was forbidden; all truth had already been revealed, and scholars must confine themselves to studying the great writings of the past.

At this time, precisely the opposite process was taking place in the West. Hitherto, it had been Islam that had been the more cultured and progressive. Now the positions were reversed. Christendom suddenly appeared to be in the ascendant, Islam in decline. God seemed to have abandoned the faithful. Why? Some thought it was because Muslims were abandoning the fundamentals of their faith. In Arabia, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab broke away from the Ottoman Caliphate and created his own state, returning to the strictest interpretation of the Koran and the Sunnah. The Wahhabi state is now Saudi Arabia, which for all its wealth still embraces fundamentalist Islam. The Caliphate itself was abolished after the First World War, with the establishment of a secular state in Turkey. There are Muslims who would like to see it re-established.

Muslims in Britain find themselves in a secular, hedonistic society whose morals and outlook they feel to be antipathetic and inferior to their own. Christians and Jews, in the Islamic State, were allowed to rule themselves under their own religious laws. Why, they argue, should not Muslims be allowed to do the same? They resent efforts to persuade them to give up their own traditional Islamic practices.

Islam is strictly monotheistic and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is, to them, a denial of the Unity of God. Further, Islamic law forbids any depiction of a living thing, particularly in the context of worship, and thus any use of images or icons, or even pictures in stained-glass windows, is impermissible.

The simplicity of Islam is attractive to many, who would like to believe that Muhammad was correct in his belief that all the peoples of the Book worship the same God, however imperfectly from his point of view. But there is a long way to go and much good will on both sides will be required before the barriers of mutual incomprehension and hostility between Christian and Muslim can be dismantled.

P.S. Still more on Angels: According to the Koran, the Angel nearest God was Iblis. God commanded him to bow down to Adam, but Iblis refused, because he was made from fire, but Adam only of clay. God then cursed Iblis 'until the Day of Judgement'. According to some Muslim authorities, God will then forgive Iblis, because his disobedience was a refusal to give to Adam the veneration due to God.