

Islam

The Religion Of Submitting To Allah

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PART ONE: Background & Life Of The Prophet Muhammad

It is helpful to begin with the geographical context in which Muhammad lived. While the “Vacant Quarter” of Arabia is certainly a forbidding place, we should also realize that the southern areas had plenty of rain and were famous in Biblical times for their incense and spices. Because of this, a lively overland caravan trade was carried on along the peninsula. This trade would lead a person directly through the city of Mecca. Mecca was strategically located along the trade routes as a stopping place for caravans. For this reason, the city had achieved an economic prominence long before Muhammad came onto the scene in 571 AD. So when we think of the Prophet’s early life, we should not think of it as that of a Bedouin Arab living in a tent and surrounded by vast expanses of empty desert. He was rather born and raised at a commercial crossroads. Where people meet to trade in goods, they also meet to share ideas. There can be no question that the Prophet was exposed to Judaism, and various forms of Christianity, as well as to the superstitious beliefs of his area.

As for the local religion, it was a mish-mash of idolatry and animistic beliefs. Allah was conceived of as being a remote “high god,” with lesser deities in charge of the bread and butter needs of the believers. Between the gods and the world of men, a second strata of spirit beings existed. The first—angels—were entirely good creatures. The second type—called jinn—could be either good or bad depending on their disposition. In addition, like all animists, pre-Islamic Arabs cherished a superstitious awe of various stones and places and rocks. Some were connected with tribal tradition. Such was the case with the Ka’aba. This was said to have been built by Abraham while on a visit to his son Ishmael. Into its southeast corner, father Abraham placed the famous “Black Stone”. Pilgrimages to this shrine were common long before Muhammad integrated them into his religion.

Finally, in considering the context in which Muhammad lived, it is helpful to be aware of the fact that, though they were united by a common language, the Arabs were divided into many rival tribes and clans. Two main tribes fought for control of Mecca: the *Khuza’a* and the *Kuraish*. The *Kuraish* was further subdivided into the wealthy and dominant *Ummayyad* clan and the more humble *Hashimite* clan. It was into the latter that Muhammad was born.

Muhammad was born and grew up in poverty. He never had the benefit of a formal education, and to the end of his life was unable to read or write. Yet he was intelligent and capable. In his early occupation as a caravan-trader, he acquired a reputation as a trustworthy man. No doubt these qualities recommended him to Khadija, the wealthy widow for whom he worked. In any case, she made an offer of marriage which Muhammad accepted. He was twenty-five, she was somewhat older. They had a daughter—Fatima—who married a man by the name of Ali.

For the fifteen years following his marriage to Khadija, Muhammad underwent what has been described as a religious awakening. While his knowledge of Christianity and Judaism was only second hand, he was impressed by their ideas of there only being one God. He also seems to have been particularly taken with the Christian doctrine of the last judgment. At the same time,

he was becoming increasingly disgusted by the fornication and drunkenness and idolatrous practices of his fellow-Meccans. He may be described as being a *hanif* at this time, that is, someone who is a monotheist, but neither a Jew nor a Christian. The thought that the last judgment might be close at hand began to trouble him. He went off into the hills near Mecca to brood.

It was while meditating that the event occurred which Muslims call “the Night of Power and Excellence”. The angel Jibril appeared to him and said:

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created, created man out of a blood clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not.

At first, Muhammad feared he might be losing his mind. He had no great love for the jinn-possessed poets of his town. One tradition has it that he was near to killing himself at one point, before the Angel Jibril prevented him. When he went back to his wife and told her what happened, Khadija received the report positively and so became his first convert. Following this, he became more at ease with the continuing heavenly revelations.

It was a little harder matter to convince his fellow townspeople. The matter of judgment day piqued their interest, but the declaration that the lucrative idol worship had to go roused their ire. This was particularly true of the wealthy Ummayyads. Revelations are all very well until they cost me something. Converts were few, opposition was great.

