

Islam Considered

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===== A CHRISTIAN VIEW =====

Margot Patterson



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Contents

Preface vii

Chapter 1

Faith and Practice 1

Chapter 2

Unity and Diversity in Islam 22

Chapter 3

Controversies and Misconceptions about Islam 44

Chapter 4

Interfaith Relations between Islam, Christianity,
and Judaism 65

Chapter 5

Islam Today 89

Bibliography 113

Index 116

Preface

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, I wrote a story on Islam for the *National Catholic Reporter*. More stories on Islam followed, and with it my interest in a religion that I and most Americans knew little about. I was already interested in the politics of the Middle East; studying the region's major faith tradition seemed a natural next step, particularly as the United States' enmeshment in the Middle East grew following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

This book is an outgrowth of my reporting on Islam. It is a work of journalism, not of scholarship. There are many excellent scholarly books on Islam that will provide a far more complete, complex understanding of the religion. My goal in writing this book was to present a simple, readable account of the major tenets and practices of Islam and to provide readers some understanding of why the West in general and the United States in particular are regarded with antagonism by some Muslims. Necessarily, I have focused on politics as well as religion, if only because the hostility between the West and Muslims has its roots as much or more in contemporary geopolitics as it does in religious belief and practice.

Researching this book has exposed me to a religion, culture and history fascinating both in its own right and for the insights it has afforded me into my own religion and culture. I hope readers will find their own satisfaction in reading this brief introduction to Islam and that it leads them to further study of one of the world's great religions.

— Margot Patterson

Faith and Practice

In a world of instant communications and rapid transportation, physical distances between nations are shrinking, yet the gulf between people of different backgrounds and faiths often seems larger than ever. Perhaps it's inevitable that friction arises as we come into close contact with people whose culture and customs are foreign to us. Often such clashes stem from an incomplete understanding of their history and our own and of the many values and aspirations we hold in common, notwithstanding differences in language, customs, beliefs, and experiences.

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Americans have become increasingly conscious of and concerned about their relations with the Muslim world. Those relations have not only a political and an economic context but a religious one as well. While Americans cannot hope to understand one in isolation from the other, they may wish to begin their study of Islam with a look at its key beliefs and practices.

THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM

The story of Islam begins with Muhammad, the dynamic founder of a faith that now numbers over a billion adherents. But

Muhammad did not see himself as establishing a new religion. He believed that he was a religious reformer who was calling people back to the religion of Judaism and Christianity, but purged of the distortions these had acquired over the years. Muhammad saw his role as reviving the faith of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Ignorance had clouded the Arabs' vision, and it was Muhammad's role to convey to them God's will as it had been revealed to him. Muhammad saw himself as one in a line of prophets who brought a message to be heard and heeded. The message he preached was a relatively simple one of surrender (*islam*) to God's will, and the God he made known to his people was not a new and different God, but the God spoken of by the Jews and Christians. That is why when Christian Arabs pray, they use the same Arabic word for God—Allah—as Muslims do.

Like Jesus, the Muhammad of history can be difficult to disentangle from the Muhammad of faith. A rich corpus of traditions, both oral and written, developed around Muhammad in and after his lifetime. Called the *hadith*, these traditions constitute a significant source of information about Muhammad. The hadith include stories of what many Muslims believe Muhammad said as well as what he practiced (*sunna*) and form an abiding inspiration to Muslims of how they should live their life. Though Muslims see Muhammad as a man, not a God to be worshiped, he is regarded as an exemplar of excellence—a model to them of how a husband, father, ruler, teacher, and citizen should behave.

Muhammad has been vilified in some Western circles, and this is one of several reasons for the bitterness that has sometimes marked Christian-Muslim relations; but he was by all accounts an exceptional diplomat, warrior, statesman, and prophet. Historians and scholars who are not Muslims can agree that Muhammad must have been a remarkable man and an outstanding leader, one who was capable of uniting the warring tribes that lived in Arabia and of melding a new community based not on blood ties but on faith.

MUHAMMAD'S LIFE AND TIMES

Muhammad was born in what is now Saudi Arabia in the year 570 C.E. His father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was six, so Muhammad was raised by his grandfather and later his uncle. At the age of twenty Muhammad went to work for a successful businesswoman named Khadija. She was a widow, fifteen years older than Muhammad. Impressed by his talents and attributes, she asked him to marry her. Muhammad consented, and they were married when Muhammad was twenty-five years old. For another twenty-five years, until Khadija's death, the couple had what appears to have been a close and happy marriage. They had six children—two sons, who died in infancy, and four daughters, only one of whom outlived them.

