

Christian-Muslim Relations—A Road to Understanding Circular Paper #2

Introductory Notes on the Religion of Islam

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The first part of these “Introductory Notes on the Religion of Islam” by Fr. Thomas Michel was included in the Summer Hospitallers Newsletter mailing. That first set of notes covered the life of Muhammad and the early history of Islam. This set of notes, Circular Paper #2, presents the major doctrines and practices for Muslims.

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These notes are part of a handbook developed by Fr. Michel for use in various institutes and courses that he has been called upon to teach. We are grateful for his generosity in allowing us to use this for our instruction.

ISLAM, IMAN, IHSAN

According to a hadith report preserved in Bukhari’s [the 9th century Muslim scholar who collected the reports of the sayings and acts of Muhammad] famous collection of the sayings of the Prophet, Muhammad once said: “The religion of God has three parts: **islam**, **iman**, and **ihsan** (or **islah**), and the first of these has given name to the religion.” Islam means “submission” and indicates what a Muslim must do to submit his/her life to God’s will. The Arabic word *islam* means surrender or submission and denotes the active surrender of one’s life to God. A *Muslim* is a person who submits one’s life to God.

When Muslims say the religion of Islam has three parts, they mean three essential aspects:

- 1) *islam*: deeds, actions, what a Muslim must do,
- 2) *iman* (faith): the more interior concept believing what God has taught,
- 3) *ihsan* (goodness) or *islah* (uprightness): the process of interiorizing the divine commands so that they give shape and expression to an upright, good life that reflects God’s own goodness. *Ihsan* is thus the fruit of carrying out the pillars of *islam* and accepting the pillars of *iman*, and goes beyond the basic minimum to integrate all that God has revealed and commanded into every aspect of one’s daily behavior.

Islamic belief and practice has two sources: the Qur'an and the *hadith*. The Qur'an is the scripture, the revealed book of Islam. The *hadith* are the sayings, deeds, and decisions of Muhammad and, together with the Qur'an, form the basis of Islamic belief and practice. The practice of *islam* rests on five "pillars," or basic acts which are obligatory for all Muslims.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

1. SHAHADA

The first of these pillars, the *shahada* is different from the other four. It is more accurate to say that the practice of Islam rests on a central affirmation and upon four cornerstones of Islamic religiosity. The central affirmation, the "witness" or profession of faith, is brief, consisting of two phrases: 1) "There is no god but The God," 2) "and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

The first phrase indicates the universal aspect of Islamic witness, which Muslims profess together with other monotheists. God is one. Nothing else exists that is worthy of worship; there is no being other than God to whom adoration and obedience is owed. Muslims not only forbid worshipping other gods, but also reject devoting one's life to (that is, making false idols out of) wealth, power, beauty, sex, nation, etc. This affirmation Muslims share with other monotheists, such as Jews and Christians.

This first phrase of the *shahada* is so important that those who profess the unity of God form a broad monotheistic community. More than once, the Qur'an says that Muslims, as well as Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans (an ancient monotheist religion in the Middle East) - all those who believe in God and the Last Day - will have nothing to fear from God's judgment, nor will they come to harm. Muslims cannot wage *jihad* against those who profess the first half of the *shahada*, unless they (Muslim, Jewish, Christian etc.) be guilty of injustice and oppression.

The second phrase of the *shahada* indicates what is distinctive, unique, and particular to the Islamic community. "Muhammad is the messenger of God." In one sense, Muhammad is one of a series of messengers, all sent by God with a divine message for humans. However, the phrase implies that Muhammad is more than simply one among many. He is preeminently *the* messenger, the one who brought the final, complete, perfect expression of God's Message contained in the Qur'an. This second phrase of the *shahada* is not professed by Jews, Christians, or the followers of other religions. Thus, profession of the two phrases of the *shahada* makes a person member of the Islamic *umma* (community of faith.)

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final prophet who completed the religion. This distinguishes them from later religious traditions, such as the Baha'i faith, which accept the prophethood of Muhammad, but deny that he was the final, definitive prophet. Whether or not followers of the Ahmadiyya movement should be considered Muslims is a debated issue.

Profession of the *shahada*, with interior assent, makes a person a member of the *umma*. When one converts to Islam, the simple ceremony consists solely of his or her making the profession of faith in the presence of witnesses. When a child is born, Muslim parents immediately pronounce the *shahada* in the child's ears so that these be the first human words which it hears.

When one enters Islam by professing the unity of God and the messengership of Muhammad, the practice of submitting one's life to God rests on four pillars: prayer, aid to the poor, fasting, and pilgrimage. Muslim legal scholars spell out what is demanded of Muslims in each of these aspects of religious life.

2. SALAT

The second pillar of Islam is *salat*, the ritual prayer. Salat is ritual prayer in that every detail of the prayer is carefully prescribed and Muslims are not free to deviate in any particular. The purpose of *salat* is to reaffirm one's submission to God at critical moments of daily life.

The first significant moment is the beginning of each new day. The day's actions begin with the prayer at **dawn**, which must be completed before sunrise. In the morning prayer, the Muslim turns to God anew in repentance and seeks God's mercy and forgiveness. The morning continues, filled with activities of homemaking, rearing children, work and business affairs. At **noon**, when daily cares and demands reach their peak, Muslims pause from these activities to reaffirm their submission to God's will in the second time for prayer. After the midday meal and, where local custom and climate favor the practice, a period of rest, the day's activities begin anew in mid-afternoon. Muslims begin their daily activity anew, between 15.30 and 16.00, with the **afternoon** prayer. After **sunset** and at **night**, before they retire, Muslims make their final two periods of ritual prayer.