Allah showed the way by getting the townspeople of Yathrib (later Medina) to invite Muhammad north to settle their tribal differences for them. Muhammad gladly accepted their invitation, and migrated there along with his followers in 622 AD. This event is called the *Hijira*. It was at Medina that Muhammad was able to establish basic Islamic religious practice, such as gathering at the mosque on Fridays, and daily prayers. Almstaking for the poor also became established at this time.

Without going into all the details of how this came to be, suffice it to say that Muhammad returned in triumph to Mecca in 630 AD, whereupon he purged the Ka'aba of its idols, smashing every one of them himself. He died shortly thereafter. Tradition has it that at one of his last great sermons in Mecca he said, “Know ye that every Muslim is brother to every other Muslim.

PART TWO: Through Muhammad, God Reveals His Will For All: SUBMIT!

A. IMAN (articles of faith)

La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadu rasul Allah. This is the basic creed of every Muslim. It means, “There is no god but God and Muhammad is God’s messenger.” A very simple concept—as simple as the desert. Yet it is one which—like the desert has become an elemental force controlling the lives of those who live in it.

“There is no god but God.” The basic thought here is of the majestic unity and transcendence of Almighty God. He is wholly other, utterly unique. Yet he is intimately involved in every atom of his creation. A special object of his love and concern is man, as the one creature with a thinking mind (and thus able to relate to God) and the creature to whom he has given freedom of choice (and is thus able to obey). The only way a creature can relate to such a majestic Being is by submission as a slave to a master. Thus it is no accident that the religion of Muhammad is called “Islam” (=submission), and that a devotee is called a “Muslim” (=a submitting one). This God works all in all. There is no resisting him. There is no changing his inalterable purpose. One can only discover what that purpose is and submit to it.

Yet how can a person come to know this majestic, unique being? That is where the second half of the Muslim's creed comes in: God in his wisdom chose to reveal himself—through Jibril his intermediary—to Muhammad his mouthpiece to man. For Muhammad is the last and greatest of a long line of prophets of the one true God. This line includes Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. All of these prophets urged submission to the one true God. Yet the text preserved by the followers of these former prophets became corrupted with error over the years. This is why God decided to give his last and final revelation in the form of poetic recitations to Muhammad. These recitations were memorized not only by the Prophet himself, but by many of his early followers. Shortly after the Prophet's death, the inscripturation of these revelations was completed by Zaid ibn Thabit, the prophet's secretary. Therefore, what we have in the Qu'ran is the word-for-word will of God. It is for all men.

Because it is the word of God, the Qu'ran is always recited in Arabic in prayers, and on other occasions. It is obviously from God since it has such an exalted tone & style and its complete internal consistency. Muhammad himself challenged his opponents to produce one surah like the ones he recited; they could not. "And if you cannot," he said, "Then fear the fire of hell."

The Qu'ran speaks of the last judgment, the blaze into which all those who do not submit will be cast. The books of men's deeds will be opened, and judgment passed accordingly. The Qu'ran also holds before the faithful the hope of heaven—"a station secure among gardens and fountains." Muslim men will also recline in heaven on lovely couches with "wide-eyed houris a recompense for that they laboured." No Muslim would presume to be certain of going to heaven; that can only come after a lifetime of struggle for God and submitting to him.

Life, then, is a test for each man. Will he submit to Allah? Will he recognize his weakness and listen to the revelation of God's Prophet? Man can make this choice and must continue to make this choice all his life to be saved. While it is true that God wills all in all, nevertheless man cannot know what his destiny is. He must discover it through action. His greatest action is to submit to Allah in every one of life's circumstances. The Qu'ran gives infallible divine guidance in living a life of submission.

The custom (sunna) of the Prophet also gives man guidance. This custom has been preserved for us through the many (600,000) hadiths (traditions) about the Prophet's life and actions which have also been written down. One Muslim woman wrote, "Someone was needed to translate the guidance (of the Qu'ran) into action, to live it. Not an angel or superhuman being, but a man like any other man." That man was Muhammad.

