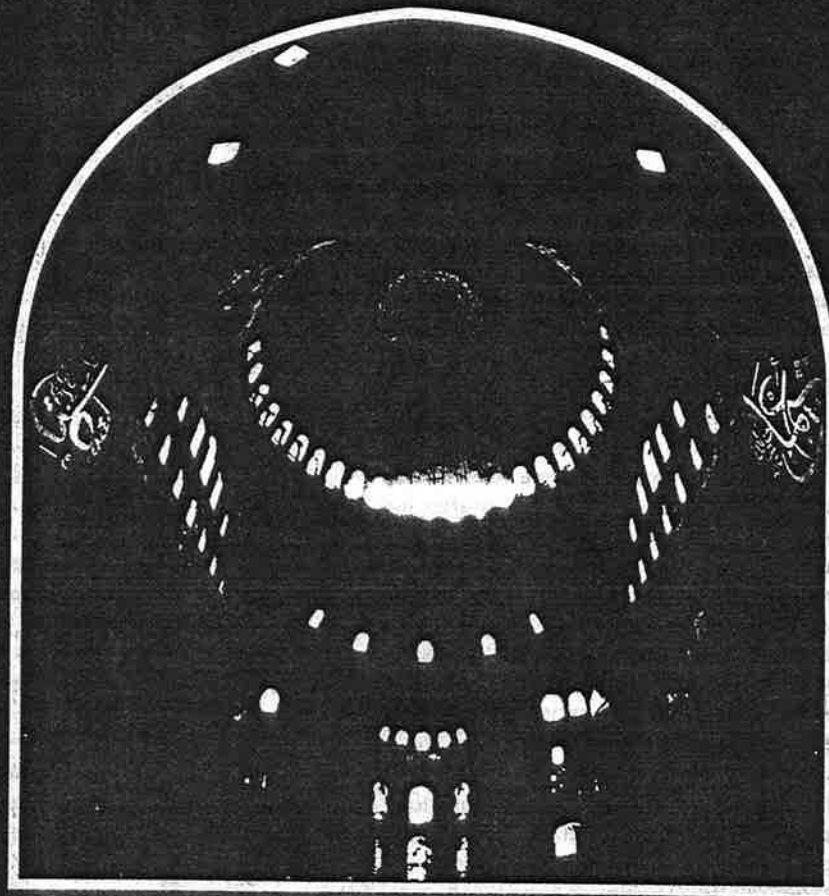


# Muslim-Christian Relations

Past • Present • Future



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## 1

## Islam

## An Introduction for Christians

## MUHAMMAD

In Muslim countries at dawn each morning a crier calls the faithful to prayer by proclaiming:

God is most great!  
 God is most great!  
 I testify that there is no god but God.  
 I testify that Muhammad is the prophet of God.  
 Arise and pray; arise and pray.

Who is this Muhammad to whom the crier refers?

Muhammad was born into a well-established but impoverished family in Mecca in 570. His early life was cradled in tragedy, for his father 'Abd Allah died a few days before he was born, his mother Amina when he was six, and his grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib, who cared for him after his mother's death, when he was eight. He was then adopted by his uncle, Abu Talib, and spent his boyhood roaming the hills around Mecca tending his uncle's flocks. Thus from an early age he grew accustomed to the loneliness of being an orphan and the desolation of the Arabian desert.

The Arabia into which Muhammad was born was essentially a tribal and polytheistic society. The city of Mecca, which lay along the trade routes between the Yemen and the Levant, was a commercial center. As well as being a place for trade, it had the greater asset of being a place of pilgrimage for the many gods of the peninsula.

Given the fact that Mecca was a commercial center, Muhammad took up the caravan business upon reaching maturity. In 590, at the age of twenty, he entered the service of a rich widow named Khadija. Though she was fifteen years his senior, she proposed marriage to him when he was twenty-

five. He accepted and during her lifetime took no other partner. Their married life was a happy one. Khadija bore him two sons and four daughters. The sons died in infancy.

Though married, Muhammad loved solitude and often retired to a cave on Mount Hira, in the hills he had roamed as a boy. There he reflected on the cruel strife of his compatriots, the endless quarrels among the tribes visiting the Meccan shrines, and the general immorality of his day.

Through vigils and meditation, often lasting through the night, Allah's reality became for him increasingly evident and awesome. Allah was not one God among many, as many of Muhammad's compatriots believed, nor even the greatest of gods. Allah was the one and only God. Soon from the mountain cave on Mount Hira was to sound the greatest phrase of the Arabic language: *La ilā ha illā ' Llā h!* There is no god but God!

