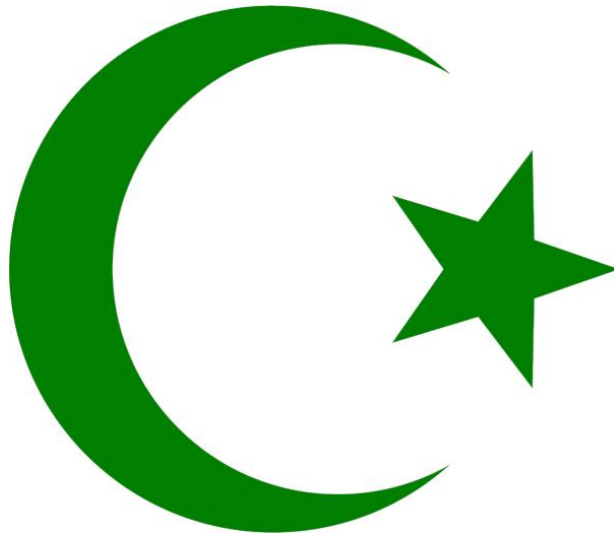


# The Challenge of Islam

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<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Why a “Challenge”?	1
What is Islam?	4
The Articles of Faith	5
<i>Ibadah</i> and the “Five Pillars” of Islam	7
Muhammad, the prophet of Islam	8
The History of Islam after Muhammad	10
Sects within Islam	13
The Qur’an	15
Is the Qur’an without error?	17
The Qur’an and the Bible compared	19
Allah contrasted with the God of the Bible	20
Islam on Jesus	21
Contentious Issues – <i>Shariah, Jihad, Hijab</i>	23
Conclusion: How should we respond to the challenge?	25
Selected References	27

## Why a 'challenge'?

I have entitled this paper 'The Challenge of Islam'. Christians in the West are likely to regard Islam as challenging in at least five respects:

### 1) Radical Islam

Perhaps the most obvious reason why Western people find Islam challenging is the headline grabbing recent resurgence in radical Islam. Especially since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Islamic terrorism has been at the forefront of public consciousness. Many Muslims argue that attacks such as 9-11 are a response of desperation built up through decades (even centuries) of humiliation of Muslim nations by Western 'Christian' nations and of perceived unfair support for Israel. The response of Western nations, with the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and then Iraq (2003), only seems to have added fuel to the fire, provoking bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) and subsequent attempted attacks. As a result, countries like the UK have revisited the question of multiculturalism, asking whether there should be a greater drive towards the integration of Muslim communities into British culture and values, including tolerance. Debates rage within Muslim communities and beyond as to whether radical or moderate Islam truly reflects Allah's will and the most faithful expression of the faith of Muhammad and the Qur'an.

Underlying these conflicts and the media responses to them, there is a clash of civilisations, between liberal post-Christendom secularism on one hand and Islam on the other. Both sides fail to understand one another. Many Muslims still consider the West as 'Christian' with the result that they think poorly of 'Christian' morality and perceive the struggle between civilizations to be fundamentally about religion. Western people often think the issue is simply economic and political, as if greater education and prosperity combined with the 'holy grail' of liberal democracy will cure all the ills they perceive in the Muslim world (consider recent responses to the 'Arab Spring'). One side thus fails to comprehend the secular dimension and the other fails to grasp the significance of the religious. Such mutual misunderstanding is reinforced by centuries of poor relations between the Muslim world and Christendom. The Crusades, so readily forgotten in the West, are very much remembered by the Muslim world.

### 2) The Growth Rate of Islam

Christianity is the world's largest 'religion', accounting for nearly one third of the world's population. Islam comes second, with around one fifth. The reality is, however, that Islam is growing. The following table gives the headline figures for growth of Christianity and Islam. Both religions are growing, but Islam is clearly gaining ground on Christianity. If current trends continue it could even overtake Christianity one day as the world's single biggest religion.

	Estimated 2000	Projected 2025	Projected 2050	Projected Growth 2000-2050
Religion	Adherents (% of world)	Adherents (% of world)	Adherents (% of world)	New Adherents (% growth)
Christianity	1,999,563,838 (33.0%)	2,616,670,052 (33.4%)	3,051,564,342 (34.3%)	1,052,000,504 (52.6%)
Islam	1,188,242,789 (19.6%)	1,784,875,653 (22.8%)	2,229,281,610 (25.0%)	1,041,038,821 (87.6%)

Some studies suggest that if birth and immigration rates remain at current levels Muslims will form 23% of Europe's population by 2050 and 43% by 2100! Others claim that these figures are exaggerated and that they ignore falling birth rates among Europe's Muslims, but in any event the challenge of Islam will only grow for Europeans in future. Of course, quoting statistics like this only serves to reinforce the question of how we perceive of the challenge. To continue to think in terms of numerical superiority or territory (is this a Christian country – will it one day be Muslim?) betrays a tendency to return to Christendom patterns of thinking. One of the essential questions for Christians must be whether they conceive of the challenge in terms of majority position, control and influence or in different terms.

### 3) Conversions to Islam

When Christians are confronted with figures such as those in the table above, they often respond by saying that the growth in Islam is simply because of higher birth rates in Muslim communities. In fact, the growth of Christianity is also

partly due to birth rates among 'Christian' communities,<sup>1</sup> but both religions are also growing through conversion. The following table compares growth rates across nine major religions due to births and conversions:

Religion	New adherents per year	Births	Conversions	Growth rate
Christianity	25,210,195	22,708,799	2,501,396	1.36%
Islam	22,588,676	21,723,118	865,558	2.13%
Hinduism	12,533,734	13,194,111	-660,377	1.69%
Buddhism	3,687,527	3,530,918	156,609	1.09%
Sikhism	392,638	363,677	28,961	1.87%
Judaism	124,515	194,962	-70,447	0.91%
Bahá'í Faith	143,491	117,158	26,333	2.28%
Confucianism	44,305	55,739	-11,434	0.73%
Shinto	-31,993	8,534	-40,527	-1.09%
Global population	78,860,791	78,860,791	N/A	1.41%

So, although Christianity is growing more through conversions than births (the opposite from Islam), Islam is also seeing a significant growth from conversions. Since most Muslim majority countries (certainly in the Middle East) have such small non-Muslim populations the majority of these conversions must be in countries where Islam is in the minority. Some people in Western countries have converted to Islam. Why does it appeal to them? Perhaps it is because they perceive a moral and religious vacuum in the West. Islam offers a strong direction and a unified system for life with radical demands and firm moral principles. The Church, sadly, appears to many people to have lost all of these.

Of course, these figures do not differentiate between different stands of Christianity. The vast majority of growth among Christianity is within Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism as well as in certain cults. If these groups are analysed separately, their growth rates may well be higher than that of Islam. Nevertheless, Christians should not be complacent about the current situation in which Islam is attracting new converts.

#### 4) Islam in the majority?

It has often been noted that Islam in a minority is very different from Islam in the majority. Many Muslims in the minority in Western countries speak of respect, debate, tolerance and compromise, but people point to Muslim majority countries and ask where the evidence of these qualities is. Some argue that there are few true democracies in Muslim majority countries and even where democracy is found there are often restrictive standards of morality and lack of freedom for Muslims to convert to another religion (Malaysia is a case in point). Others point to poor human rights records and poor treatment of women, especially in the Middle East. Moderate Muslims will be quick to point to greater than expected freedom for women in countries like Iran and the example of secular Muslim countries like Turkey, although the ongoing debacle about Turkey's possible acceptance into the European Union serves again to highlight the clash of civilisations and the long history of difficult relationships between Islam and Christendom. There are important questions as to how much of the oppressive treatment of women arises from the cultures of Arabia and Pakistan and how much derives from Islam per se, but in practice it is very difficult to disentangle the two since Islamic belief and practice has always been strongly influenced by the Arab culture in which it was born and the cultures of Muslim communities in Pakistan and elsewhere have been heavily influenced by Islam over centuries. Some people argue that Islam needs a 'Reformation' akin to the events of 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe to produce a new 'modern' version of Islam that will reinterpret historic understandings of the Qur'anic text. They look to Turkey as a possible site for such a revolution.

Islam is an all-encompassing system which, when it is in the majority, has a great deal to say about how a nation is governed as well as how individuals live. There may be debate about what expression of government in contemporary Muslim countries best expresses the spirit of Islam (the secularism of Turkey, the democracy of Malaysia, the autocracy of Saudi Arabia or the theocracy of Iran), but a look into the history of the early centuries of Islam clearly points in one direction only. The world, according to Muhammad's vision, is divided into the land of Islam, under *Shariah* law, and the land of war, which remains to be subdued. The goal of Islam throughout history has been to extend the Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that different readers will respond to this language in different ways, but whether we are content with a figure for the number of 'Christians' that includes children of believing adults and 'nominal' Christians is immaterial to the question of growth rates, as the same criteria are used for both Muslim and Christian communities. It would, however, be interesting to consider how many statistical 'Christians' are committed to their faith personally in a way that motivates them to activism and what the corresponding number might be among Muslims.

nation across the world to bring it under *Shariah* law. There are strong parallels to the kind of imperialistic expansionism that was evident in much of Christendom and 'Christian missions' throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries but where that kind of approach cannot be supported from the actions of Jesus or the words of the New Testament, the fact is that Muhammad himself was a general who expanded Islam through conquest. The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked an unusual period when the goal of territorial expansion of Islam seemed to be neglected because of the collapse of previously strong Muslim powers and the dominance in the Middle East of Western powers, but since 2000 the struggle has recommenced in earnest. Already, Muslim communities in European countries are seeking for the right to apply *Shariah* law in regulating their own affairs. Muslims hope that France (currently 6% Muslim) and Britain (3% Muslim) will eventually become Muslim majority nations.

## 5) The spiritual reality

Underlying all that has been said about visible challenges from Islam is the spiritual reality. What is the spiritual challenge of Islam? The answer depends on important questions about the nature of religion and salvation. There are three different views within Christian theology regarding the possibility of salvation for those who are not Christians:

- a) *Particularism* – Christ is the only way to God and only those who express conscious faith in Him can be saved.
- b) *Inclusivism* – Christ is the only way to God but some may be saved through Him without knowing His name.
- c) *Pluralism* – different religions present different experiences of God and ways to Him.

Pluralism is clearly inconsistent with the Bible. Jesus stated that He was the embodiment of Truth and Life and was the only Way to the Father (John 14:6). The message proclaimed by the apostles in a religiously plural world was that there is no salvation in any other name but the name of Jesus and that He is the only Saviour (Acts 4:12). Evangelicals may differ over whether people who have never heard about Jesus can be saved through Him (some will be particularist while others will be inclusivist), but we must surely agree that many Muslims are without hope in the world, destined for a lost eternity, and missing out on the blessings and assurance to be found in Christ alone.

We cannot ignore this greatest challenge of all – the challenge of Muslims who need to know about Christ. So, how should we respond? Some argue that Muslims are worshipping the true God in ignorance. Mатеen Elass (in *Understanding the Koran*) claims that Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman (John 4:22) and Romans 10:1-3, where Paul speaks about the zeal of some Jews for God that is not based on knowledge, support this position. Others argue, to the contrary, that Islam is a truly deceptive religion. Don Richardson (author of *Peace Child*) writes in *Secrets of the Koran* that Islam is the only religion he has encountered which does not contain any redemptive analogies (i.e. stories from the religion and the culture of its adherents that are echoes of God's sacrificial grace in Christ). If we are to understand Islam and to decide which of these authors is true, we must have some grasp of what it actually teaches. This is particularly true of Islam when compared with other religions because, "almost all of its terminology is borrowed from the Bible – yet its concepts and definitions are fundamentally, dramatically, and totally different" (*Challenges from Islam*, p.60). This paper is intended to help Christians understand Islam and consider how they may respond to its challenges.

Another important question arises for those who are actively engaged in mission to Muslims, either in the West or in Muslim majority countries, namely how to deal with those Muslims who come to faith in Jesus. Some argue that they can continue to be Muslims in almost all respects without compromising their commitment to Christ in a similar way to the early Jewish Christians who maintained their place in the Jewish community. Some argue for 'insider movements' of Jesus-followers who can reach other Muslims within their community. How else, they argue, will most Muslims ever hear of Jesus? Others insist that Muslims who become followers of Jesus must make a definite break from Islam. Central to these debates are questions of the nature of Christian baptism (especially whether it needs to be public) and the church (must it meet openly and distinctively) as well as about the nature of Islam. A discussion of these issues lies beyond the scope of this paper or the experience of this author, but it is worth thinking as you read about how you might approach the discipleship of Muslim background believers if you were working among them.

## What is Islam?

When we start to ask questions about Islam, the responses of Christians are likely to be radically different than those of Muslims. Take the following four questions for example:

Question	Christian answer	Muslim answer
When did Islam originate?	7 <sup>th</sup> Century	It has always existed
Where did it arise?	Modern day Saudi Arabia	in Heaven with God
Who founded it?	Muhammad	God
How did it spread and develop?	By preaching and conquest	By divine revelation and intervention

With such fundamental potential for misunderstandings it is vital that we seek a clear answer to the basic question of what Islam is.

### The meaning of 'Islam' and 'Muslim'

'Islam' means 'submission' or 'surrender'. The word 'Muslim' comes from a verb related to Islam and means 'submitter'. Islam is all about submission to Allah, the creator. Faith (*iman*) and worship (*ibadah*), which is the practical outworking of faith through submission to God in all areas of life, constitute the central core of Islam.