B. IHSAN (right conduct)

Aside from a person's duties to God, right conduct includes the recognition of the worldwide community which is in submission to Islam. All Muslims are brothers and ought not let nation, race, tribe or clan divide them. Forbidden practice includes drinking fermented beverages of any kind, "carrion, blood, the flesh of swine", gambling, divination. Commanded practice includes: charity, keeping faith in covenants, obedience to parents, concern for the weak and downtrodden. Control over sexual matters is very important. Women are commanded to "guard their sexuality" by covering their bodies and faces completely when they appear in mixed company.

C. 'IBADAT (Religious duty): THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

One of the most appealing things about Islam is its simplicity. It has no priests, no clergy, no sacrifices or any need for them. The religious duties prescribed for each Muslim are, for the most

part, easily accomplished. The first religious duty is to make the confession of faith, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger.” This is the first sentence whispered in a baby’s ear following its birth. Then there is *salat* or the prayer ritual. The Muslim must pray five times a day facing Mecca (dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall). The prayer ritual involves a ceremonial washing, rolling out a prayer rug, and bowing face down to the ground. It is common simply to repeat the following words from the Qu’ ran:

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 help
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.

Almsgiving is the third pillar of Islam. The zakat is given for the poor and for upholding the cause of Islam (upkeep of the mosques). The word zakat means purification. One source explained the idea as being one of purifying the rest of one’s possessions by giving the zakat to God. The fourth pillar is the fast during Ramadan. No food or drink is permitted between sunup and sundown. I liked the rule of thumb given for telling when either limit had been crossed: “As soon as it is possible to distinguish between a white and a black thread at dawn, until the difference is no longer perceptible.”

The last duty binding all who practice Islam together is the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. It has been described by one informant as being, “The ultimate experience in human brotherhood.” Each pilgrim, on nearing Mecca, exchanges his street clothes for a one-piece, unstitched white cotton robe. He will go around the Ka’aba seven times—three times fast, four times slow, stopping on each circuit to kiss the Black Stone. If that is not possible, he will point at it. Following this, the pilgrim goes to the spring of Zamzam for “sa’i” or “hurrying”. Zamzam was the spring the angel pointed out to Hagar, as she frantically searched for water for herself and her child. It has come to be explained as being symbolic of the human soul’s ceaseless striving in this life. The climax of the pilgrimage comes on the treeless, barren plain of ‘Arafat. Here the pilgrims gather in their millions to affirm the helplessness and utter dependence on God, and to pour out their souls to him. The pilgrim then returns to his country as a hajji -“one who has made the hajj”. The Prophet expected all Muslims to make this pilgrimage at least once in their lives, but in practice only a select few among those who live far away can do it.

CONCLUSION:

A person might describe Islam as a stern morality without the Baby. They have a strong concept of one God, they meditate upon his attributes and power in their prayers, they relate to him by submission. But they do not believe the good news that God has built the bridge to us by becoming our brother in the Baby Jesus. Their concept of the utter uniqueness of God causes them to be repulsed by the very idea of God becoming a man or having a Son. And their concept of sin—or lack of one—prevents them from seeing any need for God to take the step of relating to man by sending his Son in the flesh. Man is not basically evil. His biggest problem is that he lacks correct information about God. So what he really needs to bridge the gap is revelation. In fact, revelation is the only way a creature could possibly get any definite information about this

Transcendent God. Once God does this, however, the only question left for man is whether or not he will submit to God's will and follow his guidance.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What points of contact exist between Islam and Christianity?

(a shared respect for God's transcendence; for Jesus; for revelation and the need for it.)

2. Why is Christianity so hard for Muslims to accept, humanly speaking?

(the offense of the Trinity; God having a Son; just the fact that to leave Islam would be to leave a religion with strong history, strong ties uniting them to a trans-cultural brotherhood.)

3. What concepts need to be sharpened and clarified for the Muslim?

(his sense of man's sin—as inability to meet the Transcendent God's demands; God's coming into the flesh in Jesus as being his ultimate self-revelation. God's taking care of man's biggest problem by providing atonement for sin.)