The morning prayer includes a petition seeking God's forgiveness, and at close of the day, at the sunset prayer, is the petition for forgiveness repeated. One could say that the daily rhythm of life in Muslim societies is shaped by the periods of prayer.

The *salat* is not a lengthy prayer, requiring but 5-10 minutes for its performance. It is designed to be performed in the midst of one's daily life, and may be done at home, office, construction site, or school. Once a week, at noontime on Fridays, Muslims males are required to perform the prayer in congregation, at the mosque, when a sermon is preached. Women usually perform the Friday prayer at home, although many mosques have special areas reserved for female worshippers.

The periods of prayer are preceded by a call to worship, a fixed text chanted from minarets by the *muezzin*. Like the prayer itself, the call to prayer is always made in Arabic. The call to prayer (*azan*) has three sections: an introduction, the actual call, and a conclusion.

- (Introduction) 1. **God is greater!** (4X)
2. **I bear witness that there is no god but God!** (2X)
3. **I bear witness that Muhammad is messenger of God!** (2X)
- (Call) 4. **Come to prayer!** (2X)
5. **Come to the sowing** (the seeds of salvation)! (2X)
6. **Prayer is better than sleep** (2X) [Only at morning prayer.]
- (Conclusion) 7. **God is greater!** (2X)
8. **There is no god but God!** (1X)

The introduction (#1-3) consists of praise to God (*Allahu akbar!* God is greater! i.e., God is greater than

all else) and a profession of the *shahada*. Then, (#4-6), after summoning the believers to prayer (*Hayy 'ala s-salat*), the muezzin calls them to “the sowing” (*Hayy 'ala l-falah*). This unusual phrase, taken from agriculture, is an allusion to prayer as sowing the seed in this present world which will bear fruit in the world to come. To these, at the morning prayer, is added the affirmation that prayer is better than sleep, a reminder that in many parts of the Islamic world until today the call to prayer is the signal to rise from sleep. The conclusion to the prayer is brief, a repetition of the phrase *Allahu akbar*, and the single repetition of the first part of the *shahada*, “There is no god but God.” The call to prayer begins and ends with the name of God, ALLAH. After each phrase of the call to prayer there is a period of silence, during which pious Muslims are to repeat silently the phrase proclaimed by the muezzin, thus becoming not passive listeners, but making the call their own.

Upon hearing the call to prayer, Muslims prepare themselves with a ritual ablution. They wash their hands and arms to the elbow; faces, with special attention to eyes, nose, ears, and mouth; and feet and legs to the knees. When they have incurred ritual impurity, e.g., through sexual relations or by touching an unclean animal, they perform “the complete ablution” by bathing. The ablution is symbolic, indicating the importance of interior purity and the exalted nature of prayer.

Muslims begin the prayer by facing Mecca and making the essential act of intention, called the *niyya*. This prayer, a time to pause and affirm to God that one is going to make, for example, the morning prayer, is so important that if a Muslim omits the *niyya*, the prayer is not valid and the obligation not fulfilled. The prayer continues with the recitation of the *Fatiha*, the short prayer that makes up the first chapter of the Qur’an, followed by other Qur’anic verses. The stages of the prayer are marked by a repetition of *Allahu akbar*. The most dramatic moment of the prayer occurs in the repeated prostrations, with forehead, hands and knees touching the ground. For Muslims, this “body prayer” symbolizes the submission of one’s life to God. The prayer is concluded with the greeting of peace offered to fellow worshippers on the right and left: “*Al-salamu alaykum! Wa-alaykum al-salam!*” (“Peace be with you. And with you peace”)

The Friday noon prayer is the weekly congregational prayer. It is obligatory for men, but not for women, to perform this prayer in a mosque. Every mosque, no matter how simple, has two features: the *mihrab* marking the direction of Mecca (the *qibla*), and the *minbar*, the pulpit for the Friday sermon. Shoes are not worn in the mosque, and the floor is usually covered with carpets or mats. No pictures or statues are permitted in Islam, so the walls are usually decorated with verses of the Qur’an and geometrical designs.

3. ZAKAT

The third pillar of Islam is *zakat*, the poor tax. *Zakat* is different from almsgiving (in Arabic, *sadaqa*), because *zakat* is a fixed obligation, a percentage of income to be used for the poor of the community. The purpose is to ensure that all members of the community are provided for. The point is that each Muslim must realize that the poor of the community are his or her responsibility, a sacred obligation.

The manner collecting and distributing *zakât* varies widely. It is common, especially during Ramadan, to see a bread truck pull up at a mosque in a poor neighborhood, and loaves of bread distributed to all who ask. In Indonesian and Malaysian villages, *zakât* is paid in rice. Elsewhere, families conscientiously prepare extra food at noon on Fridays so that they can feed the needy after Friday prayers.

The spiritual implications of *zakât* are that caring for the poor of the community is not a matter of choice, mood, or feelings of sympathy. It is a required duty for every obedient Muslim. Any relationship to God or life of prayer, fasting, and other acts of worship that does not include the element of concrete assistance to the poor of the community is not a full response to the Qur'anic message.

4. SAUM: THE RAMADAN FAST

The key elements in the Ramadan fast are *remembrance, celebration, communal solidarity, renewal, forgiveness, and exposure* to the experience of hunger.

