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## **Islam, Empire of Faith**

### ***God:***

For Muslims, God is unique and without equal. They attempt to think and talk about God without either making Him into a thing or a projection of the human self. The Koran avoids this by constantly shifting pronouns to discourage believers from inadvertently reifying God and creating any physical image of Him.

God is known in Arabic as Allah to distinguish Him from ilah, which could refer to any of the gods once worshiped in Arabia. Just as one might say in English that the French or Germans worship God, not Dieu or Gott, so one should properly say that Muslims worship God, not Allah, which is simply the word for God (with a capital G) in the Arabic language. Giving a different name to the one God worshipped by the followers of Muhammad erroneously implies that their God is different from the one God worshipped by Jews or Christians.

### ***Five Pillars:***

In contrast to many other religions, the basic practice of Islam is simplicity itself. The believer worships God directly without the intercession of priests or clergy or saints. The believer's duties are summed up in five simple rules, the so-called Five Pillars of Islam: Belief, Worship, Fasting, Almsgiving, and Pilgrimage.

#### ***Belief (Iman)***

The first Pillar of Islam is for the believer to testify, in Arabic, that "There is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger." This phrase, known as the shahada, (sha-HEH-da) or Profession of Faith, is central to Islam, for it affirms both God's oneness and the central role of the Prophet. The shahada appears in daily life in many different ways, from being proclaimed in the call to prayer to being inscribed on flags and coins. In contrast to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which exhorts believers not to take the Lord's name in vain, Muslims constantly call on God by name in all sorts of situations. For example, when beginning any activity, one might say bismillah ("in the name of God") or when admiring something, one might say al-hamdu lillah ("praise be to God").

#### ***Worship (Salat)***

The second Pillar of Islam is to worship God five times a day — at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. To do so, the believer washes according to a particular ritual and prostrates himself or herself on the ground in the direction of Mecca, while reciting certain phrases. This rite takes only a few minutes to perform and can be done anywhere.

Worshippers are summoned to prayer by a muezzin, who calls the faithful together by saying:

*God is Great (four times)*  
*I testify that there is no god but God (twice)*  
*I testify that Muhammad is God's messenger (twice)*  
*Come to prayer (twice),*  
*Come to salvation (twice)*  
*God is Great (twice)*  
*There is no god but God.*

For the dawn prayer, the muezzin adds, after the second "Come to salvation," the phrase "Prayer is better than sleep" twice.

Muslims believe that the call to prayer by the human voice distinguishes Islam from Judaism, which uses the shofar, or ram's horn, and Christianity, which uses the bell. The first muezzin was Bilal, a Black Abyssinian slave who was one of the first converts to Islam.

In addition to the five daily prayers, all male believers are enjoined to gather together on Friday for the noon prayer and listen to a sermon, called a khutba in Arabic, by the leader of the community. The rules for women's attendance at Friday worship have varied over time and place. In many places today, women also attend Friday worship, although they are segregated from the men and pray behind, beside or above them. As the ruler's name is traditionally invoked in the sermon, the khutba became an important sign of the ruler's authority.

### ***Fasting (Sawm)***

The third Pillar of Islam is to abstain from food and drink, as well as smoking and sex, between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Muslim calendar.

Abstinence during Ramadan brings Muslims to greater awareness of God's presence and helps them acknowledge their gratitude for God's provisions in their lives. It serves to heighten a sense of community among believers as Muslims around the world join together in the performance of this ritual.

The Arabic word ramadan comes from a root meaning "to be hot" and suggests that the month originally fell in the summer. But following the Islamic lunar calendar, the month of fasting can come at any time during the year.

To distinguish themselves from the Jews, Christians and pagan Arabs, Muslims measure their year by the cycles of the moon rather than the sun, so the Muslim lunar year is eleven days shorter than the Christian solar year. Muslims are forbidden to adjust their year by adding an extra month, as the Jews do to keep their lunar calendar in synch with the seasons. Hence, the months of the Muslim year do not relate to the seasons.