### Is Islam a religion?

Islam is not a religion in the sense that many Western people normally think (i.e. a set of personal, often private, beliefs and standards), but an all-encompassing way of life that includes directions concerning political, religious, economic, educational, legislative, judicial and military matters. Islam is regarded by Muslims as the original religion of nature (*din-al-fitrah*), the religion of God. Muhammad's message is claimed to be identical to that of all previous prophets, although it has been faithfully preserved where theirs was either lost or distorted. All people are Muslim at birth and only their environment and upbringing leads them away from Islam. For this reason people who become Muslims are said to *revert* rather than to *convert* as they are believed to be returning to their original birth faith.

### What is the Muslim idea of salvation?

There is no concept of an intimate relationship with God in Islam; it is about submitting to God's demand for dutiful obedience to His commands in the hope of being recognised and rewarded as faithful servants. God is understood and explained in terms of His power but not truly of His love. After all, how can a solitary person be love in His being if He has no one to love? Allah has predestined all things (Surah 14:27; 5:17; 54:49). "Allah leaves straying those whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases" (Surah 14:4). He has no love as Christians would understand it for those he elects. Muslim tradition adds (Hadith quoted in *Understanding the Koran*, p.87):

When God resolved to create the human race, he took into his hand a mass of earth, the same whence all mankind was formed, and in which they after a manner pre-existed, and having divided the clod into two equal portions, He threw one half into hell, saying, 'These to eternal fire, and I care not,' and projected the other half into heaven, adding, 'And these to Paradise, I care not'

The Qur'an teaches that all human beings are sinful and have fallen from Paradise. Muslims believe they are dependent on Allah's mercy and need to repent, to obey him and to believe to have hope of salvation (Surah 19:60; 20:83; 25:70; 28:67). Sin has not, however, rendered people incapable of living in a way that pleases God. It is possible through a life of faith and worship (including obedience to the required practical duties of Islam) to earn Allah's favour. There is no need for atonement for our sins. A Muslim hopes that his life will be judged by Allah to be acceptable in the final judgement and so that he will be able to enter Paradise. There is no possibility of assurance of salvation however, as there is no concept of justification (God declaring us guilty in this life in advance of the final judgement).

### Folk Islam

This paper focuses on the core beliefs and practices of Islam. These are vital for understanding the faith and engaging in witness to Muslims, but it is also important to realise that there is a wide variation of understanding of the meaning and significance of these core elements throughout the Muslim world as well as many practices and superstitions that have been mixed with Islam (often these originate from the religions that were present before Islam). Bill Musk (quoted in *Ishmael my Brother*, p.152), writes:

*Popular Islam has added a whole life-way of animistic beliefs and practices. The use of the rosary for divining and healing, the use of amulets and talismans, the use of hair-cuttings and nail-trimmings, the belief and practice of saint-worship, the use of charms, knots, magic, sorcery, the exorcism of demons, the practice of tree and stone worship, cursing and blessing – these and many other animistic practices belie that gap between the theological religion and the actual religion.*

## The articles of Faith

Islam has six core articles of belief which are defined in the Qur'an and unite all Muslims.

### The oneness of God (*Tawhid*)

Central to the confession of faith is the doctrine of *Tawhid* (the unity and oneness of God), which states that God is one in his essence; one in his attributes; one in his works. This is a fundamental idea for Islamic theology and is claimed by Muslim scholars to have great benefit for those who grasp it, producing self-respect, modesty and humility, uprightness, hope, determination, bravery, peace and contentment (see *Towards Understanding Islam* p.69f.). The concept of *Tawhid* is expressed in the *Kalima*, the primary creed of Islam, which says "There is no God but Allah" (*la ilaha illallah*). In Islam it is a serious sin (called *shirk*) to associate any created thing with God.

### God's angels

It may seem to be strange to Christian readers that belief in the angels should be the second article of faith in Islam. The reason given by Abdul Ala Mawdudi in *Towards Understanding Islam* (p.72f.) is that this article reinforces the concept of *Tawhid* since the unseen beings that polytheists worship as deities are in fact the angels of Allah, who are his created servants involved in the administration of the Universe.

### God's books

According to tradition, Allah has given 104 in total throughout human history, although only four are named in the *Qu'ran*. They are the 10 scrolls of Abraham (lost), the *Tawrat* (Torah) given to Moses, the *Zabur* (Psalms) given to David, the *Injil* (Gospel) given to Isa (Jesus), and the *Qu'ran* given to Muhammad. Others supposedly included 10 given to Adam, 50 to Seth and 30 to Enoch. 100 books have, therefore, been lost and the three that remain in addition to the Qur'an have (according to Islamic tradition, but not the Qur'an itself) been tainted.

### God's prophets and messengers

According to Islamic tradition there have been a total of 124,000 prophets (Arabic *nabi*) of Allah. The *Qu'ran* names 25 prophets, of whom 21 are biblical figures (Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Jethro, Job, Moses, Aaron, Ezekiel, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Zechariah, John the Baptist and Jesus). The four non-biblical prophets who are named are Muhammad, Luqman the Philosopher (Surah 31), Dhu'l-Kifl (Surah 21:85-86) and Dhu'l-Qarnain (Surah 18:83-98). Some scholars believe that Dhu'l-Qarnain represents Alexander the Great, since the literal meaning of his name is "lord of the two horns" and he is described as a person of great power. According to Islam, every prophet brought the same basic *Din* (core of faith as in these six principles) but all had different *Shariahs* (detailed code of conduct for worship, morality, life and laws) according to their situation and time. Each prophet brought the message of Islam, but, according to *Islam is Your Birthright*:

*earlier messages were lost or distorted by later generations. As a result, the pure message was polluted with myths, superstitions, idolatry and irrational philosophical ideologies.*

Muslims recognise Muhammad as the messenger of Allah and submit to his teachings. As well as being a prophet (*nabi*), Muhammad is also a *rasul* (apostle and messenger), *nadhir* (warner) and *monvir* (announcer). Muslims must accept all of Allah's prophets, but Muhammad has a special position as the last prophet and the only one with a universal message. The leaflet *Islam is Your Birthright* says:

*Every messenger was sent to a specific nation but Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him) was sent with the universal mission for all Mankind. This special role played by Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) as the seal and last of all messengers puts the Muslim in the position whereby honouring Muhammad implies honouring all those messengers who came before him as well.*

The following quotation of Muhammad from *Sahih Muslim* (narrated by Abu Hurairah) reveals the fate of those who reject Muhammad as God's messenger:

*By Him in Whose Hand Muhammad's soul is, there is none from amongst the Jews and the Christians who hears about me and then dies without believing in the Message with which I have been sent, but he will be from the dwellers of the (Hell) Fire.*

Although many prophets preceded Muhammad, the vast majority of Muslims believe that he was the final prophet. In *Towards Understanding Islam* (p.57ff.), Abdul Ala Mawdudi presents the following arguments for the finality of Muhammad's prophethood:

- Muhammad and his teachings are alive in the sense that his teachings, recorded in the Qur'an, are uncorrupted and incorruptible. This is in contrast with all preceding prophets. So long as Muhammad's teachings are faithfully persevered there is no need for a new prophet to restate them.
- The Qur'an's teachings are complete. There is no need for a new prophet to add to them or modify them.

- The message of Muhammad was not only for one people, place or time, but a universal message for all of humanity. There is no need for a new prophet to spread Islam to other nations.

Islamic scholars point to the description of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (*Khatam-an-Nabiyyin*) in Surah 33:40 as Qur’anic support for the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood.

### Life after death (*akhirah*) and the day of judgement

The Day of Judgement is known by many different names: Last Day, Day of Standing Up, Day of Separation, Day of reckoning, Day of Awakening, Day of Encompassing, or simply ‘the Hour’. This final, decisive judgement will be based on the person’s works with the question being whether their good works outweigh the bad or vice versa. The basis of this judgement is described as follows in *Islam is Your Birthright*:

*People will be resurrected in the Hereafter to stand before Allah for a just reckoning of their worldly deeds and actions. People with good records will be generously rewarded and warmly welcomed to the Heavens of Allah, and those with bad records will be punished and cast into hell.*

There are two possible destinies for people:

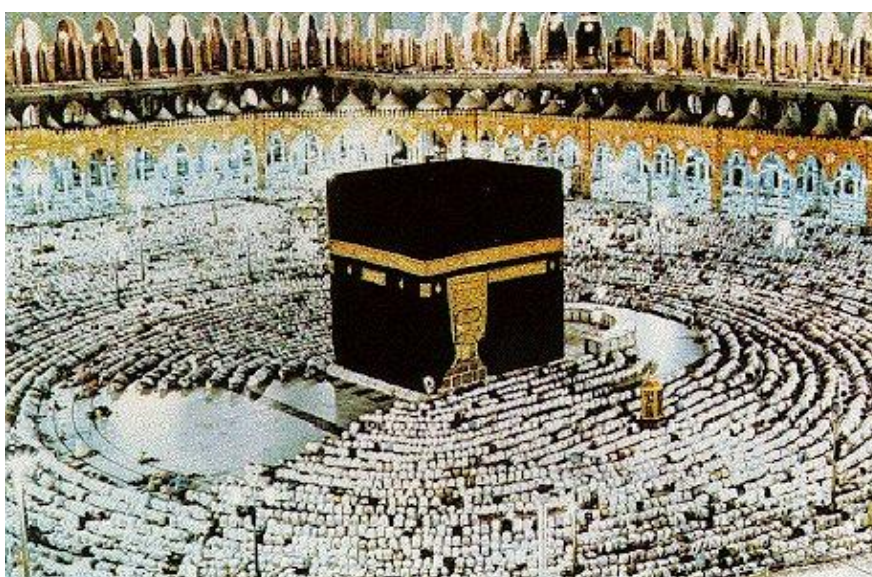
- **Hell** (often simply called *an-Nur*, “the Fire”) is vividly described throughout the Qur’an as a place of judgement through fire. It serves a purgatorial role as well as a judicial role. All people must pass through it before being taken to paradise (Surah 19:71). There are seven gates or levels of Hell (Surah 15:44) – the mildest level (*Jahannum*) where Muslims are purified before moving to Paradise, the second (*Latha*) for Christians (Surah 70:15-18), the third (*al-Hutamah*) for Jews (104:4-7), the fourth (*Sa’ir*) for Zoroastrians (4:10), the fifth (*Saqar*) for Magi and polytheists (Surah 54:48; 74:42), the sixth (*al-Jahim*) for idolaters, and the last (*Hawiyah*) for apostates from Islam.
- **Paradise** is described as garden of ecstasy including indulgence in food, wine and sex with virgins (see Surah 56:22-23, 35-37; 55:58, 72-75; 38:52; 78:33; 44:54; 37:48-49). It contains eight levels. Only Muslims can go there and they will be assigned a level based on the merit of their lives and service. There is no concept of the presence of Allah in Paradise in the Qur’an (contrast this with Revelation 21:2-4 and 22:3-5 with the centrality of the Lord’s presence).

### Divine predestination (*Qadar*)

Islam teaches that Allah has ordained and predestined all that happens in the world. This is not generally held to be in contradiction with the concept of human free will. Most Muslim scholars agree that Allah has given free will to human beings but that because this is his gift it does not compromise *Qadar*.

The doctrine of *Qadar* is the basis of the custom of adding the phrase *insha’Allah* (“if it is God’s will”) to any statement about a possible future event (a similar practice to the use of the phrase “God-willing” or DV, Deo Volente, Latin for God willing). This practice finds Qur’anic support in Surah 18:23-24:

*Nor say of anything, “I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow” – Without adding, “So please Allah!”*



Muslims praying at the Ka’aba in Mecca during the annual Hajj

## ***Ibadah* and the ‘Five Pillars’ of Islam**

According to Abdul Ala Mawdudi, all of life should be worship since the core of worship is an attitude of the heart. The word *ibadah* derives from the word for slave and means to regard oneself as Allah’s slave and to love for his pleasure. “In short, all your activities are *ibadah* if they are in accordance with the law of God and your ultimate objective is to seek the pleasure of God” (*towards Understanding Islam*, p.88). In particular, however, Muslims are called to five key practical duties as expressions of worship. These are often known as the ‘Five Pillars’ of Islam:

### ***Shahada* (declaration of faith)**

The core Islamic declaration of faith is, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s messenger”. If a person says this in Arabic before a judge or two witnesses they become member of the *Ummah* (the universal, worldwide community of believers). The following image shows the *Shahada* in Arabic.



### ***Salah* (formal prayer)**

Five daily prayers are required for all Muslims after the age of puberty who are of sound mind: at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and nightfall. Muslims are expected to wash before praying and to face the Ka’aba in Mecca. The prayers include a set cycle of memorised words in Arabic and ritual bowings. The regular pattern of prayer is important for Muslims as “the frequency and timings of the prayers never let you lose sight of the object and mission of life in the maze of worldly activities” (*Towards Understanding Islam*, p.89). Prayers can be conducted in any location but Muslims are encouraged to join with the *Ummah* to pray in a mosque, especially on Fridays. Mosques are Muslim buildings for prayer, and the community in a mosque may be led by an imam, who is a teacher and leads the community in prayers (although Islam has concept of ordained ministers or priests as in some Christian traditions). The faithful are reminded of the call to prayer by the *muezzin*, who call out from the minarets (towers) of mosques, often through a loudspeaker (a familiar sound in Muslim countries). Prayer together is seen as a great sign of equality, and Muslims often boast of Islam as the religion of equality in which people of all races and socio-economic status join together as equals. The benefits of prayer are that it (*Islam is Your Birthright*):

*strengthens the belief in Allah and elevates man to a higher morality. It also helps to purify the heart and prevent temptation towards wrong-doing and evil.*

### ***Zakah* (compulsory giving)**

Every Muslim with an income greater than a specified minimum must give 2.5% of his annual balance of money and goods to a deserving person (e.g. a person with debts, a new convert to Islam or a traveller). This is the minimum requirement for giving, but Muslims are encouraged to give alms over and above this amount.

