

WHO ARE MUSLIMS?¹

Think you can recognise a Muslim by dress or nationality? Think again. Almost one fourth of the world's population is Muslim. And although some people mistakenly believe that all Muslims are Arab (or vice versa), Arabs make up only 18% of the world's Muslim population. Muslims are found everywhere from West Africa to Eastern Europe to China and the Philippines, and they are establishing a growing presence in the West. Muslims come in all races and colours, are found in all professions and walks of life, and have made significant contributions to every field of human endeavour since the beginning of Islam, from science and mathematics to art and the humanities. In today's 'global village,' there is no place on earth that they are not making an impact. Furthermore, despite media bias, the vast majority of Muslims belongs to stable, loving families, and has nothing to do with terrorism or other acts of violence.

¹ **WAMY EUROPE**

WHAT IS ISLAM?

The word 'Islam' comes from the Arabic root *aslama*, which means peace and submission; a practising Muslim strives to submit wholeheartedly to God, thereby achieving peace in this life and the Next. Submitting to God's will does not mean that a person need no longer think, or that he must give up his free will to choose; rather, like a law-abiding citizen, a person who observes God's commands benefits himself and others by respecting Divine laws and using his freedom wisely. The Islamic concept of submission is thus an active one; a Muslim struggles to increase his knowledge, develop his character, and do what is right to the best of his ability _ after which he accepts that the outcome of his affairs is ultimately in God's hands.

WHAT DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE IN?

ONE GOD: Islam is based on faith in a Higher Power, the Gracious Lord and Creator of the Universe, without family or partners, called 'Allah'. Muslims prefer to use the Arabic word Allah for God, because it has no plural, feminine or diminutive form that could be associated with idolatry (i.e. gods, goddesses or 'demi_gods'). Although Allah is referred to as 'He,' it is understood that God is Self_Sufficient, and transcends both duality and gender; the 99 Names of Allah mentioned in the Qur'an contain 'feminine' attributes (such as the Compassionate) as well as 'masculine' ones (i.e. the Almighty). Allah is Merciful and Just, All_Knowing and All_Seeing, Friend and Guide, and the only one worthy of our worship and devotion.

PROPHETHOOD: Islam teaches that belief in a Higher Power, coupled with a universal code of ethics (summarised in the simple maxim 'believe in God and be good'), is the natural religion of mankind.

This religion (or way of life), in its diverse manifestations, has been taught by prophets, who were sent by Allah to every nation and tribe at some point in time. Prophets called people to a personal relationship with their Lord, and set a blessed example of how to live. When people forgot or corrupted the message, He sent another prophet to restore it. The Qur'an mentions 25 prophets by name; of these, five were great Messengers: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Each prophet received Divine revelation, and some were given books of Scripture. Muslims believe that Allah revealed Jewish and Christian Scriptures in their original versions, but that their texts have since been corrupted. The Qur'an, revealed to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel, holds the unique position of being God's final message to humanity, and He has promised to preserve it intact until the end of time. Interestingly, scholars have verified that the Qur'an is the only world scripture that has but a single version (in Arabic), identical to the text that was revealed more than 1400 years ago. It is also the only scripture that can be committed to memory by people of all ages, regardless of their native tongue.

LIFE AFTER DEATH: Although people are inclined to forgetfulness and sin, Islam affirms an overall positive view of man – who has been created as God's representative on earth – and teaches that faith and appreciation of goodness is inherent to human nature. Furthermore, children are born in a state of purity and do not 'inherit' sin. Life's test is to do one's best and to resist evil in the world and within oneself, so that one can stand before Allah with a clean heart on the Day of Judgement. Those who are successful will be rewarded in Paradise, but those who have neglected their souls will be doomed to Hell. Each individual is responsible for his own actions, and cannot rely on the goodness of others to absolve him of his sins. Although in the end, no one can attain salvation except by Allah's grace, the normal prerequisites will be faith accompanied by good works that, together, weigh heavier in the balance than the wrong that one has done. Reward will be granted in proportion to effort. Paradise is a place of physical and spiritual beauty and perfection, where people will have their hearts' desires and will be blessed with the vision of Allah Most High.

WHAT RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS DO MUSLIMS HAVE?