But first Muhammad had to receive his commission from God, as did Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and others before him. One night, around 610, when Muhammad was alone in his cave, the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the form of a man. Gabriel said to him, "Recite!" The frightened Muhammad replied, "I am not a reciter." Gabriel, not taking no for an answer, physically overpowered him and then released him. The same exchange took place. Again Muhammad said, "I am not a reciter." Again Gabriel overpowered him. Finally, after Gabriel's third command to "Recite!" Muhammad said, "What shall I recite?" And Gabriel revealed the first passage of the "Recitation":

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who by the Pen taught Man what he did not know (Q 96:1-3).

The night on which Muhammad received his call is known as the Night of Power. According to the Qur'an, it "is better than a thousand months; in it the angels and the Spirit descend, by the leave of their Lord, upon every command. Peace it is, till the rising of dawn" (Q 97:3-5).

Recovering from the experience, Muhammad hurried home full of doubts and misgivings. Was he receiving a revelation from God, or was he going mad? He went through what Western mystics have called "the dark night of the soul." For twenty-two years the recitations came again and again, in the form of a voice and a vision, and the command was always the same—to recite: "O thou in thy mantle, arise, and warn! Thy Lord magnify, thy robes purify and defilement flee!" (Q 74:1-5). Mantles, since the time of Elijah, have been a symbol of prophetic authority. Moreover, Muhammad's auditions and visions, his doubts, and his reluctance to accept the divine mandate are reminiscent of the call of many Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

For the most part the people of Mecca responded to Muhammad's message with hostility. Many factors contributed to this reaction, but perhaps

the main one was that its uncompromising monotheism threatened not only polytheistic beliefs but also the considerable revenue that was coming to Mecca from pilgrimages. One is reminded of the first preaching of Christianity at Ephesus, where the silversmiths complained that

Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her (Acts 19:26-27).

Muhammad and his converts were heckled, ridiculed, and even subjected to persecution. The situation worsened after Muhammad, in 619, lost both his wife Khadija and his uncle, Abu Talib, who were his faithful supporters.

When all appeared to be lost, new possibilities arose in 621: some inhabitants from Yathrib, a city north of Mecca, on hearing Muhammad's message, invited him and his followers to immigrate to their city. The invitation was accepted as a vindication from God. After receiving their pledge that they would worship Allah as the one and only God, Muhammad and his followers secretly migrated to Yathrib in June 622.

Muslims regard the migration (*hijra*) as the turning point of world history and date their calendar from this year. Yathrib soon became known as *Medinat al-Nabi*, the City of the Prophet, and then by contraction, as Medina. In Medina, when the religious vision of the Meccan revelations had to be put into communal practice, the despised preacher had to become a masterful politician and statesman.

For the remaining ten years of his life, Muhammad's personal history merged with that of the Medinese commonwealth, of which he became head. Most important, he had to settle the struggle with the Meccans for the mind of Arabia. Battles were fought. In Badr, in 624, a small group of Medinese won a victory over a Meccan army many times larger. The following year witnessed a reversal: the Meccans gained a slim victory near Uhud. The Meccans followed up this victory in 627 by laying siege to Medina to force the Muslims to capitulate. They failed. In 630, eight years after Muhammad's migration to Medina from Mecca, he who left as a fugitive returned as a conqueror. Muhammad did not press his victory. In his hour of triumph he forgave his persecutors. Making his way to the Ka'ba, a temple Muslims claim was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, he rededicated it to Allah, the one and only God.

That Muhammad's call led him to be not only a religious but also a military and political leader points to the scope of his perceived prophetic task, as was the case with many prophets in the Old Testament. For example, Samuel was a man of action, at once a prophet and a military leader

(1 Sm 15). In David's court, the prophet Nathan exercised a very powerful influence in the affairs of Israel (2 Sm 7:1-17; 2 Sm 12:1f.). And Moses took up arms against idolaters (Ex 32:27-29), as did Elijah (1 Kgs 18:40).

For Muslims, Muhammad spoke and acted on God's behalf; that is, he was a prophet. He was human, and there was no trace of divinity in him. However, he was no ordinary mortal. For Muslims he is blessed among men, just as for Christians Mary is blessed among women. And, indeed, "the role of Muhammad in Islam is in some ways analogous to that of the Virgin Mary in Christianity. The annunciation to Mary, like the revelation to Muhammad, came through the angel Gabriel. Mary, a virgin, produced a Son, while Muhammad, 'unlettered' (*ummi*), produced a Book. Muhammad's 'illiteracy,' like Mary's virginity, is of profound metaphysical and spiritual significance."<sup>1</sup>

### THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an is the record of the revelations received by Muhammad between his call in 610 and his death in 632. These revelations were collected and edited within a period of some twenty-five years into more or less the form in which they are found today.