### ***Hajj* (pilgrimage)**

All Muslims who are able to are expected, at least once in their lifetime, to participate in the annual pilgrimage to the Ka’ba in Mecca. The Ka’aba is said to stand on the site of a stone building built by Adam which was damaged and rebuilt many times, with the current building having been built by Abraham. The Ka’aba became a Temple of idols but was later purged by the Muslims when they took Mecca. Those who have been on the *hajj* can assume the title *hajji* (male) or *hajja* (female).

### ***Sawn* (fasting)**

Muslims fast from food, drink and sexual relations between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan (the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Muslim lunar year). The aim of this fast is to “suppress our passions and desires and proclaim, by so doing, the supremacy of the Law of God” (*Towards Understanding Islam*, p.91). Ramadan is important because it includes the anniversary of the ‘Night of Power’, when the Qur’an was said to have been sent down from Heaven (Surah 80:15). That night is said to be of great value for Muslims and to be filled with blessing for them.

Shia Muslims also add *jihad* as a pillar of their faith. Although Sunni Muslims do not include it as a Pillar they also agree on its importance for all Muslims.

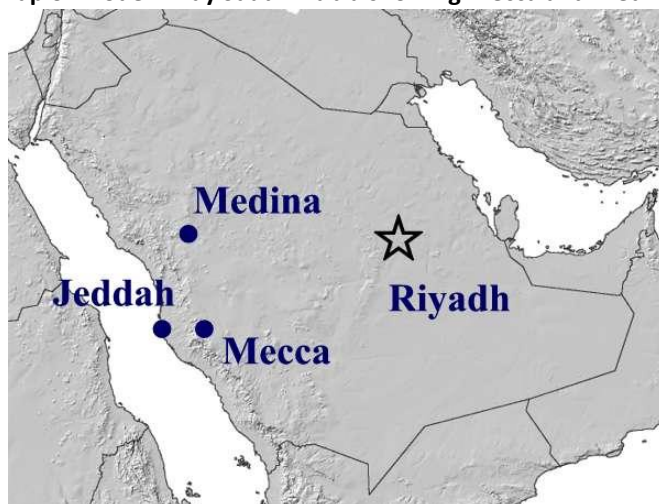
## Muhammad, the prophet of Islam

### The role of Muhammad in Islam

As mentioned above, according to Muslims, Muhammad is the last of the prophets of God and the only one whose mission was to see the message of Islam spread worldwide. As such he has a special place in Islam so that the *shahada* (confession of faith) includes the statement that Muhammad is Allah's messenger. Muhammad is held in such high regard by Muslims that they will not normally write or speak his name without adding the phrase "peace be upon him" as a mark of love and respect for him (in theory this same mark of respect should be extended to all prophets, but in practice it is always used after Muhammad's name but inconsistently after the names of other prophets).

Although Muhammad and Jesus are often seen as the founders of Islam and Christianity respectively (Muslims, of course, will say that Islam originated not with Muhammad but with Allah's message to Adam), the role of Muhammad within Islam has important differences from the role of Christ in Christian belief. Although Islamic tradition often attempts to recast Muhammad as a saviour figure, in the Qur'an he is not presented as a saviour but simply as one who warned people about coming judgement and called them to repent and be faithful to Allah and as a great example of faithfulness. The Qur'an presents him as a sinner in need of repentance (although popular Muslim tradition often regards him as sinless). In contrast, based on the testimony of the New Testament, Christians believe Jesus to be the sinless Son of God who came to be the Saviour of those who trust in Him.

Map of Modern Day Saudi Arabia showing Mecca and Medina



### Timeline of Key Events in the Life of Muhammad

- c.570 Birth** – Muhammad was born in the Arabian city of Mecca into the powerful Quraysh clan. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was six years old. For the next two years he lived with his grandfather until he also died. After that he was raised in the house of an uncle named Abu Talib. He followed his uncle's profession, becoming a merchant.
- 595 Marriage to Khadijah** – Muhammad came to work for a rich widow named Khadijah and, although she was 15 years his senior, she fell in love with him and proposed marriage. He only had one wife during his 25 years of marriage to Khadijah, although after her death he had another 11 wives, this despite the Qur'anic (Surah 4:3) suggestion of a limit of four wives (a later Surah justifies Muhammad's 11 wives as a unique privilege for Muhammad, 33:50-52). The couple had two sons (both of whom died in childhood) and four daughters (the youngest of whom, Fatima, was a close companion for Muhammad in later years and married Ali, the 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph). During this time Muhammad apparently gained a reputation for being upright and responsible and was often sought for his advice and support (he was even nicknamed *al-Amin*, 'the trustworthy one'). It seems that Muhammad's contemporaries all agreed that he was a man of integrity and generally high character. He did engage in caravan-raiding and polygamy, killed people in battle and had some prisoners executed when they refused to bend to his will, but in these respects he was very much a man of his times.
- 610 First revelation** – Muhammad received his first 'revelation' when he was aged 40 years in a cave in Mount Hira (where he often went for meditation). This event disturbed him, as he was initially unsure if it came from God or from a devil. This first message forms Surah 96 of the Qu'ran. Some time elapsed before he received his next message. Muhammad became depressed during this gap, fearing that God had forsaken him, to such a degree that he even contemplated suicide (see Surah 9:111), but then came his second message (Surah 74), and after that they came regularly. He came to believe that the Angel Jibril (Gabriel) was the mediator of the messages.

He recited them to his followers who memorised them and wrote many of them down on various mediums, and they were later collected in the Qur'an. Gradually those closest to Muhammad came to believe in his role as prophet – Khadijah first, then his cousins Ali and Zaid, followed by his friend Abu Bakr. Earlier Surahs are generally short and mainly contain warnings, promising blessing to those who heed and eternal punishment by fire for those who turn aside (e.g. Surahs 96, 112, 81, 83, 74, 111, 87). During the first ten years Muhammad's fellow Meccans were generally sympathetic to his message. They could accept Allah as the supreme God and Lord of the Ka'aba, but they did not accept that there were no other gods (they worshipped three goddesses known as daughters of Allah – Surah 53:19-22). Surahs from later in Muhammad's time in Mecca, when opposition was mounting, are longer, contain more doctrine and references to biblical material, and declare Islam to be the one true religion and the Qur'an to be miraculous (e.g. Surahs 53, 43, 38, 39, 17, 23, 46, 72).

- 622 Hijra** – Opposition from members of his clan and the death of both Khadijah and Abu Talib forced Muhammad to move with his followers to the city of Yathrib, which became known as Medina (short for *Medinat al-Nabi*, 'city of the prophet'). Yathrib was chosen because six men from that town had converted to Islam during the annual pagan pilgrimage to Mecca and had spread the message in their home town so that there was a core of 70 men there who were pledged to Muhammad. In fact, part of his own tribe's opposition to him was because of his popularity in Yathrib. He fled Mecca and spent two nights in a cave with Abu Bakr before fleeing to Yathrib on June 20<sup>th</sup> 622. This date is the beginning point of the Muslim calendar (years are designated AH). Muhammad continued to preach in Medina and he formed his new converts into a new social group called the *Ummah* ('the community'). Muhammad became a statesman within the city and there was a corresponding change in the tone of Qur'anic Surahs, with a greater focus on Muhammad's divine approval as leader and on regulating the community of Muslims (e.g. greater regulation of prayers, fast changes from Day of Atonement to month of Ramadan). Also, some Surahs from this period seem mainly to have been given to justify Muhammad's own lifestyle (e.g. 33:2, 23, 33 and 37, which approve of marrying the divorced wife of his adopted son, which was against the usual custom). The Muslims faced continued hostility from the Meccans. There was also opposition from three Jewish clans resident in Medina. Muhammad banished two of these clans and massacred the third. He was greatly disappointed when Jews and Christians did not accept his message since he had expected them to embrace it as the continuation of the faith given through Moses and Jesus.
- 624 Battle of Badr** – A smaller group of Muslims attacked a caravan from Mecca (which was supposedly threatening Medina). This success against the odds increased the Muslims' belief that God was on their side.
- 625 Battle of Uhud** – The Meccans attacked the Muslims in revenge for their defeat at Badr. It seemed as if the Muslims had won, but they were premature in their celebrations and the Meccans counter-attacked, causing a heavy defeat for the Muslims. Muhammad and his followers escaped to a nearby hill.
- 627 Battle of Ahzab** – The Meccans, allied with a powerful Jewish clan, marched on Medina, but could not pass a large trench dug by the Muslims. The Muslims routed the Meccans and then made a treaty with them.
- 629 Conquest of Mecca** – Finally the Muslims were able to enter Mecca peacefully. Muhammad banished idols and their worship and instituted the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Muhammad continued to live in Medina and his followers began to collect his sayings and deeds to form basis for the *hadith* (books of traditions).
- 631 Battle of Tabuk** – Muslim forces fought for the first time with the armies of the Byzantine Empire. The result was inconclusive, but it established the Muslim *Ummah* as a real power and encouraged many Arab tribes and also some Jews and Christians to convert to Islam. It also set the pattern for centuries of hostility between Muslims and Christians.
- 632 Death** – After Muhammad's death, Abu Bakr assumed leadership of the *Ummah* and became the first Caliph (the title for the leader of the *Ummah*). Some Arab tribes declared independence from the Islamic community, but Abu Bakr sent an army to subdue them (the Battle of Yamama), securing the unity of the *Ummah* under his leadership.

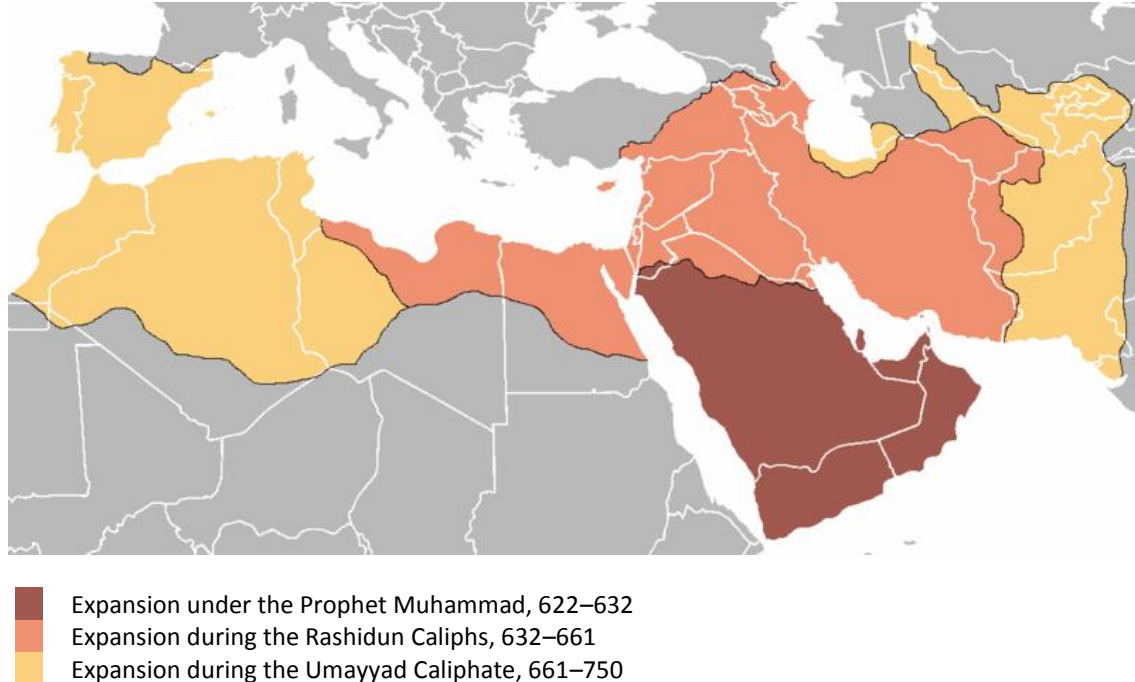
### Was Muhammad illiterate?

Muslims traditionally claim that Muhammad was functionally illiterate and that this enhances the wonder of the Qur'an (which, in contrast to other prophets and especially to Jesus, was his one miracle). This claim based on Surah 7:157-158, which twice calls him *al-ummi*, often translated 'the unlettered one'. In context, however, this phrase may simply mean that he was ignorant of Jewish and Christian teaching rather than illiterate. Furthermore, it could mean (if *ummi* comes from *Ummah*) that he was the prophet of the nation (of the Arabs) as opposed to one of Jewish lineage. Even if Muhammad was illiterate, living in a society with great emphasis on oral traditions he would have picked up many ideas, especially from communities of Jews and Christians he met.