In Ramadan, Muslims **commemorate** the revelation of the Qur'an. It is a time for Muslims to thank God for the gift of the Qur'an with Qur'an study groups, academic congresses and public Qur'an recitations. During the last week of Ramadan, on the Night of Destiny (*Lailat al-Qadr*) when the Qur'an is believed to have been sent down from heaven, and when the Day of Judgment is expected, many Muslims spend the entire night in the mosque, reading the Qur'an, listening to its recitation, and performing recommended prayers. When the Last Judgment arrives, they hope to be found in prayer.

A second element is **celebration and social solidarity**. Ramadan is not a sad time, but the happiest month of the Islamic year and eagerly awaited. The ordinary rhythm of life is replaced by a "sacred" schedule, with families rising in the early hours of the day to prepare a light meal to be consumed before dawn. The work day is often shortened and schoolchildren given their annual vacation. The mosques are crowded with worshipers, visitors, sermons and recitations of the Qur'an. At the popular level, Muslims visit shrines and tombs of holy persons and Sufis hold sessions of *dhikr*.

Sunset is announced by the call to prayer from the minarets, and in many places by cannons, gunshots, or fireworks. At the iftar, Muslims break their fast with traditional foods. Families, neighbors, friends, and colleagues gather at one another's homes or, in modern cities, restaurants, to break the fast. After the meal, they return to the mosque for night prayer and the long *tarâwih* prayers. After the *tarâwih*, shops and markets are again open, social calls are made, and special musical programs are aired on television. The socializing goes on until the early hours.

The communal performance of a long and difficult fast, with many periods of prayer, followed by communal celebration, creates a strong sense of social solidarity. The disruption of the normal daily schedule, with ordinary activities - rising, eating, praying, shopping - performed at extraordinary hours, results in the creation of a sacred time. Business affairs and work schedules are held to a minimum so that the main "business" of Ramadan is the celebration of the fast.

Renewal and forgiveness are important features of the fast. Muslims share a human tendency to get slack in their duties. Ramadan is a time for repentance and starting anew, and the *tarâwih* prayers are directed towards asking forgiveness for the wrongs committed during the previous year. Muslims believe that God's mercy is boundless and immediate towards one who repents, but during Ramadan God's forgiveness is superabundant.

They believe that through the faithful practice of Ramadan, all their sins are forgiven, and so the *Id al-*

Fitr, the Feast of Breaking the Fast, is celebrated with joy. Having been forgiven by God, Muslims are taught to **forgive one another**. Thus, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of forgiveness are joined. In the practice of *halal bi-halal*, Muslims visit parents and friends to ask forgiveness for any wrongs they might have committed towards the others during the previous year in order to prevent grievances from going on and on and poisoning human relations.

Finally, in Ramadan Muslims have an experience of **hunger**. They are asked to recall the multitudes who go hungry. Ramadan is thus a time of “conscientization” towards the plight of the hungry.

5. THE *HAJJ*: THE PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

For pious Muslims, the pilgrimage to Mecca is the dream of a lifetime, but due to factors of health, responsibilities, expense and logistics, most Muslims are never able to fulfill this desire. Because of the ease of travel, the applications to make the annual pilgrimage exceed what can be accommodated by the extensive but still limited facilities in Arabia. The norm laid down by the Saudi authorities is one pilgrim for every 1000 Muslims in each country. Although for most Muslims the *hajj* remains a dream, the pilgrimage has an important place in the Islamic life. Like the other pillars of Islam, the form and content is fixed. The pilgrimage must be made at the proper time (during the Month of the Pilgrimage) and prescribed actions must be performed on the proper days.

The pilgrimage is a reliving of Islamic roots. Mecca is the scene of Muhammad’s birth and early mission and the site of the Ka’ba, towards which all Muslims pray. The Ka’ba symbolizes both the unity of the Islamic *umma* and also the ancient, God-given nature of Islam. Muslims believe that the Ka’ba was built by the prophet Abraham, the first structure on earth dedicated to the worship of the One God. Praying in the direction of the Ka’ba is a reminder of the unity of the Islamic community.

During the pilgrimage, Muslims enter a sacred state, a time dedicated totally to God. Normal clothing is replaced by two white sheets. It is forbidden to cut the hair or nails. Sexual abstinence is required. The preliminary rites are in Mecca, particularly the walking around the Ka’ba, as Muhammad and his Companions had done and reenactment of the faith of Hagar, Abraham, Hagar, and the baby Ismail. The central act of the pilgrimage takes place 30 km. from Mecca on the slopes of Mt. Arafat. Here Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his son Ismail. If the Day of Witness is omitted, one has not performed the pilgrimage and the obligation to do so remains.

Muslims ascend the mountain in time for noon prayers and remain there until after the sunset prayer. To understand the meaning of the rite, one should know that Arafat, in the midst of the Arabian Desert, is one of the world’s most arid, hot, and inhospitable locations. But that God has commanded it, no one would go there. Standing in the sun on Arafat, the pilgrims profess that the human person finds true fulfillment and identity in obedience to God, that the ultimate purpose and reason for human existence is found in accepting willingly and joyfully one’s creaturehood before God. A whole lifetime of Islamic experience is summed up in this one act.