Muhammad was a respected businessman in Mecca, so much so that he was called *al-Amin*, which means “the trusted one.” Various accounts describe him as also devout, compassionate, astute, honest, and handsome. It is said that he loved solitude and would occasionally withdraw from society to a cave outside Mecca to meditate on the meaning of life and the problems of society.

At the age of forty Muhammad began experiencing dreams and visions. At first these visions troubled him, but after discussing them with Khadija and her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian, Muhammad became emboldened to impart to a small group what had been revealed to him. He spoke of Allah, the God considered by the Arabs to be the most important god among the many divinities they worshiped at that time. Muhammad spoke of a Day of Judgment, when people would have to account for their actions. He urged people to be grateful to Allah for what they had and to express that gratitude by charity to others.

At the time of Muhammad, the Arabian Peninsula was populated by tribes. Some were engaged in farming, but most were nomadic. Desert and steppe dominated the one million square miles of Arabia. Bedouin tribes traveled from one area to another seeking water and pasture for their camels and sheep. There was

no central authority, and fighting and factionalism were common. Social identity was organized around membership in an extended family. Several families comprised a clan; several clans constituted a tribe headed by a chief (*shaykh*).

Mecca, where Muhammad lived, was both a thriving commercial city and a place of pilgrimage. It was in Mecca that Arabs came to worship at the Kaaba, the sanctuary of 360 tribal idols built around a black, cube-shaped stone of meteoritic material. Most of the Arabs were polytheists, though a few of the Arab tribes had adopted Christianity. Jews also lived in the peninsula, as did Zoroastrians. Another native, pre-Islamic, monotheistic group called Hanifs traced their beliefs back to Abraham and yet were considered neither Christians nor Jews.

The world that gave rise to Muhammad and the emergence of a new faith was changing, the polytheistic ethos of Bedouin nomads giving way to a more commercial, urban society. The empires on either side of Arabia were Byzantium and the Persian Sasanid Empire; in both, a monotheistic faith had established itself as a state religion—Christianity in Byzantium and Zoroastrianism in the Sasanid Empire.

From the time Muhammad received his first revelation from God on the night Muslims call the “Night of Power and Excellence,” when the archangel Gabriel appeared to him as he meditated in a cave on Mount Hira, Muhammad would receive ongoing revelations throughout his life. The thrust of these experiences was to highlight for him the perfect oneness of God. Idolatry was the ultimate sin, because it diminished God and divided the allegiance owed to God. The vocation of human beings was to serve God and to act as God’s agents on earth.

Muhammad’s message was initially not well received in Mecca. His emphasis on the one God, Allah, challenged the polytheistic ethos of his time as well as the interests of the powerful and privileged in Meccan society. Muhammad said that the rich had an obligation to the poor and the dispossessed, and he championed the rights of widows and orphans. He protested false contracts and usury and urged the imposition of a tax on wealth that would

be distributed to the poor. His claim to prophetic leadership was an implicit challenge to the Quraysh clan, which administered the shrine in Mecca and collected revenues from it.

For ten years Muhammad struggled to convey his message. He won a small band of converts, including his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was to become a key figure in the history of Islam, and Abu Bakr, his future father-in-law, who would become Muhammad's successor as the first caliph, or leader, of the Muslim community. But for the most part, Muhammad and his followers in Mecca were ignored, abused, and on one occasion even attacked. On top of this disappointment, in 619 Muhammad's wife died and not long after his beloved uncle. In 620 Muhammad was invited by a delegation from the city of Yathrib, two hundred miles north of Mecca, to arbitrate a dispute between Arab tribes. Impressed by Muhammad's judgment and preaching, the visitors from Yathrib returned in 621 to seek counsel from him, and in 622 Muhammad and his followers were invited to settle in Yathrib, later known as Medina.

Muhammad's move to Medina in 622 with two hundred of his followers was a turning point in the life and ministry of the Prophet. This migration, called the *Hijra*, marked the first year of the Islamic calendar, which is calculated according to twelve lunar months. It bespeaks the communitarian nature of Islam that Muslims date their calendar not from the year Muhammad was born or died, but from the formation of the first Islamic community (*umma*) in Medina.

In Medina, Muhammad became the leader of a population comprised predominantly of nonnomadic farmers. Responding to the revelations that he continued to receive from God, he established his authority as the religious-political head of Medina. Most of the people in the city rallied to Muhammad, but some did not, including many of the Jewish population. These Jews, who came from Arab tribes that had converted to Judaism, had links to the Quraysh tribe in Mecca, which administered the sacred shrine and opposed Muhammad. Some of the Jews in Medina plotted to overthrow him.

