

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM ~ The First Ten Steps

C T R Hewer SCM Press, 2006

‘Islam’ = God creates the world in a state of *harmony* and we must all know our place and *submit* to God’s plan for harmonious creation. (Islam, Salam, Muslim – SLM)

All created as Muslims and each people has prophet, writing and creation to guide. Islam is ultimate restatement of all these revelations. Living in accord with God’s will brings *taqwa* profound sense of God’s presence.

Five Pillars of Islam:

1. *Shahada*: Only God is God and Muhammad is his prophet.
2. *Salat*: formal liturgical prayer.
3. *Zakat*: economic sharing. No *riba* usury, Give 2.5% of surplus wealth plus alms.
4. *Sawm*: fasting esp during Ramadan month.
5. *Hajj*: annual pilgrimage to Makka. (Compulsory once in a lifetime if wealth enough)

MUHAMMAD, Last in Chain of Prophets

First was Adam, also *khalifa* Regent of God. Guidance made him servant of God *Abdallah*

All prophets perfect and so many taken from Tanach but sanitised. All are *nabi* but five also received a book and so termed *rasul* - Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus & M.

Abraham’s Egyptian slave Hagar births Ishmael, who travels with Abraham to Makka and builds first building for worship of Allah, the *Ka’ba*.

Md born Makka of leading merchant father. Most Arabs polytheist but his family monotheist calling God Allah. Surrounded by Jews and heretic Christians (Collyridians worshipped Father, Jesus and Mary). Went on trade journeys earning name of *al-Amin*, trustworthy one. At 25, wealthy widow Khadija his employer married him. Child Fatima later married Ali.

610 AD 27th Ramadan (The Night of Power), *Angel Jibril* (Gabriel) saying ‘*iqra*’ = recite! (M illiterate) *Jibril* embraced Md to purify his heart and words then erupted from his heart. Over 23 further years the Ko’ran was expressed.

Recited in public and gained Khadija, Ali, Abu Bakr, Uthman.

615: persecution so some sent to Abbyssinia.

Mi’raj: Night of the Ascension – to Temple Mount & heaven for Divine Audience.

620 AD = 0 AH: Town of Yathrib invited Md to live & mediate between clans. Converted so called City of the Prophet ~ Medina. *Hijra* Md takes up place in Medina. Battles with Mekkans. Md allowed Xn group from Najran to pray in his mosque. (thus acknowledged that they worshipped

Allah) Asked to pilgrimage to Makka and in 631 Md. invaded with army because of a dispute.

Smashed all idols.

Khadija died so Md took 12 wives. For other men 4 wives allowed if treated equally.

Died 632AD buried in Medina ~ now *Masjid al-Nabi*.

Sunnis chose Abu Bakr; then Umar; then Uthman; then Ali as *Caliph*. After that became rather dynastic.

Shi'a (Shi'a Ali) holds dynastic line through Ali (only made it fourth after 'usurpers') because sinlessness was conferred on Md's whole family. Therefore they are the Imams and infallible interpreters of Qur'an. Ali nominated Hasan as second Imam but not all agreed. Hasan nominated brother Husayn who was ambushed and killed at Karbala 680AD. This is remembered by Shi'as each year in extreme mourning.

1. Zayd was 5th Imam. Then no others so no dynasties. Called **Fivers**. [Yemen]
2. **Jafari** School, after great scholar.
3. **Isma'ilis**: esoteric meaning of Qur'an known only to Imam. [India]
4. **Ithna Asharis (Twelvers)** Muhammad al-Qa'im, (12th Imam) disappeared aged 6. Will return as *Imam al-Mahdi*. Ayatollahs give guidance till his return.

This is majority group of Shi'as.

THE QUR'AN (or Recitation)

Md did not have to memorise but recite what was implanted in his heart from Ramadan 610 on.

Jibril guided so Md did not make error. Qur'an is the Speech of God (Kalam Allah) in 'bible' in way we see Xt as Word of God 'incarnate'. The Book given to Jesus (the *Injil*) is similar to Gospel according to Barnabas in what it says about Jesus but it was originally 15th century Italian mms.

Zayd ibn Thabit (d 634) wrote down Md's recitations with vowels from Quraysh tribe dialect.

Earliest copy is 8th Century. No variant readings.

114 suras or chapters. Many early commentaries (*tafsir*) many Shi'as stressing allegorical meanings.

Second Sura is known as 'the Qur'an within the Qur'an', touching on all major themes.