Four-fifths the length of the New Testament, the Qur'an is divided into one hundred and fourteen chapters, or *suras*, each containing verses called *ayat*, or "signs" of God. Generally speaking, the longer chapters were revealed in Medina and the shorter in Mecca. Thus the arrangement of the chapters as it exists today is not the order in which the revelations were received. When the sacred texts were put together in the days of the caliph Uthman (644-56), they were arranged in order of decreasing length. An exception to this is the brief prayer that forms chapter 1 of the Qur'an. The prayer is known as the *Fatiha* and corresponds in use to the Lord's Prayer in Christianity. It reads as follows:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise belongs to God, the 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 succour. 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.

For Muslims, the Qur'an is continuous with the Old and New Testaments: "We have made a covenant with the Israelites [and] you shall not be guided until you observe the Torah and the Gospel" (Q 5:70, 68). However, Muslims regard these two testaments as sharing a defect from which the Qur'an is free. For them, the Old and New Testaments were partially corrupted in transmission and have validity only when they confirm what

the Qur'an maintains. When the three scriptures differ, the inerrancy of the Qur'an prevails. The Qur'an itself makes this explicit when it states: "This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt" (Q 2:2).

The belief that the Qur'an is literally the Word and words of God underscores the place of the Qur'an in the lives of Muslims. For them, it is God's guidance for all life, for all people, for all time. It regulates and evaluates every event. It is a reminder of daily doings as well as a repository of revealed truth. It is a road map for the will as well as a collection of sayings to meditate on in order to deepen our sense of God's glory. "Perfect are the words of thy Lord in truthfulness and justice" (Q 6:115). This explains in part why the Qur'an is the most recited book in the world. Certainly it is the world's most memorized book.

As we recall, the central affirmation of the Qur'an is the unity of God: "Know that there is no god but God and seek forgiveness for your sin" (Q 47:19); "You have no other God but He" (Q 11:61). In this the Qur'an is at one with the Old Testament, and indeed the words used there are almost identical to those used in, for example, Isaiah:

Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God and there is no other (45:22).

Remember this and consider,  
recall it to mind, you transgressors; . . .  
for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God and there is no one like me (46:8-9).

To reinforce its message, the Qur'an uses material found in the Old Testament. The accounts of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and many others are referred to as examples of those who proclaimed the message of monotheism.

When the Qur'an describes the nature of God, God is presented as both transcendent and immanent. God's transcendence is clear when God is described as the omnipotent Creator of the world (Q 35:1-2; 2:109), the Master of the Day of Doom (Q 1:3), who, as in the Psalms (139; 11:4), is a judge who sees all and knows all: "He is with you wherever you are; and God sees the things you do" (Q 57:4).

Two of the greatest Qur'anic statements about God emphasize God's transcendence:

God—there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting. Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Who is there that shall intercede with Him save by his leave? He knows what lies before them and what is after them, and they comprehend not anything of His knowledge save such as

He wills. His Throne comprises the heavens and the earth; the pre-serving of them oppresses Him not; He is the All-high, the All-glorious (Q 2:255).

And:

He is God; there is no god but He. He is the knower of the Unseen and the Visible. He is the All-merciful, the All-compassionate. He is God; there is no god but He. He is the King, the All-holy, the All-peaceable, the All-faithful, the All-preserver, the All-mighty, the All-compeller, the All-sublime. Glory be to God, above that they associate! He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper. To Him belong the Names Most Beautiful. All that is in the Heavens and the earth magnifies Him; He is the All-mighty, the All-wise (Q 59:22-24).

Perhaps the best biblical parallel to the transcendent picture of God in the Qur'an is the last chapter of the book of Job, where Job acknowledges his insignificance in comparison with the greatness and majesty of God.

In the Qur'an, though God is transcendent and above all similitude, God is also immanent. God is not an indifferent, remote ruler of the universe. God in God's immanence is forever taking the first step toward men and women to draw them to Godself. The words "adore and draw nigh" were the last words uttered by the voice in the very first revelation (Q 96:19). Elsewhere we are told that every godly act that human beings perform is preceded by an act of God's favor toward them. In referring to backsliders who repented, the Qur'an says: "He turned towards them, that they might also turn; surely God turns, and is All-compassionate" (Q 9:119).

It is not surprising that the two most common attributes for God in the Qur'an are "Merciful and Compassionate." In fact, every chapter of the Qur'an, with the exception of chapter 9, begins with the formula: "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." These epithets used to describe God also can be found in the Old Testament. For example, Sirach 2:11 refers to God as "compassionate and merciful," as does the prayer of Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 30:9.