After the return from Arafat, a final moment of the pilgrimage is worth noting. On the road to Mecca, in the village of Mina, the pilgrims sacrifice a goat or sheep to commemorate the faith of Abraham who was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isma’il, in obedience to God. At this point, the pilgrims become

united with Muslims around the world who celebrate the second great Islamic feast, Id al-Adha, Feast of the Sacrifice. Just as the Day of Arafat sums up in one act the Islamic understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life, so the Sacrifice expresses their continuity with the faith of Abraham. At that moment, Muslims around the world vicariously participate in the pilgrimage, performing at their own homes or mosques the same rite performed in Mina.

Just as, in addition to required *salat*, devotional prayer (*du'a*) is recommended, besides the obligatory *zakat* Muslims are urged to give alms (*sadaqa*), and along with the Ramadan fast pious Muslims voluntarily fast on other days (e.g., Mondays and Thursdays), so also, the informal pilgrimage to Mecca called the *'umra* is considered highly meritorious. Every month outside the *hajj* season, over 200,000 Muslims make the *'umra*. These recommended but non-obligatory practices will be treated more fully in speaking of the third part of the religion of Islam, *islah*.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF IMAN

If *islam* can be described as **obedience** to what God has commanded, *iman* refers to **faith**, internal assent, to what God has revealed. Salvation (*najat*) in the sense of eternal reward with God is the result of obedience and faith. Both are necessary. Like the concept of *islam*, *iman* has five pillars.

1. Belief in the oneness of God

The first pillar of faith is very similar to the first pillar of Islam (bearing witness that there is no god but God). As the *shahada* means that Muslims obey nothing other than God, the first pillar of faith indicates that Muslims believe nothing but what God has revealed. It is not sufficient to witness to God's uniqueness in the *shahada*; a Muslim must also believe all that God has taught. God is called Al-Haqq, "the Truth," and has revealed His Word to humankind through the prophets. All human efforts at truth (theology, philosophy, science etc.) may be correct or incorrect, but only in God's Word can humans be sure of arriving at the truth and finding true guidance.

2. Belief in His Prophets

Muslims believe in all the prophets that God has sent. God has sent many prophets (122,000/ 144,000). There is no nation or ethnic group that has not been sent a prophet at some point in their history. In the Qur'an, 26 prophets are named, some of whom are the same as the patriarchs of the Old Testament, some are unique to the Arab tradition (Shuaib, Hud, Salih, Dhu'l Kifl, etc.), and from the New Testament, Yahya (John the Baptist) and Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus son of Mary).

Of these, Muslims believe that before the time of Muhammad, there were five great prophets who advanced "the history of salvation" of humanity.

1. **Adam**. The first man was the first prophet to receive God's revelation. This means that there was never a time in history when humans were left without Guidance. Adam sinned but repented and was forgiven; his sin was personal and Islam has no concept of "original sin."

2. **Nuh (Noah)**. Adam's descendants abandoned God and divine teaching, so that God sent Noah to

warn them. They did not listen to Noah and God sent the flood, after warning Noah to build the ark. After the flood, Noah became the “second father” of humanity.

3. **Ibrahim (Abraham)**. After Noah, men once again took to sinning and worshiping idols. God sent Abraham to break the idols of his father’s house and started on his wandering. After Sarah expelled Hagar and her baby Ismail, Abraham traced her to the region of Mecca, where he built the Ka’ba, the first structure on earth dedicated to the worship of God. With Abraham came the introduction of formal worship of God. Abraham was especially beloved to God (called **Khalil**, that is, “the close friend” of God) and is for Islam the model of faith.

4. **Musa (Moses)**. Moses represents a new stage of God’s guidance. He received the Torah, formed a religious community, the Jews, and gave them a law. But the Jews committed a serious error, believing that God had done all that for them alone, not realizing that God’s mercy was for all people.

5. **Isa (Jesus)**. God sent Jesus to correct the mistakes of the Jews, proclaiming God’s will for all peoples. God sent Jesus with the Injil (Gospel) and through him worked many signs of His favor. His followers understood well the universal nature of Jesus’ prophetic message, but they too committed a serious error. They began to worship the messenger, equating Jesus with God.

Muhammad, the final Messenger.

Finally, God sent Muhammad with the perfect, complete message of the Qur’an and formed a community that would live according to its teachings. After Muhammad, God’s revelation was complete, so Muhammad is called “the Seal of the Prophets.” There can be no other prophets/messengers after Muhammad.

The teaching of the Qur’an about Jesus.

The Qur’an makes claims about Jesus that are not even alleged of Muhammad. Jesus was born of a Virgin, his birth foretold by the angel. He spoke as an infant and worked miracles as a child (paralleling stories in apocryphal gospels), worked miracles, giving sight to the blind, making the lame walk, and raising the dead by God’s grace. He formed a community of disciples (*hawariyyun*) and left them a communion meal as a memorial. He predicted that another prophet (*Ahmad*, the Most Highly Praised One) would come after him. He did not die on the cross, but was assumed directly into heaven, where he awaits the end of time. His return will mark the beginning of the Last Days.

Jesus is called *‘abdu’llah* (Servant of God), the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. He is the model of holiness and the only person in the Qur’an called *min al-muqarrabin* (someone brought near to God). Muhammad said, affirming Jesus’ sinlessness: “Of all children born since Adam, all have been touched by sin except Jesus and his mother.”

Jesus is not called “Son of God,” as this is always understood in a physical way, and the Qur’an affirms that God is far beyond begetting children. The traditional Semitic trinity - Allah, Allat, and their son Baal - had been erroneously interpreted by some poorly-informed Arab Christians to indicate God, Mary (his wife), and Jesus (their son). This is strongly rejected by the Qur’an.