The Ramadan fast starts at dawn, defined as the moment when the human eye can distinguish a white thread from a black one, and ends at dusk, when the eye is again

no longer able to distinguish the difference. The end of the month of Ramadan is always marked by a feast, known as the Id al-Fitr, or break-fast feast.

### ***Almsgiving (Zakat)***

The fourth Pillar of Islam is to give alms to the poor. Muslims are supposed to donate a fixed amount of their property to charity every year.

Many pious individuals, from the mightiest rulers to modest merchants, give money to help out the less-fortunate by establishing soup kitchens, hospitals, schools, libraries, mosques, and the like. One of the most common forms of charity in medieval Islamic cities was to establish a public drinking fountain, where fresh, sweet water was distributed freely to all passers-by. Such a drinking fountain was commonly known as a sabil, from the common Arabic expression fi sabil allah, literally meaning "in the path of God" and referring to doing something for God charitably or disinterestedly.

### ***Pilgrimage (Hajj)***

The fifth Pillar of Islam is to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime, if one is able, during the first days of Dhu'l-Hijja, the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar.

People who have performed this pilgrimage, called in Arabic hajj, earn the epithet hajji, which is a title of great respect. Before entering Mecca, the pilgrim dons a special garment made of two seamless white cloths. The ceremonies of the pilgrimage are associated with the prophet Abraham and center on the Kaaba, which Muslims believe to be the house that Abraham erected for God.

The pilgrimage then moves to Arafat, a plain some 12 miles east of the city, where the ceremonies culminate on the tenth day of the month in the Feast of the Sacrifices. Livestock is sacrificed in commemoration of Abraham's readiness to offer his son Ismail, and the meat is distributed to the poor. This event is also known as the Great Feast, and it usually lasts three or four days.

In contrast to the spontaneous cheer with which people celebrate the end of Ramadan, the celebration of the Great Feast is a more solemn holiday. Although a visit to the Prophet's mosque and gravesite in Medina is not an official part of the pilgrimage, most pilgrims include it in their trip.

### ***Qu'ran and Tradition (Hadith):***

The two foundations of Muslim faith are God's revelations to Muhammad, known as the Koran, from the Arabic word Qur'an, or "recitation"; and the reports about Muhammad's life and deeds, which are known as the hadith, from the Arabic word for "report." The central miracle of Islam is God's revelation to Muhammad, whose human fallibilities as a mere mortal are repeatedly mentioned in the Koran.

The revelations that comprise the Koran were revealed over a period of more than two decades in two places. The first revelations from the period of Muhammad's residence in Mecca are short and incantatory verses of extraordinary poetic beauty. The later revelations from the period after Muhammad immigrated to Medina are longer, legalistic texts appropriate to a developing community of believers in need of rules and regulations.

Muhammad and his followers initially committed the revelations to memory, but as these revelations grew in number and complexity, some were probably written down on whatever materials were at hand. After the Prophet died, his followers were pressed to preserve the purity of the revelations and began to write down as many of them as possible. According to the traditional view, a uniform written text of the revelations to Muhammad was collected and collated some twenty years after his death.

The Koran as a book is comparable in length to the Gospels. It contains 114 chapters (each called in Arabic a sura) of varying length. It opens with the Fatiha, a beautiful short prayer that serves as an invocation in many situations;

*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate  
Praise belongs to God, Lord of all Being  
the All-merciful, the All-compassionate  
the Master of the Day of Doom  
Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succor  
Guide us in the straight path  
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,  
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful  
nor of those who are astray.*

The other chapters of the Koran follow in descending order of length, from the 286 verses of the second chapter, known as "The Cow," to the final two chapters, which are short prayers of a few lines. The chapters are thus arranged neither in the order in which the verses were revealed nor in a narrative sequence.

