

The Basics of Islam



Too often, we form opinions and beliefs about others based on stereotypes. Since 9/11, many have stereotyped those who practice Islam, based on the actions of the most fanatical of its followers.

But just as it would be erroneous to paint all Roman Catholics or all Protestants with the same brush, we must not fall into the erroneous belief that ALL Moslems are alike. Hopefully, the more we know, the more the less we stereotype. The less we stereotype, the better shot we have at understanding and the mutual respect that leads to cooperation and peace.

In preparing this series of articles, I've pulled together information from several sources to provide some basic information about Islam. My desire is that you will undertake some reading and exploration of your own. For, it is likely that you already know several people who practice Islam - perhaps your physician, the owner of a store where you shop or a hotel where your guests stay when visiting our area.

While most of us know little about beliefs other than our own, there are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, compared to about 1.5 billion Christians, one billion of whom are Catholic. The Muslims we hear most about in the news are fundamentalists who in no way represent the Muslims living in our communities. Our challenge as Catholics is to get to know more about our Muslim brothers and sisters. As the bishops at Vatican II wrote, "Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding."

The Prophet Mohammed?

Unlike Christians, who believe in the Trinity and that Jesus was the Son of God, Muslims believe that the Holy Prophet Mohammad (570-632) was not Divine, but a man like Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon and Jesus. Muslims believe that Mohammed was the last of the great prophets to receive divine revelation. Muslims believe that the revelation given to Mohammed in the Quran (sometimes spelled Koran) is God's Word.

Mohammad was born in Mecca (in what is now Saudi Arabia) in 570. When Mohammad grew up he became a merchant, traveling as far as Yemen and Syria. On these long journeys, Mohammad mixed with Christians and Jews and was attracted to the notion of One God. He believed that Arabians, who at the time worshiped many gods should know that there was in fact, only one true God, who was revealed to him as Allah.

Social injustices within the Arabic tribes were a source of great concern to Mohammed who witnessed the unjust distribution of wealth and the plight of the masses of people who had no access to food, clothing and shelter in the harsh climate of the desert.

At age 40, Mohammed experienced a profoundly life-changing mystical experience. Through the mediation of the angel Gabriel, Mohammad received the first in a series of revelations, which came to him over the next 23 years.

Mohammad tested the authenticity of his revelations with prayer and fasting before going public with his profound religious experience. When he did, he prophesied enthusiastically using poetic Arabic chants that many believed were beyond beyond his personal capacity to compose or contrive.

In the last years of Mohammad's life and shortly after his death in 632, Islam spread with lightning speed throughout the Middle East. By the end of the eighth century, Islam had reached central Asia and India and had spread across Mediterranean Africa and into Spain and France.

Mohammad's death brought about instability in the Islamic community which resulted in struggle and dissension among his followers that continues even today between those who followed Mohammad's son-in-law Ali (known as Shiites) and those who wished another follower, Abu Bakr, to be leader (a branch of Islam that became known as Sunni).

The Quran, a revelation of God

The central place of the Quran in the life of the devout Muslim cannot be exaggerated. The Quran, as revealed to Mohammad and recited by him and then recited through the centuries to our present day, is received by Muslims as the Word of God. Since God is One and God speaks through this scripture there is no doubt about its authenticity, authority and place in the heart and on the lips of every Muslim. For Christians, there are obvious parallels in seeing Jesus Christ as the Word of the Father.

The Quran (the word means "recitation") which was revealed to Mohammad verse by verse contains 114 chapters, or *suras*, which cover a range of topics from reverence for Allah to practical ways of living.

The Quran does not work in the same way as the Christian New Testament. The Quran is not designed to be recited or chanted, not sequentially read. It is poetic and profoundly musical. Perhaps, its closest counterpart within our tradition is Gregorian chant as no accompaniment is used.

Leadership

In Islam the leadership is lay. Mosques are centers of worship, as well as of learning and study of the Quran, and these may raise up an imam as a leader.

However, there is no formal ordination ceremony. Most imams qualify for their position by their ability to recite the Quran and by living the life in accordance with its teaching. As a religion, Islam has the minimum amount of infrastructure that requires overhead and maintenance. A mosque (the word itself literally means "a place to prostrate") is often stunningly beautiful architecturally and can be brilliantly ornate. However, all semblance of opulence is to be avoided and most staff workers are volunteers. The money collected usually goes to those in need through education loans, financial opportunities, or the basics of food, medicine, clothing and shelter in the attendees' countries of origin, many of which have been devastated by war.

Five Pillars

I. Profession of faith. The first of Islam's five pillars is the ultimate profession of their faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammad is the prophet of Allah." This statement is repeated at least five times each day by the *muezzin* in the minaret of every mosque around the world as an invitation to prayer.