The teaching of the Qur’an about Mary.

Mary is mentioned in the Qur’an 34 times (19 times in the New Testament). She is the only woman

mentioned by name in the Qur'an, the only woman to have a Qur'anic *sura* named after her. Mary is said to have received *wahy* (revelation), leading some Muslims to classify her among the prophets. The Qur'an recounts her Presentation in the Temple, the Annunciation, and the Birth of Jesus with stories that parallel the apocryphal gospels. She was without sin, strongly preserved her virginity and is said to be the "greatest of all women." One obscure passage in the Qur'an may be an allusion to her Assumption into heaven. In popular piety, Mary is revered as a model for women, her shrines are visited by Muslims (Damascus, Jerusalem, Ephesus), and a "Marian fast" is undertaken by women expecting their first child.

3. Belief in His Books

Islam teaches that some of the prophets were sent with Scriptures. The "scrolls" of Abraham are lost, but the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Wisdom to Solomon, and the Gospel to Jesus still exist. The Qur'an says that the Jews misinterpreted the Torah. In the polemics that ensued between Christians and Muslims, some Muslim scholars claimed that the original texts of the Torah and Injil were corrupted, so that the scriptures that Jews and Christians now have are no longer original. More cautious scholars claim that some corruption *may* have occurred or that the corrupted passages were minor. Others hold that Christians, led by St. Paul, virtually rewrote the original message given to Jesus, so that it is impossible today to recreate the revealed Book. Since Jews and Christians were recipients of revealed Books, even if they later may have corrupted them, they are called "the People of the Book" and have special privileges in Islamic law.

The Qur'an

According to Islamic teaching, the Qur'an was revealed word-for-word to Muhammad. God, not Muhammad, is considered the author of the Qur'an. The name is taken from the Arabic verb *qara'a*, meaning "to recite, to read"; hence *Qur'an* means "Recitation," i.e., the recitation of God's revelations. The Qur'an is shorter than the Christian New Testament and is divided into 114 *suras* or chapters.

Muslims believe that God revealed His Word to Muhammad in the course of 22 years by mediation of the Angel Gabriel. Muhammad memorized each revelation and taught these verses orally to his early disciples, who would recite them together during the night. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad was illiterate, which would not have been unusual in Arabia at that time. The revelations were not written down until the final years before Muhammad's death, when some disciples began to record verses on smooth stones, leaves, camel hide, tree bark, papyrus etc. Shortly after Muhammad's death, in the time of the Calif Uthman, all these fragments of the Qur'an were collected and a committee of scholars and *huffaz* (those who memorized the Qur'an) studied any variations and determined a definitive text. The earlier fragments were then destroyed. The "Uthmanic edition" is that used by Muslims today.

The Qur'an is not arranged chronologically or thematically. The longest *suras*, which were among the last to be revealed, are found at the front of the book, while the shortest *suras*, chronologically the earliest, are at the end. The result is that non-Muslims often find the Qur'an difficult to follow. The Qur'anic message exists only in Arabic, which is always used in prayer and recitation, but translations of the "meaning" of the Qur'an are permitted for those who do not know Arabic.

Among all religions, Islam is perhaps the most “Scripturally oriented.” Much of Islamic religiosity centers on reading, reciting, listening to, studying and reflecting on the Qur’an. Believing that the Qur’an is God’s own speech, reading and hearing the Qur’an are for Muslims encounters with God who reveals, teaches, and forms believers in faith and obedience.

Islamic education of children begins with children learning to read the Qur’an, despite the fact that for over 80% of Muslims Arabic is a foreign language. Because of its archaic language and the allusive, associative style of the Qur’an, it is not easy for modern persons to understand without careful study and instruction. Thus, the focus of religious education among Muslims is on study groups, sermons and lectures aimed at explaining the Qur’anic text and its application to daily life.

Muslims place great value on memorizing the Qur’an. All Muslims are expected memorize some portions, and special honor is given to a person (*hâfiz/hâfiza*) who has memorized the entire Qur’an. It is considered sinful to allow this competence to lapse through negligence; thus the *hâfiz* takes on a lifetime responsibility. Qur’an recitation is an important part of Islamic devotional life. Reciting the Qur’an is a sacred act, demanding careful attention and preparation, beginning, like all Islamic duties, with an act of intention (*niyya*), by which Muslims consecrate their efforts to God’s service and praise.

Recitation of the Qur’an is complemented by private reading and study. The Qur’an is divided into 30 approximately equal parts so that a Muslim can conveniently read the whole Qur’an in the course of a month. Especially in Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to read the entire Qur’an.

4. Belief in the Angels

Islam teaches that there are good angels, whom God has given particular tasks. The Qur’an gives special attention to **Jibril** (Gabriel), the angel of inspiration who brings revelation to the prophets. As in the Jewish and Christian traditions, some angels rebelled and were cast out of heaven. Led by **Iblis** (or **Shaytan**), they tempt humans to disbelieve and disobey God. The Qur’an acknowledges lesser spirits, (**jinn**), some of whom are good, while others are evil. The spirit world, a widespread phenomenon of traditional Asian religiosity, is identified by Muslims with the jinn.