For a decade the Muslims in Medina struggled against opposition. Eventually they triumphed. The Muslims banished or killed the recalcitrant Medinans who opposed Muhammad; they engaged the Meccans in battle and won; and they extended their influence to other areas of the Arabian Peninsula. By 631, distant tribes sent envoys to Medina to negotiate their submission to the authority of the new faith.

In 632, Muhammad died at the age of sixty-two after a pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam's rapid growth continued, however. The hundred years that followed saw the extension of Islam to many other parts of the Middle East. It spread north to Damascus, east to Persia, west to Egypt and the African continent. By 800, Muslims held land from what is now Switzerland to the eastern areas of India, an area larger than that which the Roman Empire at its peak had controlled. Today an Islamic empire no longer exists, but Islam continues to be a growing and dynamic faith. Like Christianity, Islam is a missionary religion whose adherents seek to share its message with non-Muslims.

KEY BELIEFS

Christians, certainly Catholic Christians, will recognize in Islam much that is familiar. Like Christians, Muslims believe in a Day of Judgment, when everyone will be held accountable for his or her deeds in life. Like Christians, they believe in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. Muslims also believe in the existence of three realms, namely, heaven, earth, and hell.

While Muslims acknowledge sin, they do not subscribe to the concept of original sin held by Christians; rather, they believe that sin springs from human weakness and willfulness. It is not a state of being but a result of disobedience. The consequences of sin belong only to those who sin. Repentance is a matter of returning one's attention to God and making amends for misdeeds. The emphasis on the shame, guilt, and disgrace of sin sometimes found in Christianity is much less prevalent in Islam. Instead, Muslims focus much more on how inattention, carelessness, lethargy, and

self-absorption distract men and women from their relationship with God. Remembrance is a key concept in Islam. One of the names the Quran uses to refer to itself is *al-Dhikr*, or “Remembrance,” and Islam encourages an awareness of how forgetfulness of God creates an opening for an array of spiritual dangers.

Along with Christians and Jews, Muslims share a belief in revelation and prophecy. Like Christians and Jews, they have a scripture; with Christians and Jews it is the Bible, and for Muslims the Quran, or Koran. More will be said about the Quran later, but like the Bible, it is a record of prophecy and God’s revelation to humankind. In addition, like Christians and Jews, Muslims trace their descent from Abraham. All three faiths are children of Abraham.

While Christians and Jews claim descent from Abraham through Isaac, Abraham’s son with Sarah, Muslims trace their descent from Ishmael, Abraham’s son with Hagar. Muslim tradition has it that Abraham, pressured by Sarah, who did not want her son, Isaac, to be outshone by his brother, took Hagar and Ishmael to or around Mecca, where he left them and where Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs of northern Arabia. When Abraham returned to Mecca, he and Ishmael built the Kaaba as the first shrine to the one true God. After Muhammad triumphed over the Meccans in battle, the first thing he did when he entered Mecca was to rededicate the shrine to Abraham and purge it of its tribal idols.

As this brief sketch demonstrates, Islam shares many of the tenets of Judaism and Christianity. Jews and Christians are recognized as “People of the Book,” that is, people with a Scripture divinely inspired whose faiths merit respect. The word “Muslim” means one who submits to God. Muslims regard all the great monotheistic prophets in the Bible as Muslims.

The essence of Islam is contained in the short confession of faith called *shahada*, in which Muslims testify that “There is no god except the God, and Muhammad is his messenger,” or “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger.”

The first part of this statement affirms the uniqueness of God, who is alone in power, mercy, and justice, the final cause

of everything that happens in life. Muslims see God's oneness (*tawhid*) mirrored in the unity of the world, including the unity of the human family. Transcending divisions of race, nationality, and ethnicity, Islam teaches that all people are members of one single family; we are all related, and we share a common purpose and destiny. Its affirmation of God's unity finds a parallel in the all-embracing allegiance people owe to God. There can be no private corner of a person's life that does not include God. Thus religion cannot be separated from politics or economics. God has claim on the totality of our lives. The Quran states that the only unforgivable sin is *shirk*, that is, associating anything or anyone with God, thereby allowing a person, ideal, thing, or affection to usurp God's paramount role in a believer's life and distract from the love and loyalty owed to God.

The second half of the creed affirms Muhammad's role as messenger of God. In Islam, prophets are emissaries whom God has mercifully sent to inform men and women of their duties and to warn of the consequences of evil. Islam recognizes multiple prophets—Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, among others—but Muhammad is the seal of the prophets, the final prophet whom God has sent. He is also a messenger from God. Messengers and prophets are not completely synonymous in Islam, for while all messengers are prophets, not all prophets are messengers. Messengers refer to prophets who have been entrusted with a sacred text for their community, as Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad were.