Just as it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Quran for a devout Muslim, so it would be hard to exaggerate how central this first pillar of belief is. The belief in the One,

transcendent God is the pole around which the whole religion orbits. There is no other like God, no modifier. God, simply, is God.

Even though the beliefs of Islam differ from the Christian notion of a triune God (Father (Creator), Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit (God's love at work in the world and within God's people), all Muslims honor the monotheistic traditions of Christianity and Judaism because we worship the One God. We are all "people of the book," a testament to the respect that Islam has not only for scholarship but also for the wisdom contained in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

The transcendence of God is the dominant belief for a Muslim. No image, doctrine, or dogmas can express the reality. The recognition of this transcendence is sacred enough to cause complete and total surrender. This was the main message of Mohammad, who saw himself as reminding all peoples of the reality of God's transcendence. A Moslem believer's personal surrender to Allah is the way of salvation. There is no mercy through a human savior; every person must bend his will and lift up his mind in assent to God's transcendence. God will reward the adherent with mercy and a life hereafter. There is no baptism or membership without practice. The five pillars literally sustain and constitute the faith.

2. Prayer is carried out five times a day: at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and after the fall of darkness or at bedtime. The actual prayers are accompanied by ritual cleansing, hand gestures, body bows and prostrations, and prescribed rubrics that apply whether praying alone or with others.

When the call to prayer is sounded observant Moslems stop what they are doing and pray. There is no fudging or promising to pray twice as hard later for there is a higher power that rightfully claims your time, over and total submission.

The combination of frequent gathering for prayer (as we Catholics do in when we say the Liturgy of the Hours) and ceaseless personal prayer allows Moslems and Christians alike to keep the memory of God ever present. The essence of God then pervades our life and keeps our life in balance.

3. Almsgiving. The third pillar of Islam involves a serious redistribution of wealth. Since all is given by God, then nothing of what I own is mine, unless it is shared according to God's will. Muslims traditionally give 2.5 percent of their wealth to the poor, although this tithing sometimes has taken the form of a tax if the government is Muslim. Nevertheless, the intent remains the same: to give to the poor and to be a just and peace-filled society.

The pillar of almsgiving is not only because a just society requires equity but also because earthly prosperity is a proof of God's blessing. This is a strongly rooted belief of both Judaism and Islam. Muslims also believe that these riches will also bless them when they reach heaven for God wants his people to prosper and to live in abundance.

4. Ramadan. The fourth pillar of Islam is the fast that takes place during the holy month of Ramadan. All Muslims all over the world during Ramadan are called on to fast from sunrise to sunset for 30 days, unless they are sick or on a journey. Generally, those 12 or older rise early for a meal before the sun rises, then break their fast after sunset.

The aim of abstaining from food during the day is to help Muslims identify with the poor, who have no discretion when, where and what to eat. In this way, fasting is similar in intention to almsgiving.

There is a direct link between fasting and almsgiving. The observant Muslim is called to surrender (the word *Islam* means “surrender”) again not in idealism, but in actuality and at an ordinary level. Fasting is simply seen as what it means to be a Muslim. In other words, these practices are not, as Christians might imagine, the higher practices of a saint. They are the expected minimum activity of ordinary people.

The fasting helps the believer to connect body, mind and soul. If God matters, then God’s word is to override human inclinations from time to time. Notice the graciousness of the Muslim’s God called Allah: Eleven months delight in food and drink. Fast one month. It’s strict but moderate.

5. Pilgrimage. The fifth pillar of Islam also bonds together a community of believers. It is the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. This obligation does what all great pilgrimages do. It restarts the conversion experience by returning the devotee back to the basics. Muslim pilgrims strive to restore within themselves the beliefs and practices of Mohammed and the dictates of the Quran. To take a sacred journey, along with other believers, is to personally immerse oneself in the culture of that religion and make it your own.

This holy pilgrimage imprints in each generation and within each pilgrim the revelation given to the Prophet. The total experience is one of surrender. Each person feels what it is to be a descendent of Abraham under God.

This pilgrimage is not unlike the 40 days spent by Jesus in the desert before the advent of his ministry, battling demons and surrendering his or will to God in utmost humility. In the desert, one must stay focused in order to survive. In the desert, one must get along with others to secure and maintain goods, one must move quickly, lightly and frequently to have enough basics for food, shelter, clothing and human interaction. One must be tough enough to travel long distances and defer one’s needs to provide for those who are weak. One must enjoy the solitude and adapt to the climate’s harshness.

Some of us have had the privilege of traveling with others to the Holy Land or one of the Marian Shrines. Such pilgrimages are truly a blessing. But Islam, by making the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of its five pillars, graphically reinforces the necessity of spending time with God in the desert and entrusting ones entire life to God’s providence.

As with prayer, fasting and almsgiving, the inner spiritual journey of the pilgrimage is not simply a matter for saints or mystics or hermits. It is a defining feature of being a Muslim.