5. Belief in the Final Judgment

Muslims await a Day of Final Judgment at which God will judge people according to their deeds. This doctrine emphasizes human responsibility for one’s actions; one day, God will ask each to account for the way they lived. The Qur’an teaches that Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, along with Muslims, who believe in God and the Last Day, will have nothing to fear nor will they lose their reward. At the Final Judgment, the prophets will intercede for their respective communities (Moses for Jews, Jesus for Christians, Muhammad for Muslims). On the Last Day, humanity will consist of three groups:

- 1) The damned, who disbelieved and disobeyed, will be consigned to the fires of Hell.
- 2) The saved, who believed and obeyed, will be rewarded with Paradise (**janna**, the Garden).
- 3) The holy ones, *min al muqarrabin*, whom God has graciously brought near to Himself.

ISLAH (UPRIGHTNESS), IHSAN (GOODNESS)

The third part of the Islamic religion emphasizes that a good, upright Muslim must not be satisfied with doing the minimum, but must make one's whole life conform to God's will. The "pillars" of *islam* and *iman* indicate the basic minimum that Muslims must fulfill in order to be saved on the Last Day. The good Muslim is urged to go far beyond that.

To this end, they are encouraged to perform voluntary religious acts in addition to the obligatory pillars. Besides the obligatory *salât*, there are recommended times of *salât*, such as during the night and on special occasions; further prostrations may be added to those required; many forms of informal prayer, *du'a*, are considered meritorious but not required. In addition to *zakât*, Muslims are urged to give alms (*sadaqa*) spontaneously to the poor. To the fast of Ramadan, many pious Muslims add recommended fasts, (e.g., every Monday and Thursday, or they extend the Ramadan fast by beginning two months early, making it a three month fast). In addition to the *hajj*, Muslims perform the *umra*, an informal pilgrimage to Mecca outside the *hajj* season.

The Sunna

Recommended acts by which the Muslim can conform every aspect of life to God's will comprise the *sunna*. The *sunna* includes both ritual acts (prayer, fasting etc.) and instructions on the proper way to carry out worldly affairs like receiving guests, eating, travel, dress, doing business, family relations, even the performance of bodily functions. For example, it is *sunna* to greet a guest with *Al-salamu 'alaykum*. Circumcision of boys is *sunna*. It is *sunna* to call people to prayer from the minaret. The *sunna* is derived from the practice of Muhammad found in the collections of *hadîth* reports of his sayings, deeds and decisions. Islamic life can be called an "imitation of Muhammad," who, as the first hearer of the Qur'an, lived perfectly in response to its teachings. Muhammad is seen as the model Muslim who lived, to the smallest detail, in accord with the Qur'anic message.

Information about the life and deeds of Muhammad is found in the early biographies and in the collections of *hadîth* reports. Of over 100,000 *hadîths*, about 2000 are soundly authenticated and form the basis of Islamic faith and practice. With the Qur'an, sound *hadîths* are the source of the *sunna*. The *hadîth* reports elaborate the teachings of the Qur'an and also counsel Muslims on the interior attitude that should accompany Islamic practices. For example, a *hadîth* regarding almsgiving recalls Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "If you give alms openly, that is good, but if you give them to the needy in secret, it is even better, and will atone for some of your bad deeds."

The Shari'a

The Qur'an and *sunna* form the main bases of the *shari'a*, the Islamic way of life. Containing elements of law, but going far beyond the notion of law, the *shari'a* indicates the totality of actions and attitudes that characterize Islamic life and society. Elaborated by the science of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), the *shari'a* covers every aspect of human life, from personal affairs and family relations to the social, economic, and political organization of the community.

Muslim scholars speak of four sources of the *shari'a*: 1) **the divine source, the Qur'an**; 2) **the prophetic source, the sound *hadith*** from the prophet Muhammad; 3) **the communitarian**, called *ijma'*, the **consensus** of the community; 4) **the effort of the individual believer, *ijtihad***, to apply the *shari'a* in the context of place, time, and culture. Far from being embarrassed by having a religion of law, Muslims believe that the *shari'a* is one of God's greatest gifts.

Although the word *shari'a* does not appear in the Qur'an, all Muslims agree that the concept can be found there. In the Qur'an there are many regulations and legal decisions aimed at giving guidance to the Islamic community in matters related to the ordering of life in society. In the first centuries after the time of Muhammad, Muslim scholars undertook the task of gathering, organizing, and giving a theoretical framework, basic principles, and systematic method of development to these regulations. Many **legal systems, (*madhhab*, pl. *madhâhib*)** appeared in the Islamic community and, in the course of time, four systems were eventually recognized among Sunni Muslims. Shi'a have their own Ja'fari *madhhab*.

Each *madhhab* is considered acceptable, and theoretically every Muslim is free to choose and follow any *madhhab*. The practical demands of living together have required that, in every region, one or another *madhhab* is dominant. In North and West Africa, **Maliki** law is followed. In Southeast Asia, Gujarat in India, southern Arabia, East Africa, and the city of Cairo in Egypt, it is the **Shafi'i *madhhab*** which dominates. The **Hanafi** system is the most widespread, covering most of the Arab countries of the Middle East, Turkey, Central Asia, and the nations of the Indian subcontinent. Since the main regions of Muslim immigration to Europe and North America were those of Hanafi tradition, the Hanafi *madhhab* is also the main legal system followed there. The **Hanbali *madhhab*** is the most restricted geographically, followed only in Saudi Arabia.