(1) The first step is to declare with conviction that 'there is none worthy of worship but Allah (God), and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah' (the shahadah). This is the first 'pillar' of Islam, and when said before witnesses it marks a person's entry into Islam. A sincere Muslim also undertakes to perform four acts of worship that complete the Five Pillars. These are:

(2) Prayer (salah): Every believer should offer five prayers daily, at certain times of day (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening); the obligatory prayers take 5-10 minutes, engage body, mind and soul, and are offered in congregation whenever possible. Regular prayers help one to establish a direct link with God and are a means of purifying the heart; they can be likened to connecting to a power source and recharging one's being. Group prayers, in which believers stand, humbly, shoulder to shoulder, also help people to transcend false barriers of race, ethnicity, and class.

(3) Charity (zakah): Muslims are expected to donate a minimum of 2.5% of their net yearly savings to charity, in the form of money or goods. This is collected by the community annually and distributed to those in need. The word zakat means purification and growth: one's wealth is not pure for one's own use until it has been shared with those less fortunate; being charitable leads to spiritual growth.

(4) Fasting (sawm Ramadan): During the lunar month of Ramadan, the faithful abstain from food, drink and sexual relations between dawn and sunset, and are also expected to control their tongue and temper. Meals are taken before dawn and after sunset. Fasting in Ramadan teaches self-restraint and empathy for the poor, builds willpower and God-consciousness, and it is a time during which Muslims strengthen their ties with the community and their Creator.

(5) Pilgrimage to Makkah (Hajj): Every Muslim who is financially and physically able must visit Makkah once in his or her lifetime, during the Hajj season. The Pilgrimage puts the reality of human life into perspective: it serves as a vivid reminder of the struggles and sacrifices made by the prophets; it strengthens the bonds of brotherhood between the international community of Muslims, who come from every corner of the world to join in this unique 'annual convention;' and it prepares the pilgrim for the profound journey that each of us must undergo from this life to the Next.

NOT JUST A (RELIGION) BUT A WAY OF LIFE

There are many other acts of worship that are recommended in Islam, such as offering personal prayers and supplications, reading the Qur'an, volunteering in service of the community, etc., besides which everything a person does with the intention of pleasing God is considered an act of worship. In contrast, there are things that God has prohibited because of the harm they engender to individuals and society; these include lying, stealing, disrespecting one's parents, extra-marital affairs, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and other destructive or unethical behaviour. The guidelines for these commands and prohibitions are found in the Shari'ah, or Sacred Law, which is derived from the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.* The Shari'ah is unique in that it provides guidance not only on 'religious matters,' but addresses every aspect of life, including issues of social justice, politics, trade, international relations, family life, and even animal rights and the environment.

SOLUTION TO TODAY'S PROBLEMS

Despite the negative manners in which Muslims are often portrayed by the media, many people are surprised to find, upon deeper investigation that Islam provides a solution to their spiritual, personal and social needs. It offers a faith based on reason, free of superstition or the need for intermediaries between oneself and God; it actively promotes racial brotherhood and harmony; and its economic guidelines encourage fair exchange between rich and poor, capital and labour. Its political system (in the original, pure form) is based on a deep concern for justice and human rights, and it provides guidelines by which people of different faiths can live with one another in harmony. Furthermore, its model for family life offers an alternative to the current breakdown of the family in Western society, and the ensuing social disintegration and chaos.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

THE PARABLE OF (THE GOOD TREE)

The image of a healthy tree, evergreen, giving shade and bearing delicious, fragrant fruit year-round, is a parable of a balanced Muslim. The source of this parable is the Qur'an, which says, 'A good word is like a good tree whose root is firmly fixed, and whose branches reach to heaven; bearing fruit in all seasons by the permission of its Lord' (Qur'an 14:24_5). If we imagine that the tree represents a Muslim who is sincerely striving to embody Islamic ideals, then the seed of this tree is the shahadah. This affirmation of God's unity permeates and colours every cell, so that his every thought, word and action is formed within the matrix of this understanding. The roots, which nourish the tree and grant it stability, can be likened to the Articles of Faith - belief in God, His angels, holy books, prophets, the Day of Judgement and Divine destiny.

The trunk grows through faith in Allah and His Messenger, which extends from the seed to the branches. Five branches represent the Five Pillars: they give the tree its shape and habit. Furthermore, the leaves represent Islamic manners and customs (such as greeting with 'salaam' or wearing modest dress). They are what make the tree attractive and recognisable from a distance, and provide shade to other creatures. In the end, however, a tree's purpose remains unfulfilled until it bears fruit. The fruits of the tree are good character: qualities such as truthfulness, patience, courage, empathy, love, and compassion, along with all the other things that we desire in a friend, spouse or colleague; namely, the things that make us human.