Through prophets, guidance has been provided to people on earth as to their duties to God and to their fellow human beings. Muslims believe that the prophets have lived in different places and times and delivered their message to particular peoples, but they do not differ from one another in their fundamental message. All the prophets call men and women to remember the divine oneness of God, whose very oneness is revealed in the multiplicity of peoples, prophets, and revelations. "And every people hath had its apostle," says the Quran (Sura 10:48).

Accordingly, the Quran encourages religious toleration. Recognizing the continuity of religious experience, Muslims should

deal amicably with others who have been vouchsafed a revelation from God. “Dispute not, unless in a kindly sort, with the people of the Book; save with such of them as have dealt wrongfully with you: And say ye, ‘We believe in what hath been sent down to us and hath been sent down to you. Our God and your God is one, and to him are we self-surrendered’ (Muslims)” (Sura 29:45).

Like Christianity, Islam posits that upon a catastrophic event signaling the Day of Judgment, the dead will be raised and each person will be judged by God according to his or her actions in life, the standards of the community, and the particular message sent to their people by God. Muslim descriptions of the afterlife are more concrete and specific than those in Christianity. Eternity is depicted in both spiritual and physical terms as a fulfillment and fruition of life. The Quran speaks of beautiful gardens of flowing rivers, of a banquet at which guests will enjoy eternal peace, and, in a few verses, of enchanting companions called “the black-eyed ones” (*houris*). Western critics have translated the word “houris” as “virgins” and have spoken of them as a motive for suicide bombers today. Many Muslims would compare this with Christians believing they will receive a harp and wings when they go to heaven. Mainstream Muslims interpret the word “houris” allegorically; the houris are virgins insofar as they are purified souls. In any case, the delights of Paradise exist for all good Muslims, not just martyrs.

Hell is described equally graphically as an inferno. Sinners suffer in torment there for their sins, but the good may go directly to heaven. Some Muslims interpret the descriptions of heaven and hell literally; others see the descriptions in the Quran as metaphors of spiritual bliss and suffering.

Jesus plays a key role in Islamic eschatology. Like Christians, Muslims believe that there will be abrupt end times, at which point the Mahdi, that is, the prophesied redeemer of Islam, will arrive to rule the earth, followed by the Second Coming of Christ in Jerusalem, the destruction of the world, and the final judgment and resurrection of the dead. It is interesting to note that Jesus, not Muhammad, plays a key role in this final chapter of human history.

THE QURAN

The Quran is of inestimable importance in Islam, more important to Muslims than the Bible is to Christians, including even fundamentalist Christians. The Quran is God's revelation transmitted to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years. Muslims consider it God's literal words. The word Quran means "recitation" and contains the messages recited or delivered by Muhammad and gathered together into a book, a task begun during Muhammad's lifetime and completed during the reign of the third caliph. Recitations of the Quran are an art and entertainment form in the Muslim world; they continue today and draw large crowds of people to listen to how the speakers choose to pronounce and intone the rhyming prose of the Quran, which is considered the finest work of classical Arabic.

Because the Quran is considered God's literal words, and Muhammad simply the recipient of them rather than their author or editor, both the form and content of the Quran are sacred. The message cannot be extracted from the words used to express it. The language itself is the vehicle of God's grace. Thus, while the Quran is often translated from Arabic into other languages so that non-Arabic-speaking people can read it, Muslims generally consider the translations necessary but not entirely satisfactory. They believe that one must learn Arabic to fully understand God's revelation in the Quran. The intrinsic role Arabic plays in God's final revelation is one reason why Quranic Arabic remains standard usage today, fourteen hundred years after the Quran was revealed to Muhammad.

Though Muslims believe that God chose to make his final revelation to the Arabic people, Islam acknowledges and honors previous revelations made to other peoples during history. The message of Islam is not unique or exclusive. The book of Moses, or the Torah, and the story of Jesus (*Injil*) are seen as being in agreement with the Quran. Moses and Jesus are regarded as among the greatest of God's prophets.

Christians may be particularly interested in the depiction of Jesus in the Quran. He is spoken of as Messiah, son of Mary, messenger, Word of God. The Quran shows him working miracles, though fewer than in the gospels, and portrays him as preaching an authentic message that it behooved his audience to follow. The virgin birth of Jesus is accepted, and Mary is a revered figure whose name appears more frequently in the Quran than in the New Testament. She is portrayed as a woman who completely accepted God's will, despite inevitable misunderstanding by members of her community and accusations of unchastity.