The function of the *shari'a* in Islam is to enable the believer to know the will of God in every aspect of life. Since the revelation of the Qur'an, humans can no longer claim ignorance or use the pretext that they "do not know." The *shari'a* is meant to make the will of God clear in all situations and hence covers the personal, familial, social, economic, and governmental spheres of life. Being able to know the will of God focuses the attention of the believer on the question of obedience, to obey and submit one's life to God or knowingly choose to disobey God's commands. The *shari'a* has many parts dealing with distinct areas of life. There are sections on faith and what to believe (*aqidah*); ritual, the correct way to pray, fast, pay the poor tax, go on pilgrimage etc. (*ibâdât*; economic affairs (*mu'amalat*); principles of government (*siyâsah*); punishments (*hudûd*); family law (*al-ahwâl al-shakhsiyya*); and moral instruction (*akhlâq*).

According to the principles of *fiqh*, every human act falls into one of five categories. These categories are flexible, and circumstances can and do influence the moral nature of the act. The study of *fiqh* determines the relative weight that is to be given to often conflicting circumstances:

- 1) obligatory: the omission of which, without serious reason, is a serious sin,
- 2) recommended: these acts, forming the important category of *sunna*, are highly encouraged, but no sin is attached to their omission,
- 3) indifferent: one can perform or omit.
- 4) reprehensible: acts that should be avoided, although they are not strictly forbidden,

5) forbidden: serious sins that demand repentance and forgiveness from God.

The *shari'a* is **personal** law, applying to members of a specific religious community. Muslims also recognize the *shari'a* of Christians, brought by Jesus, and the *shari'a* of Jews, brought by Moses. This is in contrast to the Western **territorial** concept of law. Western law codes apply to all persons living within a certain territory, irrespective of religion, race, or social class.

In pre-colonial Muslim society, each religious community was governed by its own laws in matters of personal law and each had its own recognized status, rights, and duties. The state intervened in cases of conflict between the communities. During the colonial period, most Muslim regions became subject to territorial law imposed by the colonial powers. After independence, most Muslim states simply updated and modified colonial law, although some movements today advocate a return to the *shari'a* system that predated the colonial era. This often means application of the *shari'a* as a kind of territorial law of the state.

Modern debate over the nature of the *shari'a*

Until the 20th century, the *shari'a* was assumed to have found its final, complete form codified in the four *madhhabs*. *Fiqh* was limited to the study of differences between the four systems and to the application of principles that had already been determined. The door of *ijtihad*, the principle of personal effort, was said to be closed. Ordinary Muslims were not expected to do *ijtihad*, but rather to obey the legal opinions of the legal scholars.

This concept is challenged today by Muslim scholars. They stress the necessity for each Muslim to engage in *ijtihad*, to the extent they are able, in order to arrive at personal moral decisions. The *shari'a* has to be adapted and modified to express the will of God in every social situation and culture in which Muslims live, and rethought at each new period of history. This can only happen if Muslims see *ijtihad* not as an activity limited to highly educated legal scholars, but the duty of each Muslim, to the extent that their knowledge and abilities permit. The debate about the nature of the *shari'a*, and specifically the use of *ijtihad*, is heatedly discussed by Muslims today.

Jihād

The word *jihād* means “struggle” and is a duty of every Muslim. *Jihad* implies that it is not easy to live completely in accord with God’s will. It takes effort, personal sacrifice, and deep motivation to let God’s will be sovereign in a person’s life. Simply pronouncing the *shahada* does not mean that someone has fully submitted every aspect of his/her life to the will of God. This is a lifetime effort, one that is never finished, one that allows no complacency or self-satisfaction.

Muslims distinguish between three facets of *jihad*:

1) The first, called “the greatest struggle” (*al-jihad al-akbar*) is the interior jihad, the continual, ongoing effort to make every area of personal life conform to God’s will. It is an effort that ceases only with death. Most people find it easy to submit to God’s will in some areas of life, but hold back in others

(e.g., a man will be faithful in prayer but find honesty very difficult; a woman will be a loving wife and mother but hate her in-laws.) The “greatest struggle” is to bring *every* area of life under God’s reign.

2) The second aspect, which may be called “social *jihad*,” involves building society according to God’s will. It is a struggle to be people of faith in modern, secular societies. Parents who raise children to be God-fearing people, teachers who conscientiously impart education, those who work for the development of their people are engaged in this type of *jihad*.

3) Muslims must oppose all forms of injustice and oppression. When force is the only way this can be accomplished, Muslims can use force and, when necessary, engage in military action. This third facet of *jihad*, which is quite rare in real life, has given rise among non-Muslims to the idea that Islam has a concept of “Holy War.” The concept of *jihad*, which generally has little to do with fighting and killing, can be exploited by unscrupulous rulers, ethnic nationalist movements, and fiery preachers to mobilize Muslims for particular causes. Christians, aware of their own frequently bloody history, despite the non-violent teaching and example of Jesus, will not be surprised that religious concepts can sometimes be manipulated and co-opted for worldly ends.

The Sufi tradition in Islam

It is not possible to speak of *islah* without referring to the Sufi tradition. Sufism is not a separate religion or a “parallel path” opposed to Islam as practiced according to the *shari’a*. Sufism is rather an Islamic movement that intends to discover and elaborate on the spiritual elements already found in the pillars of *islam* and *iman* in order to lead people to a union of love with God. Sufis see their efforts as an expression of the “interior struggle,” *al-jihad al-akbar*, to attain a union of love and will with God. The Sufis drew up a practical program of inner growth and spiritual direction so that ordinary Muslim “laity” - manual laborers, craftsmen, housewives, farmers - could live united with God in the midst of their daily activities.