## The History of Islam after Muhammad

### The first 120 years (632 to 750)

The following map shows the spread of Islam during the period 622 to 750 AD:



### 632-661 Rashidun (or “Rightly Guided”) Caliphate

- 632 Abu Bakr becomes the first Caliph.
- 634 Fall of Jerusalem
- 634 Death of Abu Bakr. The Caliphate passes to Umar ibn al-Khattab (a close associate of Muhammad) in keeping with Abu Bakr’s dying wishes. Umar ordered the expulsion of Jews and Christians from Arabia and made the “Covenant of Umar”, based on Surah 9:29, which said that Jews and Christians in Muslim conquered territories would have freedom of religion and protection of their lives and property in return for paying a poll tax and submitting to Shariah law.
- 635 Damascus falls to Muslim armies
- 641 Islamic conquest of Egypt
- 644 Death of Umar, assassinated by a Christian Persian slave. Uthman (also a close associate of Muhammad) was elected as Caliph from among six candidates. He was responsible for standardising the Qur’anic text. During his reign the Islamic Empire was extended as far as Pakistan in the east, Morocco in the west and Armenia in the north. A navy was also established, economic reforms were undertaken, and a sound administrative basis for the Empire was established.
- 656 Uthman was assassinated during period of great unrest in the Empire. Ali (son of Muhammad’s uncle Abu Talib and also son in law of Muhammad through his marriage to Fatima) became Caliph. Most of his reign was marked by civil war (known as the First Fitna) and the beginnings of the fragmentation of the Islamic Empire and the Muslim *Ummah*. Ali is regarded by Shi’a Muslims as the first *Imam* (spiritual leader) since he was from Muhammad’s family. Some Muslims rejected his leadership and became known as the Kharijites. Although he defeated them in battle his position was fatally weakened.

### 661–750 The Umayyad Caliphate

- 661 Assassination of Ali, apparently by a Kharijite. His son Hasan (grandson of Muhammad) was ousted by Muawiyah, who became the 5<sup>th</sup> Caliph, establishing a new dynasty based in Damascus, the Umayyads. Some Muslims remained loyal to Hasan. They later became the Shi-a, who regard him as the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Imam*.
- 669 Husain ibn Ali, brother of Hasan, becomes 3<sup>rd</sup> Shi’a *Imam* after Hasan is poisoned.

- 680 Yazid, son of Muawiyah, becomes Caliph. This was a significant point in Islamic history as he was the first Caliph to assume his role purely on the basis of heredity without even the pretence of election, marking a definite split between Sunni and Shi'a. Husain opposed his appointment, sparking the Second Fitna (civil war), but he was killed in the resulting battle of Karbala. Husain's son, Ali, became the 4<sup>th</sup> *Imam*.
- 711 Muslim expansion into Spain.
- 718 Muslim army defeated by Byzantine army near Constantinople.
- 732 Battle of Poitiers (France) – northward progress of Muslim army in Western Europe halted by Charles Martel.

### Muslim / Christian Relationships, 750 AD to the Present Day

- 750-1519 Abassid Caliphate (descendents of Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, Muhammad's uncle).
- 909-1169 Fatimid Caliphate based in Egypt with capital in Cairo.
- 1071 Seljuk Turks defeat Byzantine army and take over Asia Minor.
- 1095 First Crusade launched by Pope Urban II in an attempt to "regain" Jerusalem and the "Holy Land".
- 1099 Crusaders capture Jerusalem, slaughtering Jews and Muslims. Dome of the Rock converted into a church.
- 1147 Second Crusade inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux after Muslim conquest of Edessa.
- 1187 Third Crusade launched after Saladin conquers Jerusalem. Jerusalem remains under Muslim control but Christian pilgrims are given rights to visit the city.
- 1202 Fourth Crusade initiated by Pope Innocent III – ends in disarray with the sacking of Constantinople by crusaders (cementing the split between the Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches).
- 1217 Fifth Crusade – fails to conquer Egypt (which was to have been a staging post for conquering Jerusalem).
- 1228 Sixth Crusade conquers Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem.
- 1244 Jerusalem again falls to the Muslims.
- 1248 Seventh Crusade fails to reconquer Jerusalem.
- 1270 Eight Crusade.
- 1271 Ninth Crusade.
- 1281 Centre of power in Islamic world shifts to Turkey with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire.
- 1291 Fall of Acre, the last remaining Crusader city in the Middle East.
- 1354 Ottoman army crosses into Europe, leading to the conquest of the Balkans.
- 1453 Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks and end of the Byzantine Empire. The city becomes Istanbul the new capital of the Ottoman Empire. Hagia Sophia is converted into a mosque.
- 1492 Fall of Granada – Muslim rule in Spain comes to an end.
- 1529 Failed siege of Vienna by Ottoman army.
- 1683 Ottoman attack on Vienna repulsed.
- 1918 Ottoman Empire falls after World War I. Middle Eastern territories come under British and French rule.
- 1924 End of the Caliphate – officially abolished by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, first president of the Turkish Republic.
- 1948 State of Israel established. First War between Israel and Arab countries.
- 1967 Six Day War between Israel and Arab countries.
- 1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and Arab countries.
- 1979 Egypt becomes the first Muslim country to make peace with Israel and officially recognise it.  
Foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- 1990-91 Gulf War.
- 2001 September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in New York. October 7<sup>th</sup> invasion of Afghanistan.

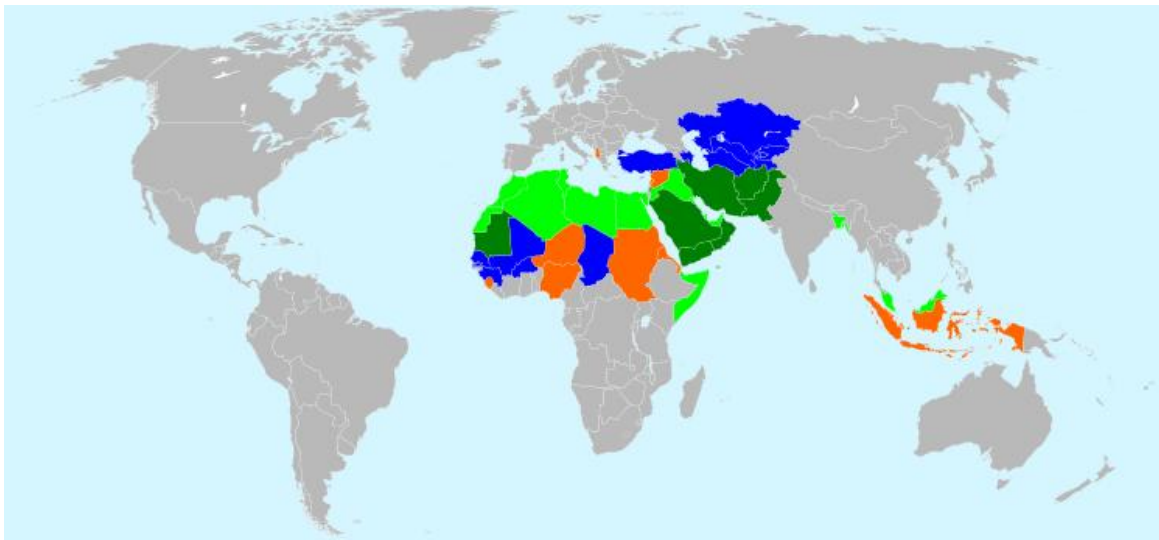
- 2003 Invasion of Iraq.
- 2004 Madrid train bombings.
- 2005 7<sup>th</sup> July London bombings.

**The Islamic World Today**

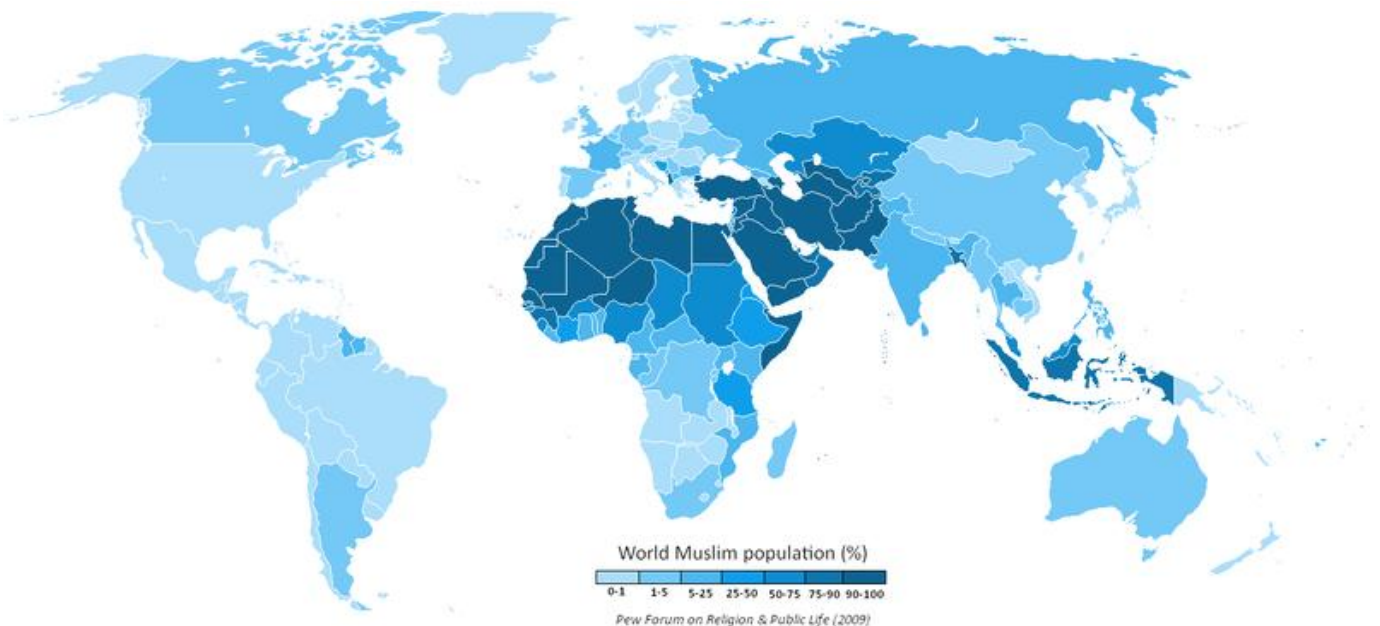
The Muslim world is still centred around its place of origin, the Arab countries of the Middle East. From there Islam spread into North Africa, central Asia and the Indian subcontinent (after British rule in India ended the Muslim population was further concentrated into the areas where it was already predominant which became Pakistan and Bangladesh). The other major concentration of Islam is among the Malay people of Malaysia and Indonesia. Islam spread to them from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century onwards through the influence of Muslim Indian traders.

The following map shows the 47 countries where the majority of the population are Muslim. These can be divided into three groups based upon the degree to which Islam underpins their political systems.

- **Islamic States** – political system based on *Shariah* law (e.g. Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen)
- **Islam as official State Religion** (e.g. Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Morocco, UAE)
- **States with a secular constitution** (e.g. Albania, Chad, Gambia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Turkey, Uzbekistan)
- **No official declaration**



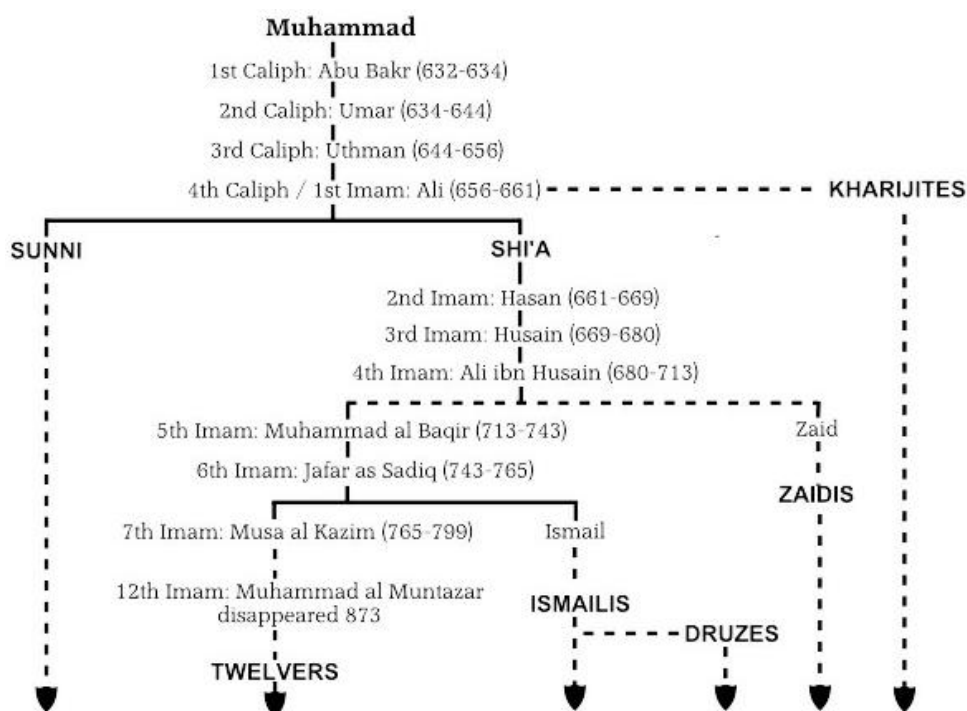
Of course, many Muslims also live in countries where Islam is a minority religion, including 16 million in the EU. The following map shows all the countries of the world shaded according to the percentage of Muslims in their population:



## Sects within Islam

The different sects within Islam can be likened to the existence of different denominations within Christianity, but with one highly significant difference: whereas Christian denominations largely arose because of theological and sociological differences, Muslim sects mainly arose because of political disputes. Muslims often boast proudly about the unity of Islam, and it is true that the core theology of Islam is highly united across different sects, although Christians may argue that Islamic doctrine is simpler than Christian theology. The Christian Church actually stayed united for significantly longer than Islam, although it was a movement without political power for the first three centuries of its existence. The number of assassinations in the early centuries of Islam tells a story of internal disputes over leadership.