The message of the Qur'an is filled with joy and hope. It speaks not only of ultimate justice on the Day of Judgement, but also of help along the way and pardon for the contrite:

By the white forenoon and the brooding night! Thy Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee and the Last shall be better for thee than the First. Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied. Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee? Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee? Did he not find thee needy, and suffice thee? (Q 93:1-8).

A believer can at any time lift heart and soul into the presence of God to receive strength and guidance for life's troubled journey:

We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein (Q 50:15).

The Qur'an teaches that people can come to a knowledge of God by considering God's works and contemplating God's creation:

Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day and the ship that runs in the sea with profit to men, and the water God sends down from heaven therewith reviving the earth after it is dead and His scattering abroad in it all manner of crawling things, and the turning about of the winds and the clouds compelled between heaven and earth—surely there are signs for a people having understanding (Q 2:159).

If anyone wishes to know God, one has only to "journey through the earth and see how He hath brought forth created things" (Q 29:19). "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (Q 2:109).

Paul makes the same claim when he says that ever since the creation of the world God's "eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:20). And in the Psalms we read:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
(Ps 19:1)

The human response to God should be that of praise, love and service: "And proclaim the praise of thy Lord in the night, and at the declining of the stars" (Q 52:48-49). For

hast thou not seen how that whatsoever is in the heavens and in the earth extols God, and the birds spreading their wings? Each—He knows its prayer and its extolling; and God knows the things they do. To God belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and to Him, is the homecoming (Q 24:41-42).

To love God fully is to surrender to God totally. One who surrenders to God not only believes in God's message but also tries to live according to it, well aware that God is present in every place and time and that there is really no profane sphere of life. For such a person, not only prayer, but also the practice of mercy and justice is an essential part of true religion:

It is not piety, that you turn your faces to the East and to the West. True piety is this: to believe in God, and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay the alms. And they who fulfil their covenant, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril, these are they who are true in their faith, these are the truly godfearing (Q 2:172).

## ISLAMIC LAW

After Muhammad immigrated to Yathrib/Medina, his message, as recorded in the Qur'an, began to include legislative, or legal, material pertaining to the ordering of life in the new supra-tribal religious community. About 10 percent of the Qur'an falls into this category. The inclusion of legal material in a revelation from God has its parallel in many books of the Old Testament.

After Muhammad's death, as Islam expanded out of Arabia, law continued to evolve and to play a central role in the unification of the Muslim world. In Islam this legal guidance is known as the *shari'a*, the Arabic word for "path" as it appears in Qur'an 45:18.

In the evolution of Islamic law, or the *shari'a*, the first foundation was the Qur'an. Upon this foundation legal experts developed three further principles that, together with the Qur'an, came to be known as the four foundations of the *shari'a*. These were the *sunna* (custom), *ijma* (consensus), and *qiyas* (analogy).

The second foundation of the *shari'a*, the *sunna*, is the record of the custom of Muhammad as opposed to the diverse local customs found in the expanding Islamic empire. This record takes the form of a collection of sayings concerning what Muhammad said and did. Each saying is called a *hadith*. Thus the *hadith* is the vehicle of the *sunna*. There are six collections of *hadiths* commonly recognized as sound by most Muslims.

The justification for regarding the *hadiths* as an authoritative source of divine guidance comes from the Qur'an: "Obey God and the prophet" (Q 33:33; 4:58); "Truly in the messenger of God you have a beautiful model" (Q 33:21). In many respects the Christian analogy to the *hadiths* is the New Testament, which records what Jesus said and did.

The third foundation of Islamic law, *ijma*, or the consensus of the community, in turn lies in a *hadith* attributed to Muhammad: "My community will not agree on error." This *hadith* was taken to justify the view that if at any time in the history of Islam the community came to a consensus on a question about which neither the Qur'an nor the *sunna* made any specific statement, that consensus became part of the *shari'a*. This idea is not un-

like the Roman Catholic notion of *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, which is recognized as a guide in living the faith.

The fourth foundation of the *shari'a*, *qiyas* (analogy), was introduced to deal with new legal problems and issues. Its aim was to limit the use of personal opinion by suggesting that sound guidance could come only through reasoning by analogy with existing points of law, somewhat like what lawyers in the West call argument from precedent.