From the first generations, some Muslims stressed the potential of the Qur’anic message to transform a believer inwardly. They protested against the worldly power and wealth that entered the community soon after the death of Muhammad. They stressed the need for a simple, prayer-centered life and adopted many ascetical practices. Starting from Qur’anic teaching, they stressed the transforming power of God’s love. Their early leader and hero, Hasan al-Basri, criticized rulers for luxury and nepotism. By the second century there was already a community of ascetics in Abbadan (modern Iraq) who wrote treatises about the love of God. About this time, they began to be called “Sufis,” although the origin of the word is disputed (*suf*, wool; *ahlu saffa*, people of the bench; *safa’*, purity.)

Spiritual teachers attracted disciples and wrote down instructions for their students. Chains of initiation grew up, so that a student on the path identified, through his spiritual teacher and teacher’s teacher, with one of the great spiritual masters of the past. In the early centuries, Sufi life was informal, disciples gathered around a spiritual guide (Arabic, *shaykh*, Persian, *pir*, with the Hindi word *guru* often used in the Indian subcontinent and the Javanese *kiai* in Indonesia).

The Sufi Orders

In 1258, the Mongol armies destroyed Baghdad, killed the Calif and his family, and burned the great educational institutions and mosques. The “old order” in Islam was dead, and new movements and forms of Islam took its place. Prominent among these were the Sufi Orders. Noted Sufis wrote a Rule by which their disciples should live. Each Sufi Order (*tariqa*) was distinguished by particular dress, and each had its own system of initiation and novitiate, its own lodges or convents, and was characterized by distinctive forms of prayer and patterns of spiritual exercises.

Between the 14th and 18th centuries, most Muslims were inscribed in one or more Sufi Orders. Some were made up of mainly intellectuals and scholars; others drew from one or another craft guild, from soldiers, the urban poor, or peasant farmers. Many of the Sufis were missionary-minded and accompanied traders on their business trips to Asia. As the merchants conducted business, the Sufis preached Islam to the masses, and it was primarily through their activity that, in the 14-15th centuries, the mass conversions to Islam came about in South and Southeast Asia.

The Sufi Path

The Sufis saw Islam as a path leading progressively to union with God. God was called “the Beloved” and mystical poetry used the human experience of passionate love as a symbol of the relationship between the mystic and God. Many longed for death in order to be united forever with the Beloved.

The *pir* prescribed a program of spiritual exercises tailored to the seeker’s personality, needs and state of life. Under the guidance of the director, the seeker passed through a series of stations (*maqâmât*) to overcome the human obstacles to God’s grace. Sufi convents had special rooms set aside for retreatants who would retire in silence for prayer for 3-7-30 days. The Sufi would have to learn humility, obedience, poverty, patience, diligence, temperance in matters of food and sex, etc. After progressing to a certain point, the Sufi would be blessed with special states (*hal*, pl. *ahwâl*), when God would enlighten the heart with strong experiences of love, trust, joy, fear of the Lord, etc., intervening directly by grace to carry the believer farther along the Path. These states were not always uplifting. The Sufis knew the Dark Nights (*qabd*) described by Christian mystics, when they had to trust in God despite the lack of sensible or emotional evidence.

The final state is that of *fanâ*’ when all else passes away and what remains (*baqâ*’) is God’s loving presence. With this, the Sufi arrives at the Truth (*Al-Haqq*), the ultimate goal of life, a union with God where the believer no longer has an independent will, but desired only the will of God. Those acquainted with Christian spiritual traditions will find parallels between the stages of the Sufi path and the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways described by Christian mystics.

Dhikr

A characteristic of Sufi spirituality is the way they developed the Qur’anic injunction to “Remember God often” (33:40). *Dhikr* means “remembrance” and refers to many forms of repetitive prayer whose purpose is to center one’s attention on God’s immanent presence in the heart of the believer. *Dhikr* may

be done alone and silently recited aloud in groups, often accompanied by bodily movements, musical chanting and instruments. A popular form of *dhikr* is the rosary (*tasbeih*), which the Muslim uses to recite the Beautiful Names of God. 99 Divine Names are mentioned in the Qur'an, hence Muslim rosary beads usually have 99, 66, or 33 beads. Each name corresponds to one of God's qualities; hence the prayer becomes a meditation on God's nature and characteristics.

***Wahdat al-wujud* (the Oneness of Reality)**

Sufi emphasis on unity with God led some to elaborate a kind of pantheism. God is the only true reality, and all other beings are imperfect manifestations of the One Reality. To unenlightened persons, reality appears multiple, but to the mystic who has discovered "the secret," the creatures of this world are seen to have no existence other than God. The proponents of *wahdat al-wujud* used images such as the sun and its rays, shadows on a wall, a coconut - hard, ugly, and inedible on the outside, but once one has cracked its secret, full of sweet meat and drink. This view was strongly rejected by other Muslims, who believed that *wahdat al-wujud* made God wholly immanent and destroyed God's essential differentness and transcendence. The resulting controversy resulted in some of the earliest Muslim literature in South and Southeast Asia.

In this century, the influence of Sufism has declined, but in many parts of the Islamic world Sufism is still very much alive and active. South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan), West Africa, the Maghrib, Egypt, Sudan, and the Central Asian former Soviet republics are outstanding examples.