The following graphic shows the historical development of various sects within Islam:



### Kharijites

The Kharijites (meaning 'those who went out') originated from those Muslims who rejected the rule of the fourth Caliph, Ali. They insisted that any Muslim could be the leader of the *Ummah* and that any leader who deviated from the example of Muhammad should be rejected. They rejected Ali because in his wars with Muawiyah he was prepared to submit to arbitration rather than insisting on his position as the rightful Caliph.

Today the descendents of the Kharijites are mainly found in southern Iraq but no longer designate themselves as a distinct sect within Islam.

### Sunni

The Sunni (short for *Ahl as-Sunnah*, meaning 'people of the tradition about Muhammad') are the largest group within Islam. They represent those who remained loyal to the rule of the Umayyad Caliphs.

Today around 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunnis, and they represent the majority in most Islamic countries.

### Shia

The Shia (short for *Shiatu Ali*, 'followers of Ali') are those Muslims who rejected the Umayyad Caliphate and believed that the leadership of the *Ummah* should continue with the family line of Muhammad (the *Ahl al-Bayt*, 'people of the House'). Shias believe that Ali ibn Abu Talib, nephew of Muhammad and husband of his favourite daughter Fatima, should always have been regarded as Muhammad's successor. The successors to Muhammad from the *Ahl al-Bayt*, were known by Shias as Imams (a word that is used in a different sense by Sunnis for men who lead in prayer in mosques) and are believed to have special spiritual and political power over the *Ummah*. Most Shias also believe that the Imams possessed *ismah*, the gift of infallibility that Muhammad had as God's prophet. The correct line of the Imams is disputed among different Shia sects.

Shia Islam has a number of distinctive theological beliefs in addition to the Imamate of the *Ahl al-Bayt*:

- Many Shia believe in the future hope of a Messiah-like figure known as the Mahdi. He is believed to be a hidden Imam who has disappeared (in an event called the Occultation) who will return with Jesus to extend Islam across the world. Different sects of Shia Islam disagree about which Imam will return as the Mahdi.
- There is a developed role for Shia clergy who are experts in Islamic Law (within this system Ayatollah is a high rank) as political leaders.
- *Tawassul* – the practice of intercession through a saint or Imam (dead or alive). This principle is also believed by Sufis within Sunni Islam.

Today Shia Muslims constitute around 10 to 13% of all Muslims worldwide. They are the majority of the population in Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq and Bahrain although there are significant Shia minorities in Yemen (45%), Lebanon (35%), Kuwait (20%), Turkey (10-15%), Pakistan (over 10%) and Afghanistan (over 10%).

There are three main subdivisions within Shia Islam:

- **Twelvers**

By far the largest group (around 85%) within Shia Islam (in fact the term Shia is often used to refer simply to the Twelvers). This group recognises twelve Imams, the last of whom, Muhammad al-Muntazar, disappeared in 873 AD and is expected to return as the Mahdi. Twelvers accept the principle of the *ismah* of the Imamate.

- **Zaidiyyah**

This group originate from the followers of Zaid, brother and rival of Muhammad al Baqir for recognition as the fifth Imam. Zaid believed that he should fight against the Umayyad Caliphs to reunite the *Ummah* under the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Zaidis are sometimes called Fivers by Twelver Shias since they diverged at the point of the fifth Imam, although there were other Zaidi Imams after Zaid. Zaidis do not accept the principle of the *ismah* of the Imamate.

Today Zaidis constitute around 40-45% of the population of Yemen but are generally a small minority elsewhere.

- **Ismailis**

This group derives from those Shias who accepted Ismail rather than his younger brother, Musa al-Kazim, as the rightful seventh Imam. The dispute arose because Ismail apparently predeceased his father, Jafar. Twelvers argued that the Imamate should therefore pass to Musa, whereas Ismailis argued that Ismail's early death did not eliminate him from the succession (indeed some claimed that Ismail had been killed after his father's death by supporters of Musa) and that his son, Muhammad ibn Ismail, should become Imam. Some Ismailis believe that the Imamate ended with Ismail (they are sometimes called Seveners) and that Muhammad went into the Occultation, to return one day as the Mahdi. Others continued to follow Muhammad's son, Abdullah ibn Muhammad. This branch of Ismailism became powerful through the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. Ismailis accept the principle of the *ismah* of the Imamate. The largest division of Ismaili Islam today is the Nizari, most of whom recognise the Aga Khan as their Imam. The title is currently held by the 74 year old Shah Karim al-Husayni who is said to be the 49<sup>th</sup> Imam.

Today Ismailis represent the second largest Shia sect with around 15-20 million adherents worldwide.

## Druze

The Druze are a small offshoot of Islam living in Syria, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan totaling around 750,000 to 2 million people today. They were founded in 1017 by Hamza ibn Ali ibn Ahmad, a Persian Ismaili who blended Islamic ideas with Gnosticism and Greek philosophy.

## Sufi

Sufism is not a distinct sect of Islam, but rather a mystical tradition found across different sects. Devotees are called dervishes. The name Sufi is believed to derive either from the Arabic word for wool, referring to simple woolen robes early sufis wore, or from the word for purity. Sufism emphasises the possibility of drawing closer to Allah in this life and achieving purification through the passing on of divine light from the heart of the teacher to the heart of the student and through various devotional practices. Those dervishes who achieve this are known as *sufis*. Sufi traditions say this chain passes all the way back to Muhammad himself although the historical origins of Sufism appear to date back to al-Ghazali in around 1111AD. It is estimated that between 30 and 50% of all Muslims are involved in Sufism in some way.

## The Qur'an

The Arabic of the Qur'an is said by Muslims to be particularly beautiful, an evidence of its divine origin. Even some non-Muslim Arabic speakers are said to agree that it has an almost mystical quality. Muhammad challenged anyone who denied the inspiration of the Qur'an to try to create just one Surah of similar beauty (2:23-24). Others have disputed these claims. Criticisms of the Qur'an as literature include:

- *It is unintelligible* – “a fifth of the Koranic text is *just incomprehensible*. This is what has caused the traditional anxiety regarding translation. If the Koran is not comprehensible – if it can't even be understood in Arabic – then it's not translatable” (Gerd Puin quoted in *Secrets of the Koran*, p.67). One example of this challenge is the frequent use of pronouns without indicating to whom or what they refer, so that translators often have to place a suggested noun in brackets to make sense of the statement.
- *It is highly repetitive* – “If every statement or story that is repeated in the Koran was given *only once*, the entire Koran would slim down to approximately 40 percent of its published length” (*Secrets of the Koran*, p.98).

### How was the Qur'an transmitted to Muhammad?

The traditional Muslim view is that the angel Jibril (Gabriel) was the mediator of God's words to Muhammad, although Surah 2:91 is the only Qur'anic verse that actually says this. Other verses speak of the Holy Spirit as agent (Surah 16:102; 26:193), while others mention a nameless mediator. It seems likely that Muhammad conflated the distinct biblical personages of Gabriel and the Holy Spirit (it has been suggested that based on Luke 2:26 and 1:35 he may have confused the messenger of Jesus' birth, Gabriel, with the agent of conception, the Holy Spirit). Most Muslim commentators use the names Gabriel and 'Holy Spirit' synonymously.

An alternative idea was proposed by Aisha, one of Muhammad's favourite wives, who reported, according to tradition, that his visions came in dreams. She also said that some oracles came to him in an intense enveloping light, while others came through tinkling of bell which only Muhammad could discern words from.

The most exalted means of revelation to Muhammad was the *Mi'raj* (ascent). Surah 17:1 speaks of this event in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of his ministry when he was carried at night from the *Masjid al-Haram* (the mosque in Mecca that surrounds the Kaaba) to the *Masjid al-Aqsa* (in Jerusalem). Tradition adds that he was actually taken to Heaven where Allah spoke to him without any angel interceding and gave instructions concerning the ritual prayers. Allah initially required that prayers should be made 50 times per day, but after Muhammad's pleading he decreased it to five times per day. Moses supposedly thought that this was still an excessive requirement but Muhammad said he was too ashamed to ask for a further reduction.

The important thing to realise, however, is not the way in which Muhammad is believed to have received the words of the Qur'an but the realisation that Muslims believe that its words are literally the words of Allah, free from any error whatsoever. These words were dictated to Muhammad and later accurately recorded in writing. The Qur'an is only the Word of Allah in the original Arabic and it is wrong to speak of a 'translation' into another language – the Qur'an's words expressed in another language are merely a paraphrase. Thus the Muslim understanding of the Qur'an is different from the Christian understanding of the Bible. Christians believe that the whole Bible (all Scripture) has been breathed by God and is a useful basis for belief and practice (2 Timothy 3:16-17) but we recognise within the Bible different genres of literature that must be read and understood in different ways. All are true and accurate as an record of historical events, but some are the words of people (or even of Satan) and some are the words of God, to be trusted and obeyed. God's words in Scripture allow us to judge the words and actions of other people as recorded within it. They also interpret for us the meaning of God's actions in history. Some Bible writers recorded words dictated to them by God (similar to the Muslim belief about the Qur'an) – this is the case in the Old Testament Prophets and Law and Revelation. Others recorded history including divinely inspired judgements about right and wrong – as in the narrative books of the Old Testament and the book of Acts. Still others wrote songs, poems and wisdom sayings reflecting their relationship with God, their emotions and godly advice for living – as in the books from Job to Song of Songs and Lamentations. Some recorded events and words from the life of Jesus in a way that reveals His identity and explains the reason for His death and resurrection – in the four Gospels. Others applied the truth of the gospel to the situations and challenges facing Christian believers, giving them guidance for life as the Spirit inspired them – this is the case in the New Testament epistles. So, although Muslims believe the Qur'an was given through one man (Muhammad) using one means (dictation), Christians understand that the Bible was given through many men using many different means of inspiration. Christians, inspired by the truth of Christ's incarnation, also accept that it is possible to translate the words of the Bible into other languages in a way that allows the translation to be regarded as God's Word, although we acknowledge that it is important for these translations to be as faithful as possible to the meaning of the original and that knowledge of the original languages (or insights from those who have it) is helpful for detailed study.

## Divisions of the Qur'an

The Qur'an consists of 114 Surahs (chapters) which are very unequal in length. They are generally arranged in order of descending length, with the obvious exception of number 1 which, although being relatively short, is placed first because of its foundational significance. The Surahs were originally known only by their titles and their numbers were assigned at later stage. All Surahs with the exception of number 9 begin with the *bismillah*, a phrase reading "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful". One theory suggests that Surah 9 may have originally been the second half of Surah 8. Interestingly, twenty-nine Surahs have mystery letters after the *bismillah* consisting of between one and five apparently unrelated letters. Islamic scholars claim that these have profound religious meaning known only to God and perhaps Muhammad.

Each Surah is further divided in *ruku'ah*, the beginnings of which are normally indicated in the margin of text. Muslims are encouraged to bow reverentially at the close of the recitation of each section. The whole Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts (*juz*) of roughly equal lengths to help Muslims who wish to recite the whole book throughout Ramadan.

## Significant Surahs

### Surah 1: *Fatiha* ('the opening one')

This is the most important of all Surahs and the only one which is written as a prayer addressed to Allah rather than the words of Allah to people. Muhammad allegedly said that those who fail to recite it cannot claim to have observed prayer. The prayer, paraphrased into English, reads as follows:

*In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.  
Praise be to Allah the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;  
Master of the Day of Judgement.  
You do we worship, and Your aid we seek.  
Show us the straight way,  
The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace,  
those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.*

### Surah 2: *The Cow*

This is the longest Surah in the Qur'an. It is notable because it contains the so-called 'throne verse' (2:255), which speaks of Allah's sovereignty, because its final two verses are often said to summarise the message of Islam, and because it contains many theological ideas, including:

- *Predestination* – "As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. Allah has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil; great is the penalty they (incur)" (2:6-7).
- *The perfection of the Qur'an* - "And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a Surah like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (if there are any) besides Allah, if your (doubts) are true. But if you cannot – and of a surety you cannot – then fear the Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones – which is prepared for those who reject Faith" (2:23-24).
- *Mankind's purpose and the Fall* – it speaks of God's creation of Adam to be His "viceregent" (2:30-34) and mankind's fall from the original Paradise through Adam's sin in eating from the tree God had forbidden as he was tempted to do by Satan. However, in the Qur'an (2:35-36) God's command was not to "approach" the tree, whereas Genesis 3:3 simply forbids eating from its fruit, with the idea of not touching it being added by Satan!
- *The privileges of Israel* – there is recognition that the Jews ("people of Israel") were specially blessed by God with a covenant and call for them to heed God's revelation through Muhammad (2:40-47). There are also details of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea, their worship of the golden calf and the Law given to Moses, although the Qur'an never provides details of what that Law actually said (2:49-61). Islam is also said to have been the religion of Abraham (2:135).
- *Seeming hope for Jews and Christians* – "Those who believe (in the Qur'an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (2:62).
- *Jesus was a prophet from God* – "We gave Musa [Moses] the Book and followed him up with a succession of Messengers; We gave Isa [Jesus], the son of Maryam [Mary], clear (signs) and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. Is it that whenever there comes to you a Messenger with what you yourselves desire not, you are puffed up with pride? Some you call imposters, and others you slay!" (2:87) There is, however, also a statement of a recurring Qur'anic theme which is evidently intended to 'correct' the Christian view, namely the insistence that Allah has no begotten Son (2:116).