While the Quran presents Jesus as the second most important prophet after Muhammad, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified or was the son of God. Given the power and grandeur of God, the idea that God would be born as a man in humble circumstances, suffer evil, and permit himself to be crucified seems absurd and impossible. God is without equal or offspring in their view, and they regard notions that Jesus was the son of God and was put to death as regrettable distortions of the truth. The absolute monotheism of Islam leads Muslims to reject the anthropomorphism found in Christianity. Talk of God as "father" or of humans being made in the image of God seems to them to blaspheme God's transcendent nature, which exceeds human beings' ability to understand and describe it.

In addition, Muslims do not understand why a God of power, justice, and mercy would demand the sacrifice of Jesus to atone for sin. Adam was forgiven for his sin, so why would more be demanded of his descendants? The idea contravenes their understanding of Islam as both God's final revelation and a return to the primordial monotheism that existed in the time of Adam and characterizes God's relationship to humankind. Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified on the cross but escaped death and was taken up to heaven to be with God. The notion of the Trinity violates their understanding of God's oneness and seems to them a form of polytheism.

The Quran is organized into chapters called *suras*. The chapters do not depend on chronological order but are presented

according to length; anyone can pick up the Quran at any point without missing prior information necessary to understand it. Some non-Muslims consider the Quran disorganized and confusing because of this and because the topic may shift from one paragraph to the next. Most Muslims consider the sequence of the suras holy because the Prophet was divinely inspired. The suras are composed of verses of unequal length, ranging from as little as 3 verses to 238. Many of the chapters recount or refer to events that take place in the Bible, but the Quran is not a straightforward book of history but a compendium of stories, exhortations, anecdotes, prayers, and descriptive and allegorical passages.

Every sura but one in the Quran begins "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." Each sura ends with either the words Mecca or Medina to describe where the revelation was received. Usually shorter in length, the Meccan suras tell of the biblical prophets and deal with the fundamentals of faith, while the Medinan suras describe the early history of Islam and articulate how the community should be governed.

Not only do Muslims draw their main spiritual inspiration from the Quran, but the Quran has also been the source of studies of grammar, philology, literature, and law. Some scholars have compared the incarnation of Christianity with the "inlibration" of God in the Quran. God does not become embodied in the Quran as Christians think God becomes embodied in Jesus, but God's will and love and grace are made manifest in the book. The sense of this is so powerful that the word of God furnishes the inspiration for all Islamic art and civilization, whether this be calligraphy, chanting, Quranic recitation, carpets and textiles, or academic studies.

Modern biblical criticism as has been applied by scholars to the Bible is alien to most Muslims' view of their sacred Scripture. The Quran communicates a timeless message that speaks to men and women throughout history; their challenge is to implement God's message in their own era. Muslims acknowledge that the language of the Quran is a human language, but since human judgment did not create the Quran, they believe that human judgment cannot deconstruct it. The skeptical or

neutral spirit that animated nineteenth-century biblical criticism and which was for that reason resisted by many churches (and continues to be rejected by some today) strikes Muslims as antithetical to the softening of the heart that the Quran should effect in readers or listeners.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Islam is an action-oriented religion. Muslims are called to express their faith through the actions they perform in life. A good Muslim is not a passive or disengaged citizen, but one who actively contributes to the betterment of the community. While this can be done in any number of ways, being a good Muslim begins with practicing the essential obligations of the faith. These fivefold duties of Muslim practice are called the Five Pillars of Islam. They are:

1. declaration of faith
2. prayer
3. almsgiving
4. fasting during the month of Ramadan
5. pilgrimage to Mecca

Declaration of Faith

The declaration of faith, or *shahada*, has been described earlier. It is the statement “I witness there is no God but the God (Allah) and Muhammad is his messenger.” Pious Muslims may repeat this confession twenty times a day or so. No other phrase is used as often. To become a Muslim, a person must only make this declaration, which confirms the two central tenets of Islam: God’s transcendent power and Muhammad’s role as his prophet and messenger.

According to scholars, faith (*iman*) consists of five elements: belief in one God, who alone is worthy of worship; belief in angels, who are messengers of God; belief in Scripture and prophets and their messages; belief in the Last Judgment; belief in divine

decree and predestination. The last is probably the most passionately discussed element of Islamic faith. Just as Christians have argued over the nature of providence versus free will, Muslims have been divided over how much to attribute to God's will and how much to the actions of men and women.

Angels play a role in Muslim cosmology very similar to their role in Christianity. Islam regards angels as creatures of light who serve God and act as intermediaries between him and his creation. Another supernatural creature, known as *jinn*, from which the word "genie" derives, has the ability to interact with human beings in ways both positive and negative.