The Koran, as God's literal word, can only be comprehended in the majestic and glorious Arabic language in which it was revealed. The necessity of reading the Koran in Arabic has meant that all believers should learn the language in order to understand the scriptures. This requirement has created a linguistic bond among believers, particularly as Islam spread beyond the boundaries of Arabia to regions inhabited by speakers of other languages. Having learned to use Arabic as the language of religion, the new converts also used it as a language of literature, science, commerce and social intercourse.

The primacy of Arabic as the language of God's revelation has also helped to preserve the purity of the Arabic language, for Muslims constantly call to mind the noble and magnificent words and phrases of the Koran. Although the Arabic language has evolved over the fourteen centuries since the Koran was revealed, it has not changed as much as English has changed in the six centuries since the time of Chaucer. Finally, the primacy of the Arabic language has encouraged the spread

and use of the Arabic script, which is known and used from the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific to render a variety of languages, including Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Pashto, Kashmiri, Urdu, Sindhi, Ottoman Turkish, Chaghatay, and Malay.

The second basis of Muslim faith is the example of the Prophet. As the perfect Muslim, Muhammad served and still serves as the model for all believers. His sayings and deeds were remembered by his associates and preserved in the Traditions, known in Arabic as hadith. These Traditions normally take the form of a chain ("So-and-so heard from so-and-so, who heard from so-and-so, that the Prophet said [or did]"), followed by a report of what the Prophet said or did.

The Traditions came to be considered second in authority to the Koran and also help explain and elaborate the circumstances under which obscure passages in the Koran were revealed. The Traditions were transmitted orally for several generations before being written down, beginning in the eighth century. By the ninth century the jurist al-Shafii (d. 820) came to consider the sunna, or custom of the Prophet, the second most important root of Islamic jurisprudence after the Koran. Together the Koran and the Traditions, along with consensus and analogy, make up the sharia, the rules and regulations that govern the day-to-day lives of Muslims.

### ***People of the Book:***

Muslims believe that God had previously revealed Himself to the earlier prophets of the Jews and Christians, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Muslims therefore accept the teachings of both the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospels. They believe that Islam is the perfection of the religion revealed first to Abraham (who is considered the first Muslim) and later to other prophets. Muslims believe that Jews and Christians have strayed from God's true faith but hold them in higher esteem than pagans and unbelievers. They call Jews and Christians the "People of the Book" and allow them to practice their own religions. Muslims believe that Muhammad is the "seal of the prophecy," by which they mean that he is the last in the series of prophets God sent to mankind. Muslims abhor the followers of later prophets. This attitude serves to explain the extreme Muslim animosity toward Bahais, followers of a nineteenth-century prophet, who in the Muslim mind is false.

### ***Islam Today:***

Islam, followed by more than a billion people today, is the world's fastest growing religion and will soon be the world's largest. The 1.2 billion Muslims make up approximately one quarter of the world's population, and the Muslim population of the United States now outnumbers that of Episcopalians. The most populous Muslim countries are Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. The number of Muslims in Indonesia alone (175 million) exceeds the combined total in Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, the traditional heartlands of Islam. There are also substantial Muslim populations in Europe and North America, whether converts or immigrants

who began arriving in large numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. In keeping with tradition, the two main branches of Islam today are Sunni and Shiite.

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s Islam reemerged as a potent political force, associated with both reform and revolution. Given the large number of adherents, it is no surprise that Muslims incorporate a broad and diverse spectrum of positions in regard to liberalism and democracy. Some are secularists who want to disengage religion from politics. Others are reformers, who reinterpret Islamic traditions in support of elective forms of government. Still there are others who reject democracy entirely.

From <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/index.html>

#### About This Site

Throughout the production of Islam Empire of Faith — including this Web site — we have made every attempt to present as broad a portrait of Islamic art and culture as possible, in order to show the great diversity as well as the fundamental unity of Islamic civilization in its long and varied history.

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Special thanks to TVBooks, for excerpts from Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power

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