- *The principle of Abrogation* – “None of our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: know you not that Allah has power over all things?” (2:106).
- *Dietary restrictions* – Muslims are forbidden to eat blood, the meat of pigs or anything prayed for in the name of a false god (2:173).
- *The articles of faith and practical duties* (2:177) – this verse lists the requirement to believe in Allah, the “last Day”, Angels, Allah’s Book and the Prophets and issues a command to spend out of love for him, to be steadfast in prayer and regular charity and to be firm and patient through suffering and adversity. The chapter also refers to the direction of prayer towards Mecca (2:142-150), the requirement for fasting during Ramadan (2:183-185) and the duty to go on Hajj or to offer sacrifice if the Hajj is not possible (2:196-203).
- *The duty to fight in cause of Allah* – “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors. And slay them wherever you catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress truth. But if they cease, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression” (2:190-193). Note, however, in my notes on *Jihad*, that the principle of abrogation means that this limited command can no longer be seen as normative.
- *Warnings against wine and gambling* – “In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit” (2:219). Surah 5:90-91 later prohibited the consumption of intoxicants altogether.
- *Regulations about marriage* – Muslims must only marry believing women and marry daughters to believers (2:221). Women are unclean during menstruation and should be avoided (2:222). There are extensive rules about divorce and marriage (2:227-237) with the general principle that “women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them” (2:228).
- *No compulsion in religion* – “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256). In practice, however this means that people are free to become Muslims but not to convert out of Islam.
- *Financial practices* – there is to be no usury (2:275-279). Islamic finance and banking do not permit the gathering of interest.
- *Prayers for mercy* – the Surah ends with prayers for God to forgive and “blot out” sin, but, as in the whole Qur’an and in Islamic thinking, there is no concept of atonement for sins (2:286).

#### **Surah 36: Ya-Sin**

Muhammad allegedly called this Surah the “heart of the Qur’an” and promised that whoever reads it will receive rewards equal to reading the whole Qur’an ten times.

#### **Surah 112: the Purity of Faith**

Emphasises the uniqueness of God and contains polemical language against paganism (“There is none like unto Him”) and Christianity (“He does not beget, nor is He begotten”).

#### **Surahs 113 and 114**

These Surahs are often used in popular Islam as incantations in defence against evil.

## Is the Qur'an without error?

Muslims are adamant that the Qur'an is completely accurate and without error. Unlike the other books given to people by Allah, which have either been lost or corrupted, the Qur'an was faithfully received by Muhammad, memorised by his followers, written down after his death and transmitted faithfully throughout the centuries. The Qur'an available to people today is claimed to be identical to the Heavenly copy. How are we to respond to these claims? There are four major reasons for concern about the accuracy of the Qur'an:

### The principles of abrogation and *takkiya*

Abrogation is the claim made in the Qur'an that later pronouncements from Allah can correct and change earlier ones (see Surah 2:106 and 16:101). This doctrine was convenient for Muhammad as his circumstances changed (e.g. the Qur'anic attitude to Christians changed from friendship to enmity as he realised that they were not accepting his message readily) but it is also highly confusing, since abrogated verses are scattered throughout the Qur'an (e.g. Surah 9:5, which allows for the forced conversion of pagans and the killing of those who refuse to convert, is said to abrogate 124 other verses of the Qur'an).

An example of the principle of abrogation at work is the Muslim teaching on alcohol. The Qur'anic teaching progresses through three stages:

1. Surah 4:43 simply forbade Muslims from coming to prayer in a drunken state.
2. The later Surah 2:219 warns about alcoholic drinks, saying that they contain great sin and some benefits.
3. Finally, Surah 5:90-91 declares alcohol to be an abomination from Satan and forbids Muslims from consuming it.

As can be seen, the ordering of the Surahs in the Qur'an does not give a clear indication of which was given earliest.

One Christian writer speaks of the implications of the doctrine of abrogation for the character of Allah as follows (Sam Soloman, *Challenges from Islam*, p.63):

*As portrayed, he is master of deception. He contradicts himself and justifies that by calling it abrogation, meaning the replacement of earlier revelations with latter ones as they were out of date and no longer applicable – all within a period of twenty-three years*

Abrogated verses are often quoted by Muslims to non-Muslims under the justification of *takkiya* (cover-up), a rule which allows Muslims to lie or deceive others in order to advance Islam or protect its reputation. *Takkiya* finds its basis in Surah 16:106, which allows believers to utter unbelief under compulsion. In modern practice it allows debaters to hide some unpopular or unpalatable aspects of Qur'an and focus on others.

### Muhammad was sometimes misled

Muhammad apparently at times 'got it wrong' and had to change sayings. The most famous example of this is the so-called 'Satanic verses' (famous from the title of Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel). Muslim tradition says that Muhammad was in debate with members of his clan outside the Ka'aba and speaking of three goddesses supposedly daughters of Allah he said "These are exalted females, and truly their intercession is to be hoped for". This statement caused great delight in his clan and confusion among his followers. Soon Muhammad returned claiming that his original statement had been a deception from Satan and that Gabriel had since given him the right reading of the revelation. Surah 53:19-23 records his clarification of the situation:

*Shall you have male children and God female? Behold this would be a most unjust division. Truly, these are merely names which you and your fathers have given them.*

Muslims claim that the final version of the Qur'an was perfect and error free (all mistakes having been corrected by then), but this story alone should call Muhammad's credentials as a prophet into question.

### The lack of a standard version until years after Muhammad's death

According to Islamic tradition, the first collection of the Qur'an was made under Abu Bakr, Muhammad's successor and the first Caliph. He was concerned that many of those who could recite the Qur'an (having heard it from Muhammad) were being killed (for example, in the Battle of Yamama) and so he commissioned Zaid ibn Thabit to collect the Qur'an in written form. Zaid collected portions from oral reports of people who had known Muhammad as well as portions written on fragments of parchment, stones, leaves, bones and other materials. According to Zaid's account (but contrary to popular Muslim belief), no single person had memorised the entire Qur'an, and the last verse he located was known only by one man. Abu Bakr kept Zaid's Qur'an but did not distribute copies of it.

Later there were numerous disputes as to different readings of the Qur'an and this led Uthman (the third Caliph) to produce a standardised Qur'an based on Zaid's collection and the Quraysh dialect. He placed four standard copies in

the cities of Medina, Kufa, Basra and Damascus (the latter three cities were chosen because they each had had a rival version of the Qur'an that was gaining popularity) and destroyed variant readings. Since then, Uthman's uniform text has been transmitted very accurately. In summary, "the Koran did not exist as an undisputed, uniform text from the beginning but achieved that status only after Uthman's decree was carried out to burn all competing texts and copy instead the newly reformed text of Zaid ibn Thabit" (*Understanding the Koran*, p.45).

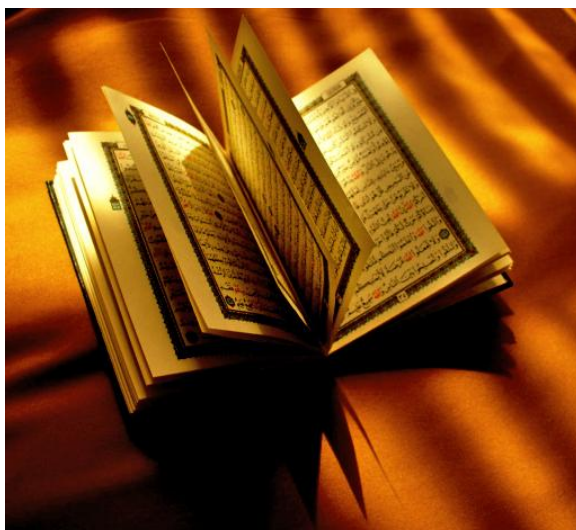
Muslim apologists claim that the variations between different versions of the Qur'an at the time of Uthman were only in the way the text was recited (depending on which dialect of Arabic was used and where unwritten vowels were placed) rather than in the written text itself, but this does not explain why the other manuscripts had to be burnt. These problems arise from the fact that the Qur'an was not written down during Muhammad's life-time and that there are no original manuscripts. This contrasts with the Bible books, which were written down by their original authors rather than undergoing a period of oral transmission and were copied numerous times and circulated among believing communities across wide geographical areas. Christian scholars are always seeking the earliest possible manuscripts of the Bible texts and are willing to alter the received text if an older or more reliable text is discovered. The degree of agreement between ancient texts of Bible books is remarkable, providing an excellent basis for believing that the Bible we have today is what was originally written, with only a few minor alterations. It is impossible to do the same with the Qur'an since the vast majority of the oldest manuscripts were forcibly destroyed and even if a purported older variation was unearthed Muslim scholars would refuse to alter their received text. As Sam Soloman writes, "Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an has no historical authentic document that can witness to its literary reliability or to its historical authenticity. Its followers claim divine origin from the eternal tablet" (*Challenges from Islam*, p.63).

### The Qur'an contradicts the Bible

There are numerous contradictions between the Bible and the Qur'anic references to biblical stories and characters, for example the conflation of details of Gideon's story with Saul (2:249). As well as open contradictions, some important Bible concepts and events are surprisingly absent from the Qur'an. For example, in the first 89 Surahs, the Exodus is mentioned 27 times but the Passover is never mentioned. There are also examples of the inclusion of Jewish traditions in the Qur'an, for example in Surah 5:27-31 concerning the story of Cain and Abel (see *Understanding the Koran*, p.101f. for details). From a Muslim perspective these variations simply reflect an unreliable Bible whose original message has been altered. Christians would suggest, however, that they actually reflect Muhammad's limited knowledge of the Bible.

When Muhammad began preaching his message he expected Jews and Christians to confirm it and he actually advised his followers to speak to "people of the book" for clarification and support. This reflects his own confidence that his message had come from God and his initial belief that his teaching was not a novelty but a return to faithfulness to the one God worshipped by Jews and Christians. When this was not forthcoming and contradictions between Bible and Qur'an became clear, the Muslims concluded that the Old and New Testaments must have been corrupted by unbelieving Jews and Christians respectively. Interestingly, however, this claim is made in Islamic traditions rather than in the Qur'an itself. It is impossible to accept both the Qur'an and the Bible as the faithful word of God. Either the Bible is inaccurate or the Qur'an is.

In summary, Sam Soloman writes that: "the Qur'an has no coherent message, lacks clarity, and is historically inaccurate and internally inconsistent" (p.65).



## The Qur'an and the Bible compared

The following table summarises some of the most significant differences between the Muslim view of the Qur'an and the Christian view of the Bible (by the 'Christian' view I mean the view held by Christians, including Evangelicals, who hold to the high view of the authority of the Bible that the biblical text claims for itself):

The Qur'an	The Bible
Delivered to one man over a period of around 23 years.	Delivered through approximately 40 different people over a period of around 1600 years.
Claimed by Muslims to contain no human element. Its words were dictated to Muhammad. Passed on orally to others and later written down verbatim.	Believed by Christians to have been produced through the coming together of the divine will and the human person. God conveyed His words through the agency of human beings, carrying them along so that their words (in their own language and style) convey His truth faithfully.
Cannot be translated from Arabic – part of its beauty is in the Arabic and translations are not regarded as the Qur'an but merely interpretations of its meaning.	Can be translated into every human language since God's truth is contained in the meaning of the words not in the original languages.
Reads as a collection of thoughts that are often disjointed and lack any narrative framework or sustained sections of reasoned argument.	Is a rich collection of different literary genres including narrative, Law, wisdom sayings, poetry, songs, parables, didactic teaching, prophecy and apocalyptic.
Has no sense of 'progressive revelation' or of a grand metanarrative (an overarching story). Claims to call people back to the original religion of nature and to worship Allah.	Tells the story of God's plan for the redemption of human beings. God progressively reveals Himself throughout history, with later believers having greater knowledge of Him than in earlier times.
Is the final word of God. Plays a role in the Muslim's life similar to that of Jesus for the Christian.	Is the written word of God that faithfully records the proclaimed word of God (the gospel) that bears testimony to the ultimate living Word of God, Jesus Christ.
Reveals God's will and law but not God Himself (He is essentially unknowable).	Reveals God Himself.
Muslims claim that there is only one official text of the Qur'an, in Arabic, and that this is an exact replica of the heavenly original.	Christians acknowledge that there are numerous manuscripts of the Bible books and that these contain minor variations and must be compared to discover the original text.
Includes the principle of abrogation, meaning that some parts are not to be trusted as God's final word on the matter.	Contains no principle of abrogation – every part of Scripture is breathed by God and is useful for the Christian (2 Timothy 3:16). Christians reject the idea that there is any

## Allah contrasted with the God of the Bible

It is often claimed that Allah and the God of the Bible are essentially one and the same God. It is true that the word 'Allah' is simply the Arabic word for God and that it is used by Arabic speaking Christians as well as Muslims, but an examination of what that Bible and the Qur'an actually say about God reveals significant differences. Both books speak of one God who created all things and who is sovereign over creation, but there the similarities end. The following table outlines some of the key differences between the portrayal of God in the two books:

God as described in the Bible	Allah as described in the Qur'an
God's most fundamental characteristics are His grace and His holiness – He is both love and light (truth) in His essential being.	God's most fundamental attribute is <i>Qadar</i> – His absolute power and will in contrast to human helplessness.
There is only one God who exists eternally in three persons who are one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*	God is one. He is not described as 'Father' in the Qur'an.
God is knowable through Christ – He is transcendent (beyond our reach) but has made Himself immanent (come near) through the incarnation of Jesus	God's essence is not knowable – he is transcendent but not immanent
God reveals Himself through history, through the Bible and, ultimately, through Christ	God reveals His will for humans but not his person.
God calls us into a life-transforming relationship with Himself through His indwelling Spirit.	God demands rightful obedience to commands. Sufis add to this the possibility of experiencing the divine.
God enters into binding covenants with His people in which He commits Himself to them despite their weakness and failures. Covenants are the means through which God extends His plan of redemption. God can be trusted always to be faithful to His promises.	God would not commit Himself to people in a lasting covenant as that would make Him subject to them.
God must punish sin. Human beings cannot save themselves from sin but God has provided a way for sins to be forgiven – through atoning sacrifice. The Old Testament provides the pattern for this but Jesus death was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. It is on the basis of faith that God can forgive people because of Christ's death.	God will finally accept some people based on their faith in Him and their worship of Him (although all people must pass through Hell for some period of time). Sin does not place people beyond being able to rescue themselves. There is no concept of atonement. Although Islam does have sacrifices (e.g. in place of the Hajj if an individual cannot undertake it) and the greatest Islamic holiday is <i>Eid al-Adha</i> , the 'feast of sacrifice' (in honour of Abraham's offering of his son, Surah 37:100ff), there is no explanation in the Qur'an as to why sacrifices are significant.