The angels are said to record each person's good and bad deeds in life. While God does not need the records to know people's deeds, the recording of the angels encourages people to lead good and God-fearing lives, confident in the knowledge that at the Last Judgment they will receive justice from God. The angels will stand with men and women when they account for their actions to God. Those who have heeded God's commandments will enjoy eternal life; those who have led unrighteous lives will be thrown into the fiery pit of hell.

Prayer

One of the most commonly depicted images of Muslims is of men in a mosque prostrating themselves to worship. This ritual has a series of steps. Facing Mecca, the worshipers announce to themselves the intention to perform *salat*, the name for the ritual prayer. They begin by standing, then bend and touch their hands to their knees. They rise and then drop to a kneeling position, from which they touch their heads to the floor. They then rest quietly on their heels. This process is repeated two, three, or four times, depending on the time of day. During *salat*, worshipers are enjoined to concentrate on prayer and not converse or look around. Certain words are spoken at each of the positions, and in addition to prayers for mercy and guidance, there is praise and adoration. The first sura of the Quran, *Al-Fatiba*, or "The Opening," is always recited at each prayer period. This reads:

Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds!
 The compassionate, the merciful!
 King on the day of reckoning
 Thee only do we worship, and to Thee do we cry for help.
 Guide Thou us on the straight path,
 The path of those whom Thou has been gracious; —with
 Whom Thou are not angry, and who do not go astray. (Sura 1)

Muslims are required to pray five times a day: before sunrise, at noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after nightfall. The hour of prayer is not up to the believer but is fixed. Because it depends on the rising and setting of the sun, the time changes with the seasons, and newspapers in Muslim countries usually print the exact time of prayer each day. It occurs in response to the call to prayer chanted by a *muezzin* from the tower, or minaret, of a mosque. This call to prayer is itself a prayer. The format is as follows:

1. "God is great" (repeated several times).
2. "I witness that there is no god but God" (said two times).
3. "I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God" (said two times).
4. "Come to prayer" (said two times).
5. "Come to the good life" (said two times).
6. "Prayer is better than sleep" (this is said only at the dawn prayer).
7. "God is great" (said two times).
8. "There is no god but God."

Before they pray, Muslims are required to ceremonially cleanse their face and limbs. This is to purify themselves both physically and spiritually before seeking God in prayer. Bodily functions and contact with certain substances defile the believer. One washes one's ears to put away the thoughts that surround one and to pray in clear consciousness. The Prophet is quoted as saying, "Those who remember God when they perform their ablutions will have their whole body purified. But those who do not remember God at ablutions will not be purified except in those places where the water was applied" (Speight, *God Is One*, p. 33).

Worshippers face Mecca when they perform salat. They can pray individually or in groups. On Fridays worshippers visit the mosque to pray. This obligation has always been incumbent on men but not on women. Increasingly, however, women as well as men attend midday Friday prayer, particularly in the United States.

In addition to being places of prayer, mosques typically offer educational classes and serve as community centers. They are more informal than Christian churches, with people not only praying but relaxing, meditating, eating, and even sleeping inside the mosque. Furnishings are simple. Worshippers do not use chairs or pews but sit on the floor on mats, after removing their shoes before entering the mosque. A niche in the wall facing Mecca, called the *mihrab*, is the focal point for worship. This is unfurnished but often adorned with stuccowork or mosaic. There are no depictions of living creatures in the mosque so as to avoid idolatry, but floral and vegetal ornamental motifs are widely used.

Praying five times a day enables Muslims to develop *taqwa*, or reverence. Through *taqwa*, Muslims become aware of what draws them to God and what pulls them away from him. *Taqwa* is consciousness of God, alertness to God's will and awareness of the temptations that could keep believers from fulfilling it.

A Christian parallel to salat is the Liturgy of the Hours performed in Catholic and Anglican monasteries. One American who was raised Catholic and converted to Islam said he was drawn to Islam because it was monasticism for everyday life. Like Muslims, monks and contemplative nuns meet for prayer numerous times during the course of the day to give thanks and praise to God.

Prostrating oneself before God as Muslims do in salat seems foreign to many Christians, yet it is part of the Catholic tradition as well. Men preparing to be priests prostrate themselves during the sacrament of ordination. Priests also prostrate themselves before the altar on Good Friday, and members of some

monastic orders prostrate themselves before the Blessed Sacrament instead of genuflecting. Salat is a form of embodied liturgical prayer expressive, some say, of both the outer and inner dimensions of Islam, for if the prayer is physical, even athletic, and communal, it is also internal and interior. The various postures represent the totality of human experience, from dependence to dignity.