The development and codification of Islamic law took place within the first three centuries after the death of Muhammad. In theory, its four foundations—the Qur'an, the *sunna* (custom), *ijma* (consensus), and *qiyas* (analogy)—provide a comprehensive system of divine guidance for Muslims in all areas of private and public life, including the organization of the state and relationships between communities and nations. It is possible to say that the achievement of legal scholars in early Islam is comparable to that of the church fathers in early Christianity. They affirmed what they considered to be the authoritative viewpoint against deviating tendencies.

#### SUNNIS AND SHI'ITES

Muslims accept the *shari'a* as the manifestation of God's compassionate love for the world and a means by which the unity of God can be reflected in the unity of all human life. This is the Islamic ideal, just as in Christianity there is the ideal of one church, one faith, one God. In actuality, both religious communities are divided.

In Islam the major division is between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The division came about as follows: After Muhammad's death, Muslims were not in agreement concerning the temporal leadership of the community. One group maintained that Muhammad had designated Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, and Ali's descendants to be his successors. This group came to be called the *shii'a* ("party," "faction") of Ali, popularly known as Shi'ites.

The other group, convinced that Muhammad had done no such thing, opted for choosing a leader from a group of elder associates of Muhammad. This group came to be called "People of the Sunna and the Assembly," Sunnis for short. They elected Abu Bakr, one of the first persons to embrace Islam in Mecca, as the first caliph or successor to Muhammad. When Abu Bakr led the community (632-34), followed by Umar (634-44) and Uthman (644-56), Ali's supporters continued to insist that Ali had been unfairly passed over three times. Finally, Ali was elected the fourth caliph in 656.

Five years after the death of Ali the community became even more divided. The Shi'ites argued for continuing leadership in the family of Muhammad through his two grandsons, Hasan and Husayn. However, the majority favored Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, who was caliph from

661 to 680. The disagreement festered and erupted into conflict. In 680, in the battle of Karbala, a city in Iraq, Husayn was murdered by troops of Yazid, Mu'awiya's son and successor. Viewing the death of Husayn as that of a martyr, the Shi'ites dissociated themselves from the main body of the Muslims, the Sunnis, and formed a distinct community within Islam.

What began as a question of succession soon acquired a religious character. The Shi'ites called those whom they considered to be the legitimate successors to Muhammad Imams instead of caliphs, as the Sunnis did. However, while they adhered to their belief that a true successor to Muhammad must be of the family of the prophet, many sects developed among them over disputes centered on the right to succession of the fifth, seventh, and twelfth Imams. They rejected the first three Imams of the Sunnis and regarded the fourth caliph Ali as the first Imam. Hasan (d. 669) and Husayn (d. 680), Ali's two sons, became the second and third Imams. After the death of Husayn, his son Ali Zayn al-Abidin (d. 712) became the fourth Imam. He had two sons, Zayd (d. 740) and Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 731). Zaydi Shi'ites recognized Zayd as the fifth and final Imam. Other Shi'ites acknowledged his brother as the fifth Imam. Al-Baqir's son, Ja'fir al-Sadiq (d. 765), became the sixth Imam. He in turn had two sons, Isma'il (d. 760) and Musa al-Kazim (d. 799). Isma'ili or Sevener Shi'ites contended that Isma'il was the rightful seventh and last Imam. Other Shi'i groups supported Musa al-Kazim. Twelver Shi'ites continued to recognize the line of succession through Musa al-Kazim to Muhammad al-Muntazar, the twelfth and final Imam, who disappeared in the year 878 and is expected some day to return.

Twelver Shi'ites make up the main body of Shi'ism in the Islamic world today. They believe that Muhammad imparted part of his teaching directly to Ali, and through him to the subsequent Imams. Thus to the four foundations of the *shari'a* recognized by Sunnis, they add a fifth, the teaching of the Imams.

Since the disappearance of Muhammad al-Muntazar, actual leadership of the Twelver Shi'i community has been conducted by *ulema* (the Arabic word for "teachers/scholars"). The representative of the (Hidden) Imam is called a *marja' al-taqlid* and his interpretation of the religious law is binding on all Twelver Shi'ites. Under him there is a kind of religious hierarchy with *mullahs* (the Persian word for "teachers") at the lowest level and *ayatollahs* at the highest level of authority. The rise to power of Khomeini through the 1979 revolution in Iran was facilitated by the fact that he was a *marja' al-taqlid*.

In the development of a religious hierarchy Shi'ites departed from the basic egalitarian outlook of the Sunnis. James A. Bill and John Alden Williams observe that the religious hierarchy of the Shi'ites has its parallel in Roman Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> For them, the egalitarian outlook of the Sunni *ulema* has its parallel in the Protestant churches.

There is a similarity between Shi'ism and Roman Catholicism concerning the deaths of Husayn and Jesus, for just as Shi'ites regard the