\* The Holy Spirit is mentioned three times in the Qur'an, twice as one who strengthened Jesus (2:87, 253) and once as the one who brings the Qur'an to Muhammad (16:102). As mentioned above, he is often united with the angel Gabriel by Muslim scholars. He is certainly not seen as a divine person. This seems to be a clear example of Muhammad using a Christian term without any clear understanding of its meaning for Christians.

## Islam on Jesus

The Qur'an says a great deal about Jesus and he is respected by Muslims. An examination of Muslim beliefs about Jesus, however, reveals that it is not the Jesus revealed in the New Testament.

### An Apostle of Allah

Jesus is regarded as a *rasul* (apostle), together with Muhammad and Moses. The Apostles hold a higher rank than the other prophets of Islam. The Qur'an repeatedly calls Jesus the Messiah (*al Masih*), although it offers no explanation of what this title means (an example of Muhammad's use of Jewish and Christian terms without apparently understanding their significance). Muslim scholars have tried to distance the Qur'anic use of this term from the Jewish and Christian understandings of its significance by claiming either that it refers simply to the fact that Allah anointed him with blessings and honours or to the fact that he healed people (for example by anointing the eyes of the blind), but neither of these suggestions explains why the term is used exclusively of Jesus in the Qur'an and never of Muhammad or any other prophet. It also calls Him the Spirit from God (Surah 4:169) and The Word of God, the Word of Truth (Surah 4:169; 19:35). These titles would seem to place Jesus on a greater level even than Muhammad, although Muslims generally agree that Muhammad is the later and final prophet and therefore the greatest.

### Born of the virgin Mary

Jesus is described as the son of Mary, who is also exalted above all other women (Surah 3:35). Muslim tradition identifies Mary and Jesus as the only two children born without the touch of Satan, which seems to reflect the early development in some Christian circles (later official Roman Catholic dogma) of the non-Biblical idea of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Christians may ask why it was Jesus and not the 'final prophet' Muhammad who was conceived by a virgin.

### A miracle worker

In the Qur'an Jesus' first miracle actually occurred when, as a baby, he spoke (Surah 19:30-33). Miracles of Jesus recorded in the Qur'an include healing the blind, cleansing lepers, and raising the dead. Two miracles of the adult Jesus mentioned in the Qur'an are not found in the New Testament:

- Surah 5:115-118 mentions a banquet from Heaven provided for the disciples. Some scholars think this may relate to a confused idea of the Last Supper.
- Surah 3:49 and Surah 5:113 speak of Jesus making a bird from clay. Interestingly, there are similar accounts in Gospel of Thomas and another non-canonical 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century book, the Protoevangelium of James. It seems that Muhammad was aware of some extra-Biblical Christian traditions but did not know to distinguish these from Biblical stories.

Although the Qur'an presents Jesus as a miracle-worker, the same is not true of Muhammad, who is not recorded in the Qur'an as performing any miracles other than the reception of the Qur'an. Muslim tradition attempts to make up this deficit by speaking of several miracles allegedly performed by Muhammad, for example suggesting that Surah 54:1-2 refers to him splitting the moon in the sight of his opponents. Christians may wonder why Jesus was such a prolific miracle worker and Muhammad, supposedly the final prophet, was not.

### Not divine

Surahs 4:171 and 5:73 explicitly deny the Christian idea of the trinity. Jesus denies his deity and that of his mother in Surah 5:72-75. The Qur'an displays confusion about the Christian concept of the trinity. It identifies God, Mary and Jesus as the three persons of the Christian Godhead (Surah 5:119) and suggests that Christians are tritheists rather than Trinitarian (Surah 5:73) – that is, that they believe in three distinct gods rather than One God who exists in three persons. Some Muslim apologists devote significant energy to countering the passages in the Gospels that record Jesus' claims to divinity (they focus on the Gospels and not the New Testament epistles because Islam accepts that the Gospels as originally recorded were given by Allah although they have since been corrupted). For an excellent summary of these passages and Muslim interpretation of them see the book *Faith to Faith* by Chawkat Moucarry.

### Did not die on the cross

According to Surah 4:157, Jesus didn't really die on the cross, only his likeness did, and Allah removed him to Paradise (see also Surah 3:55). There are different traditions about what exactly this means (another example of lack of clarity in the Qur'an). One of most popular theories is that God fooled the Jews by changing the facial features of Judas to

resemble Jesus. Others claim that Simon of Cyrene took Jesus' place. Interestingly, when the Qur'an records the words Jesus supposedly spoke as a baby, He speaks about his coming death and being raised to life again (Surah 19:30-33). This would appear to contradict the idea that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross.

### Proclaimed the future coming of Muhammad

Jesus' mission, according to the Qur'an, was to affirm the Torah and to proclaim Muhammad's coming (Surah 61:6):

*Isa, the son of Maryam, said: 'O children of Isra'ii! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.' But when he came to them with Clear Signs, they said, 'This is evident sorcery!'*

This claim that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad is often a cause for debate between Christians and Muslims. When asked for evidence in support of it, Muslims often point to a limited number of references:

- *Deuteronomy 18:15-18* – the promise of a prophet like Moses. Muslims point out that this prophet is spoken of as coming from among the brothers of the Israelites and say that it is a reference to Muhammad, an Arab descendent of Ishmael. They add that Muhammad's ministry as a receiver of God's words was similar to that of Moses. In the Bible, however, this prophecy is clearly applied to Jesus. The phrase "from among their brothers" can only refer to an Israelite as Deuteronomy 17:14-15 shows. John 1:45 and Acts 3:20-22 link the prophecy to Jesus.
- *John 14 and 15* – the promise of a coming Counsellor. Muslims often claim that Jesus promise of the Counsellor who would come after him was a reference to Muhammad and that the phrase "Holy Spirit" in these contexts may have been added at a later date as part of the corruption of the Gospels. There is, however, no textual evidence for this claim and it is clear that the promise was actually about the coming Holy Spirit.
- *The Gospel of Barnabas* – some Muslims claim that this book is the only surviving Gospel written by a follower of Jesus and contains His genuine teaching. Twelve times in this document Jesus foretells the coming of Muhammad using his name. How are we to respond? Only one manuscript of the 'Gospel of Barnabas' exists. It was discovered in the Netherlands in 1709 and is written in Italian, a language that did not exist in the time of Christ. It has been dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and should not be confused with the Epistle of Barnabas, which dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century. In contradiction to the biblical Gospels, the Gospel of Barnabas replaces the name of Thomas in lists of Jesus' disciples with the name of Barnabas. The book actually contains a large degree of Islamic teaching, including the claim that Judas was crucified in Jesus' place and statements by Jesus that He was not the Son of God, and it contains at least thirty-three basic errors, such as the claim that Nazareth was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (in fact it is around ten miles away). In addition, it contains quotations from Dante, who lived 1266-1321. It seems clear that this book was written many centuries after Jesus by someone with limited knowledge of the area where He lived and with a clear agenda to support and advance Islam.

### Will return again

According to Islamic tradition, Jesus will return to earth at some point in the future to usher in the end time. He will reign as king over all humanity, extending Islam over all the earth. This theory is not explicitly taught in the Qur'an, although some Muslims tenuously point to Surah 43:61 for support. One may wonder why it is Jesus, rather than Muhammad, who is given this central role in the fulfilment of the spread of Islam.



## Contentious Issues – *Shariah, Jihad, Hijab*

### Shariah

*Shariah* law is a regulating law for every aspect of life. Although all prophets had their own *Shariah* for their time and context, all past *Shariahs* have been abrogated because Muhammad's *Shariah* is comprehensive and universal. At the heart of *Shariah* is the family unit, but every aspect of the life of nations should be regulated by it. Some Muslims countries (notably Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran) follow *Shariah* law as the foundation for their political institution. Muslim scholars claim that *Shariah*, far from being a burden is the best way for human beings to live. Abdul Ala Mawdudi (*Towards Understanding Islam*, p.101) describes the basic approach of *Shariah* as follows:

*The fundamental principle of the Law is that man has the right, and in some cases the bounden duty, to fulfil all his genuine needs and desires and make every conceivable effort to promote his interests and achieve success and happiness – but (and it is an important 'but') he should do all this in such a way that not only are the interests of other people not jeopardised and no harm is caused to their strivings towards the fulfilment of their rights and duties, but there should be all possible social cohesion, mutual assistance and co-operation among human beings on the achievement of their objectives. In respect of those things in which good and evil, gain and loss are inextricably mixed up, the tenet of this law is to choose a little harm for the sake of greater benefit and sacrifice a little benefit, so avoiding a greater harm.*

*Shariah* is based on four sources of authority in descending order of importance:

1. The *Qur'an* – The ultimate foundational authority for belief and practice.
2. The *Sunnah* – the customs, habits and approvals of Muhammad, second only in authority to the *Qur'an*. There are six main collections of accounts of the *Sunnah*, called *Hadiths*, which were made by people who were either companions of Muhammad or who recorded what the first witnesses remembered. The *Hadith* of Muhammad al Bukhari (died 870 BC) is the earliest and best known. The *Sunnah* has been said to account for up to 80% of the regulation of the life of the Muslim. Sunni and Shia Muslims differ over which *Hadiths* are most faithful.
3. *Ijma* – the unanimous agreement of the *Ummah*, or of its learned scholars. For Shias, the consensus of the *Imams*.
4. *Qias* (“measuring”) – the analogical reasoning (by finding similarities) of scholars with regards to difficult, doubtful or new questions of doctrine and practice. Some Shia Muslims refer instead to *aql* (“intellect”), meaning dialectical reasoning, as the fourth source of authority.

### Jihad

This Qur'anic word is often translated 'holy war' but literally means 'struggle' or 'exertion'. It means a fight against evil and in defence of Islam and can take many forms:

- *The heart* – all Muslims need to engage in the internal struggle for obedience to the rules of Islam
- *The mouth* – using speech to undermine opposition to Islam (e.g. through debates)
- *The pen* – using the written word to undermine opposition to Islam
- *The hand* – defending Islam through praiseworthy deeds
- *The sword* – this has been the primary understanding in Islamic history and increasingly today. It also links with the Qur'anic word *qital*, which means fighting with a weapon to kill or subdue.

*Jihad* includes struggle against enemies of Islam. According to the Qur'an enemies of Islam include:

- *Kufar* (unbelievers) – all who disbelieve Muhammad's message, especially the six central articles of faith.
- *Mushrikun* – those who engage in *shirk*, linking any created thing with Allah as his equal – includes all polytheists and idolaters and Jews and Christians (Surah 3:28; 4:89; 5:51).
- *Hypocrites* – apostate or lapsed Muslims. The Qur'an does not decree their execution, but *Shariah* law does.

Muhammad's practice of (and teaching on) *Jihad* evolved through four stages:

1. Peaceful persuasion – when Islam was a small minority in Mecca (Surah 16:125-126).
2. Defence against aggression – when Muhammad and his followers were in Medina (Surah 2:190-194; 22:39).
3. Offensive fighting – followed from Muhammad's teaching that martyrs for Allah's cause would go straight to the highest level of Paradise (Surah 9:111). Fighting could not be initiated during four holy months (Surah 9:5).
4. Expansionist *jihad* – removed all limits on when fighting in Allah's cause could be initiated (Surah 9:29).

It would appear that today when Islam is in a minority it tends to follow the path of peaceful persuasion, but once it is in the majority it assumes a more offensive approach. At the same time there has been a resurgence in expansionist *jihad*

in the past two decades. Some 'moderate' Muslims may argue that only peaceful means should be used to spread Islam or to struggle for Islam in Western nations but those who favour militant Islam can also appeal to the Qur'an and to Muhammad's example for support. They apply the principle of abrogation to argue that expansionism should be normative today. According to Abdul Ala Mawdudi (*Towards Understanding Islam*, p.94):

*A man who exerts himself physically or mentally or spends his wealth in the way of Allah is indeed engaged in Jihad. But in the language of the Shariah this word is used particularly for a war that is waged solely in the name of Allah against those who practice oppression as enemies of Islam.*

Even under this definition, which seems to limit *Jihad* to defence of Muslims against oppression, some Muslims justify terrorism against Western countries on the basis that they have oppressed Muslims through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their policies in the Middle East which are seen to be pro-Israel.