The formal prayer of salat is a foundation of Islam but is not meant to exhaust Muslims' prayer life. Other prayers are often taken from or inspired by the hadith, the collection of Muhammad's sayings. Private, informal prayer is usually said in a worshiper's mother tongue rather than Arabic.

Unlike Christianity, Islam has no ordained leadership. The Friday prayers are led by a prayer master who delivers a sermon as well. Depending on the circumstances, the *imam* may also visit the sick, administer the mosque, instruct couples planning to marry, etc. Because they assume some of the same duties as priests and ministers, imams are sometimes compared to them, but there may be as many differences as there are similarities. In contrast to priests and ministers, imams are not required to be professionally trained or educated; laymen of faith considered to be of good character often serve as imams. As will be discussed later, Shi'i Muslims ascribe a special role and significance to the imam that Sunni Muslims do not.

Almsgiving

Islam is a religion that emphasizes social justice. Almsgiving, or *zakat*, is seen as an intrinsic element in bringing about a just society on earth. Faithful Muslims are required to donate 2½ percent of their total wealth each year to the needy or unfortunate. This is regarded more as an act of worship than a tax. In some Muslim countries the government collects the *zakat*. In others, offering *zakat* is left to the individual consciences of Muslims. In addition to helping prevent destitution and acting as a social

welfare program, zakat is seen as having spiritual benefits. Those who give zakat are purified of selfishness and attachment to wealth and possessions, and those who receive zakat are helped to become free of envy and resentment.

The importance attached to zakat underscores the connection between faith and action in Islam. In the Quran, references to zakat are almost always preceded by a reference to prayer. While prayer is good, believers are also asked to demonstrate their faith through their commitment to others.

Since God is seen as the Creator of all things, including wealth, Muslims are expected to take seriously the duty of stewardship. They are trustees of God on earth, and they have a responsibility to use what they have been given for good.

Fasting

Like members of other religious traditions, Muslims practice fasting but confine it to the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During Ramadan, Muslims abstain from food, drink, sexual activity, and other pleasures from before sunrise to sunset. It is a time when Muslims are encouraged to contemplate and practice the spiritual values of honesty, generosity, love, and devotion. The gulf between rich and poor diminishes as people of all classes are brought together to share a common experience of discipline and deprivation.

Ascetic self-denial of pleasure as a goal in and of itself is not promoted in Islam. Fasting is seen as a way of strengthening the will, growing in appreciation of God's gifts of food and drink, and heightening one's awareness of the hungry and unfortunate. During Ramadan one is meant to abstain not only from food and drink but from hurtful words or deeds. The Prophet said, "If you do not give up lying, there is no need for you to give up eating and drinking" (Speight, *God Is One*, p. 40). Hatred or envy is antithetical to the spirit of Ramadan and renders the fast invalid.

Muslims begin fasting during Ramadan from the age of thirteen. The ill, the elderly and infirm, pregnant women, travelers, soldiers in battle, and others in special circumstances are exempt

from the fast but are expected to make it up at another point during the year.

The day after the end of Ramadan is the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, which translates as “The Feast of the Breaking of the Fast.” The celebration extends for three days and is comparable to Christmas in its joyous spirit. People wear new clothes, exchange gifts, distribute food to the poor, and eat special delicacies to celebrate a time of hope, victory, and thanksgiving after the rigors of Ramadan.

Ramadan constitutes a decisive break with the normal pattern of life. There is a holiday feel during the month. For many Muslims, it is their favorite time of the year. Some say they never feel better. For others, Ramadan is a time of spiritual reflection and remembering, a purifying period in which believers try to rid their hearts of all that is not Allah and replace it with that which is “from Allah.” Some will go to the mosque every evening to say the prayers that are said only during the month of Ramadan. Some may also recite the Quran from memory, one-thirtieth each night. Memorizing the Quran is considered an excellent achievement, one of the best ways of continuing the vitality of the living Scripture. Just as the Eucharist brings to Christian believers an experience of God’s presence, the recitation of the Quran under proper circumstances can be an experience of divine presence for Muslims.

Ramadan commemorates two historical events: Muhammad’s first revelation from God and the Battle of Badr in 624, when Muhammad and his followers triumphed over the Meccans despite being outnumbered.

Pilgrimage to Mecca

Making the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca is the last of the essential duties of Muslims. All Muslims are asked to make a trip to Mecca once in their lifetime if their finances permit. Pilgrims visit the compound of the Grand Mosque to worship at the Kaaba, which is revered as the first house of God built by Adam and then rebuilt by Abraham. Arabs have worshiped at the Kaaba for centuries, both before and after Muhammad rededicated it

to Abraham. It is thought to replicate the throne of God, which is surrounded by angels.

Pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times, representing entrance into the divine presence. They walk—some run—seven times between two nearby hills, Safa and Marwa, in memory of Hagar, who, after she was repudiated by Abraham, is said to have run back and forth searching for water for herself and their son, Ishmael. Seeing her distress, the archangel Gabriel miraculously caused a spring to burst forth from the well. Pilgrims drink from the well, which is called Zamzam, and symbolically reject the devil's lures by throwing stones at a masonry pillar where Abraham rejected Satan's temptation in the Valley of Mina.

Sacred as the Kaaba is to Muslims, it is not meant to be worshiped as an idol. A hadith reports that Muhammad said that the destruction of the Kaaba is easier in the sight of God than the loss of an innocent life.

A key part of the hajj is visiting the Plain of Arafat, where Muhammad delivered his final sermon to the Muslim community before his death. From noon to sunset, pilgrims stand on the plain as Abraham stood before God. The pilgrimage ends with the sacrifice of an animal in memory of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his own son in obedience to God. Muslim tradition has it that this was Ishmael rather than Isaac.

The hajj reflects and reinforces in Muslims the strong sense of community that Islam instills. Coming from all points of the globe and all walks of life, Muslim worshipers are brought together in unity, a unity based on the oneness of God. Whatever their social or economic class, all on the hajj are equal before God. Pilgrims don white robes to circle the Kaaba and chant "Labbaika, Allahumma, labbaika" ("O God, here I am, at your service"). The white robes reflect the purification of the pilgrims, who must avoid sexual activity and improper speech and actions during the hajj.

The activities of the hajj connect Muslims to key events in their faith tradition (the construction of the first altar to God by Abraham, the first Muslim; the expulsion of Hagar and Ish-

mael; Abraham's sacrifice of his son in obedience to God; Muhammad's farewell speech to the Muslim community) and to key moments in the life to come. The white clothes that pilgrims wear symbolize their future passage from life to death. Wrapped in their burial shroud, those on the hajj forego all sorts of activities symbolic of life, from using perfume to carrying weapons, hurting animals (even an insect), or trimming their fingernails. All of the Five Pillars of Islam are compressed and expressed moment to moment in the hajj when pilgrims surrender their lives and will in service to God.

The pilgrimage occurs during the twelfth month of the year. In a spirit of communion with the pilgrims at Mecca, Muslims around the world sacrifice an animal on the same day as pilgrims do, on the tenth day of the hajj. Usually one animal per household is slaughtered for the Festival of Sacrifice, or Eid al-Adha, as it is called; ordinarily it is a sheep, but goats, cows, camels, and other herd animals are also acceptable. Some of the meat is eaten during the festivities that follow; most is given to the poor. As with Eid al-Fitr, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast at the end of Ramadan, gifts are exchanged and special foods are prepared for the holiday.

The slaughter is not considered expiation for sin. Muslims do not believe that a blood sacrifice is necessary to eradicate the effects of sin. The festival should be seen in the context of pre-Islamic rituals in Arabia that regarded animal sacrifice as a way to purify the believer from sin. This belief was transformed in Islam into a commemorative rite meant to instill in worshipers a sense of honor and respect for parents and a willingness to sacrifice to God that which is most dear.

In addition to the hajj, there is a lesser pilgrimage called *umra*, which involves visiting Mecca at a time other than the designated twelfth month. Many pilgrims making the hajj go on to undertake a *ziyara* (visit) to Medina, where Muhammad is buried, but making the *ziyara* does not absolve believers from making the hajj.

Unity and Diversity in Islam

Islam, more than Christianity, is a practical faith. In this respect, it is more akin to Judaism, for while Christianity focuses on what people believe, Islam and Judaism focus on what people do. The importance that theology has for Christians, law has for Muslims. For both Muslims and Jews, disagreements within their faith have arisen primarily over interpretations of religious law rather than over matters of doctrine.

Regardless of their particular faith, all religious believers are necessarily faced with the question of what their religion means or demands of them. Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike ask themselves, What is God's will? What is God's law? For Muslims, this latter way of phrasing the issue is particularly apt to arise. Throughout Muslim history, law has been looked upon as a form of God's guidance, a blueprint for putting into effect the just society that God commands his followers to create. Religious law (*sharia*) is regarded as the expression of the divine will and is meant to encompass every imaginable aspect of human life. It continues to be a source of Muslim identity today, as is seen by the demand among some Muslims to reinstitute sharia.

If Westerners sometimes view the sharia as oppressive and harsh, many Muslims see it as providing a balance between individual and collective interests, a gift given by God to enable humankind to follow the straight path of Islam. Since Muslims think that faith is best expressed in action, they consider obedience