## **Hijab – Dress Codes in Islam**

The principle of modest clothing in Islam is known as *Hijab* (literally 'covering'). The Qur'an requires modest behaviour from Muslim women and men (Surah 24:31):

*And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, or their sister's sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments.*

This verse gives an additional flavour of the nature of the Qur'an. It is unlikely to make much sense to a reader who is not familiar with Arab culture in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. What are the woman's "hidden ornaments"? What is their "beauty" that must not be displayed? What is a "veil" (Arabic *khimar*)? The ambiguity of this verse has led to vast variation in its application across the Islamic world. The other key Qur'anic verse concerning *Hijab* is Surah 33:59:

*O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested*

The Arabic word for "outer garment" in this verse is *jilbab*. Again there is room for significant debate as to what kind of garment this should be and what parts of the body should be covered by it.

The debate centres on women since it is generally agreed that men need only cover the area between their navel and knees. Applications of *Hijab* to women in contemporary Islamic societies include:

- *Total covering* – this is one extreme in which the whole body, including the face and hands, is covered when the woman is in public, with only a slit or mesh for the eyes. Garments designed for this type of covering include abayas, burqas, chadors and niqaabs. Some scholars argue that this extreme form is actually an expression of Arab culture which predates the coming of Islam, and is not what the Qur'an intended.
- *Covering of whole body except face and hands.*
- *Head covering* – the *khimar* is the headscarf worn by many Muslim women. In this view the veiling of beauty required by the Qur'an refers to covering the head and hair (in addition to avoiding tight or revealing clothing).
- *No compulsory covering* – some scholars argue that the passages quoted above do not specifically mention the covering of the head. Some argue for a relativist interpretation of *Hijab* which sees the issue of modesty in dress as being dependent on the cultural context. What was appropriate in 7<sup>th</sup> Century Arabia may not be appropriate (or necessary) in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.

*Hijab* has become a political issue in both the Islamic and Western worlds. Some Muslim countries, notably Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan under Taliban rule, have enforced the wearing of *Hijab*. Other Muslim countries with secular constitutions, notably Turkey, Tajikistan and Tunisia, ban the wearing of *Hijab* in government buildings, schools and universities. In 2008 an attempt by the Turkish government to remove a ban on women wearing headscarfs in universities was overturned by the country's constitutional court.

*Hijab* has also been a political issue in some non-Islamic countries. In 2004 France passed a law banning women from wearing *Hijab* and a significant debate was sparked in Britain in 2006 by government minister Jack Straw's admission that he asks women to remove face veils if he is speaking with them in his role as an MP. *Hijab* is an example of the collision between two civilisations. Islam is concerned with the issue of modesty (although some approaches actually end up demeaning and restricting women severely) whereas the West has rejected its Christian heritage which also saw modesty as an important principle.

## Conclusion: How should we respond to the challenge?

### What conclusion can we make about Muhammad?

Christian responses to Muhammad and the message of Islam have ranged from the belief that it is simply a Christian heresy (John of Damascus, a Christian who was an official in the Muslim Empire in the early 8<sup>th</sup> Century took this view) to the claim that it was Satan's greatest counterfeit. Certainly from a Christian perspective Islam is a step backwards from Christianity into a religious system with some elements of Judaism (e.g. the dietary restrictions) but a fundamental system of works righteousness. So, what can we conclude about Muhammad? To borrow C.S. Lewis's 'trilemma' (which he famously applied to Christ's claim to be God), we can conclude that there are only three possible responses to Muhammad's claim to be God's apostle and prophet:

- *He may have been honest and right.* Clearly Muslims believe this to be the case, but Christians cannot accept this option because of the clear disagreement between Muhammad and Christ about core issues including the identity of Christ, the character of God, the authority of the Bible and the path of salvation.
- *He may have been sincere in his claim but wrong* – perhaps he saw and heard hallucinations and believed these to be from God, or he was deceived by Satan or an evil spirit. There are elements in the accounts of Muhammad receiving his oracles that suggest this may be true. The claim of mental illness, however, does not seem to fit with his ability to administer and lead the growing band of Muslims.
- *He may have been deliberately deceptive,* inventing his stories of revelation from God to enable him to gain power and to establish his authority. The changing nature of Muhammad's oracles over time as he changed from a persecuted leader of a small group into a statesman and the convenient principle of abrogation suggest that Muhammad may have invented at least some of his revelations to support his position.

Mateen Ellass (*Understanding the Koran*, p.127) presents one possible picture of how Muhammad may have come to produce the oracles of the Qur'an:

*In the midst of hearsay and secondary tributaries of material as well as in cultural surroundings used to the telling of fantastic tales, Muhammad rearranges much of what he had accumulated, sometimes conflating stories, sometimes mixing sources, all from the desire to undergird his claim to be a true prophet of God in line with the true prophets of old. Casting those former prophets in his image as harbingers of God's wrath against unbelief and polytheism, Muhammad sought to bolster the force of his own message and to compel listeners to a fateful decision: to side with Allah and his prophet, or to be against them*

I think there is probably much truth in what Ellass writes, but perhaps he is still too favourable. After all, the Bible has very severe warnings about false prophets. Furthermore, there must surely be a spiritual dimension at play and it seems unlikely to me that evil spirits had no role in inspiring and shaping Muhammad's message.

### Should we fear the growth of Islam?

As Christians who trust in the living God and who are entrusted with the gospel we should not fear future possibilities or opposition. Although it is sad that many Muslims have no opportunity to hear the gospel and that Christians in Muslim countries often face persecution we must also have confidence that God is sovereign and that nothing can stand in the way of His purposes. The collapse of Christendom brings an opportunity for genuine Christian believers to redefine the popular understanding of Christianity and to show Muslims that it is not a 'religion' that is hostile to them and that has ambitions for world domination but that it is a message of sacrifice and service that centres on the person and atoning death of Jesus Christ. Christians should be aware of the challenge of the growth of Islam and should realise that some Muslims in Western countries have a clear agenda to increase their influence over society. We should be wise about this and play our part in resisting this move. We should also do all we can to support the cause of freedom of religion in Muslim countries, but we must keep focused on our ultimate hope and goal – the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### How can Christians share the gospel with Muslims?

Some Christians will undoubtedly be called by God to take the gospel to Muslim countries, often by living and working there in professional capacities. These people will need to immerse themselves in Muslim culture and the local culture and language to be effective in what is likely to be a very challenging mission field. For others the opportunities will be to pray for the Muslim world and to engage with Muslims who are present in their own countries. The following are some simple principles for Christian outreach to Muslims living in Western countries. They are not definitive and they are written from limited personal experience. I have, however, included thoughts from authors with greater experience.

- **Sensitivity** – When seeking to witness to Muslims (or any group) it is wise to avoid causing unnecessary offence so that barriers to the gospel can be removed. Examples of this may include:
  - Women dressing modestly and avoiding personal contact with men.
  - Not speaking disrespectfully about Muhammad or the Qur’an.
  - Treating copies of the Qur’an and Bible with care. A Muslim will never place the Qur’an on the ground and will handle it with great respect. If we want to convey our respect for the Bible we should do likewise with it.
  - Sensitivity about alcohol – not to drink alcohol or speak about it in the presence of Muslims (Christians who are serious about reaching Muslims may even decide to be teetotal).
  - Never offer a Muslim pork to eat.
  - Don’t eat things with your left hand (in most Muslim countries it is the dirty hand used for toileting).
- **Relationship** – It will be vital to make meaningful connections with Muslim people. For some Christians this may mean moving to a Muslim country to live out their faith there. Others will have wonderful opportunities in work or college where there may be Muslims (the potential of international student outreach is immense). For many it may seem difficult to find inroads into Muslim communities since they are often perceived to be quite insular. Those who are serious about witnessing to Muslims must pray for opportunities. Hospitality is an important concept in many Muslim countries and opening your home to Muslims is a wonderful way to build bridges with them.
- **Service** – It is important to show people the love of Christ in action by serving them in appropriate ways. This is particularly true in witness to Muslims as it may be very difficult to convince them to read the Bible since they have been taught that it is corrupted. If they see the reality of your faith in your love and joy they may begin to see the reality of Christ in you and that will be a useful starting point for you to encourage them to read Scripture.
- **Common Ground** – In sharing with Muslims it is important to seek the common ground as a beginning point for discussing the gospel. Examples include:
  - *The oneness of God* – emphasise that Christians are also monotheistic. When speaking about the concept of trinity it is helpful to use biblical language (e.g. Muslims may be quick to point out, correctly, that “trinity” is not a Bible word).
  - *Morality* – Christians can agree with Muslims about many aspects of morality and family values. We should be able to sympathise with Muslim criticisms of moral standards in Western societies and we should share their concern for modesty of dress, even if our expression of it differs from Muslims.
  - *Jesus* – we can use the titles that the Qur’an uses of Jesus (the Word of God and Word of Truth) and the recognition that He was a messenger from God as starting points for discussion about Him.
- **Scripture** – If a Muslim friend agrees to read the Bible you should begin by introducing them to one of the Gospels since Muslims believe that *Injil* (gospel) was given to Jesus by Allah. They may believe that it has been corrupted but remember that the Qur’an itself does not say this. Copies of the Gospels are available in Arabic, but remember not all Muslims may be fluent in Arabic. Find out what their ‘heart language’ is and try to provide a gospel in it.
- **Debate and dialogue** – Muslims are often open to dialogue and debate. These can be excellent opportunities to learn more about Islam and to stretch your understanding of your own faith. On the other hand they can be difficult for those who are not already well versed in both their own faith and in Islam. The book *Faith to Faith* is an excellent resource. It should also be remembered that Muslims may use the principle of *takkiya* (cover-up) and quote abrogated verses in debate. Be prepared for the big questions that will inevitably come up – surrounding the trinity, the deity of Jesus, the question of whether Jesus truly died on the cross, the reliability and authority of the Qur’an and the Bible, and the authenticity of Muhammad. It will be vital to speak with respect of Muhammad and the Qur’an otherwise all trust will be lost and great offence caused. Above all, do not allow yourself to be drawn into heated debate. This is never helpful for your witness.
- **Proclamation** – Finally we must declare the gospel message. The challenge will be to do this in ways that are sensitive to the cultural and religious context of Islam. The best basis for proclaiming the good news to a Muslim friend (or any person) is a relationship where they are convinced of your respect, love and sincerity towards them. Where the gospel is proclaimed (whether or not Muslims are the intended audience) organisers should be aware of Muslim attitudes (e.g. not speaking of a ‘crusade’).

The God we serve is not limited by our limitations. Stories are told of Muslims in Islamic countries with no Christian witness receiving dreams and visions of Jesus Christ and seeking out Christians who can explain their significance. It is said that some imams have come to Christ and have led whole villages to trust in Him. Given the closed nature of much of the Muslim world and the persecution converts from Islam would face, it is difficult to verify some of these stories or to know how frequent they are. We can, however, be confident that God loves the world’s Muslims and, if we are in step with His Spirit, so should we! We must pray for the Muslim world – both across the world and in our neighbourhood and ask the Lord how He wants us to respond to the challenge we see.

## Selected References

Wikipedia was my source for most of the statistics and for maps of the Muslim world.

### Muslim Sources

Quotations from the Qur'an are taken from *The Holy Qur'an*, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (The Young Muslims UK, 1995)

*Islam is Your Birthright* (Islamic Book Service, Indiana)

A short introduction to Islam produced by a Muslim society for Western people.

*Towards Understanding Islam*, by Abdul Ala Mawdudi (The Islamic Foundation, 1980).

This is a very useful introduction to Islamic theology from a leading Islamic scholar. It is widely distributed by and approved by Muslims engaged in sharing their faith to Westerners.

### Recommended Christian Books about Islam

Soloman, Sam. 2007. 'Challenges from Islam' in *Beyond Opinion*, edited by Ravi Zacharias (Thomas Nelson)

A hard-hitting look at various issues surrounding Islam from the perspective of Christian apologetics.

Moucarry, Chawkat. 2001. *Faith to Faith: Christianity and Islam in Dialogue* (IVP)

A helpful summary of major issues between Christians and Muslims as regards the Scriptures, key doctrines, the person of Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Written with sensitivity to Muslim readers but clearly presents the claims of Jesus Christ and the heart of the Christian Gospel. Contains some very helpful chapters about the responses of Islamic scholars to the Biblical accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus.

Sheikh, Bilquis and Richard Schneider. *I Dared to Call Him Father* (Kingsway)

A classic testimony of a Muslim woman who came to faith in Christ. A great insight into the challenges of conversion for Muslims.

Cooper, Anne and Elsie A. Maxwell (editors). 2004. *Ishmael My Brother*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Monarch)

The latest edition of a classic course on the basics of Islam. One of the most helpful introductions to Islam from a Christian perspective.

Elass, Mateen. 2004. *Understanding the Koran* (Zondervan)

A very helpful introduction to the Qur'an for Christian readers. Concise and easy to read. Well worth buying.

### Books about Islam referenced in this article but not recommended

Richardson, Don. 2003. *Secrets of the Koran* (Regal)

I really wouldn't recommend this book. The author makes far too many claims that cannot be substantiated (e.g. about Muhammad's motivation) and without providing any references to back him up. In addition he misrepresents Christian ideas at times and in places uses what I deem to be foolish phrases that are likely to be unnecessarily inflammatory to Muslim readers. I think I have quoted the only helpful parts of this book in this paper.