ISLAMIC HISTORY

Islam is largely united for its first two centuries but local dynasties arose, esp. Abbasids (Baghdad), Umayyads (Spain), Fatimids (Egypt) 1258 Mongols overran Baghdad but became Muslim, expanding into Asia and Africa. Later: Ottomans (1280 – 1924), Mughals (India 1526 – 1858) Safavids (Iran 1501 – 1765) Alawids (West Africa 1631 on).

Islamic Empire: Abu Bakr First Caliph : Rules of military engagement incl care of basic human needs, synagogues & churches. The Empire grew but not necessarily Islam with religious freedom for People of Book (incl Zoroastrians) In Egypt Copts remained majority. Non Muslims paid a tax and wore special clothing.

Jerusalem: c700 Christians had let Temple mount decay so Dome on the Rock decorated by Byzantine Christian craftsmen, al-Aqsa Mosque. Capital moved from Medina to Damascus 660s where Islam met Greek thought and thinkers. (John of Damascus 750 considered Islam 'Christianity gone wrong').

Decline of West and move of capital to Byzantium in 5th Cent, where ancient wisdom was retained. Translations from Greek, Syriac into Arabic. Philosophical and medical, art, architectural advances (Cairo Uni. for Sunni scholarship).

711 Tariq invaded Spain/Gibraltar but stopped at Pyrenees by Charles Martel. Cordoba capital. From here Aristotelian logic infiltrated Christianity. Golden Age of Islamic *al-Andulus*. Concept of zero, pulmonary circulation of blood, anaesthetics, optics. Majority in *al-Andulus* remain Xn. Clunic monasteries took on learning. Jewish mystics also in Spain alongside Sufis and influenced St John of the Cross and Dante.

Ferdinand and Isabella 1492 enforced Christianity on Jews and Muslims (plus Inquisition)

Crusades: Pope Urban II 1095 – first call. 'exterminate this vile race!'

1. Great Schism 1054, then western pope wanted to claim east.
2. Sicily and Malta feeling threatened.
3. Crusades used to unify warring factions of Europe under Pope's patronage.

Modern Period:

Through trade and commitment. Only 15% Muslims are Arab. Great War Ottomans sided with Germans so Arab lands divided. Atatürk secularised Turkey as reaction. Lands despoiled.

CENTRAL BELIEFS

Absolute oneness of God. So must be worshipped. 99 names of God in Qur'an and Hadith. We must be coloured by God to become more his regents on earth. Does not talk of God as Father in case of misunderstandings re sonship of Christ. God sustains all life. God is only judge.

Angels: automata and ideal messengers. Every human has two, recording good and bad deeds.

Shaytan is a *jinn*, not an angel because impossible for them to rebel against God but *jinn* has some freewill. Angels come from light, jinn from fire, humans from clay. *Iblis*, a jinn, disputed with God so he was cast down and tempts humans.

Predestination: God wills everything but does not like everything, wanting freely given obedience. If one dedicates every action to ‘God the merciful compassionate’ wins assurance of power of God to live godly life and avoid sin.

Death: life after death begins once placed in grave. Once grave is filled in, angels come to interrogate. Outcome is better or worse experience in grave.

The Last Days: Shi’as believe Mahdi will return, Sunnis it’s Jesus ‘*Isa*, against *al-Dajjal*, the charlatan. Jesus then rules until death and burial with Mohammed in Medina. The trumpet will sound and all rise in ‘new bodies’ all standing naked before God’s judgement – good deeds weighing ten times bad deeds recorded in books by the two angels. Prophets may intercede for followers. Then all go either to Hell or Heaven.

Heaven and Hell: Paradise Garden or the Fire. May be ‘for a time’ but associating created being with God is unforgiven.

PRINCIPAL PRACTICES

1. **Shahada** One becomes Muslim by reciting *Shahada*: ‘I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of God.’ May then take Jewish or Xn wife but children must be muslim.
2. **Salat** 5 times daily. Call to Prayer (*adhan*) by *Muezzin*, esp Fridays – the *Salat al-Jum’a*. Ablutions (*wudu*) first of part of body associated with working life. *Qibla* (direction for prayer) wall with the niche *Mihrab* faces *Ka’ba*. Verses cannot be read but memorised. Pulpit *minibar* is for *Jum’a* gathering. *Du’a* are prayers for all occasions, so ‘raising hearts’ to god in remembrance. With right intention, Allah will forgive. ‘Prayer without ceasing is the state of *taqwa*. Must attend mosque by puberty but home salat is expected. Fridays in not rest day.
3. **Zakat:** sharing portion of wealth with needy. Lending must assume proportionately same risks as borrower. Forbidden to make profit from alcohol or to hoard – money must circulate. After basic family costs 2.5% is given as *Zakat*.
4. **Swam:** Fasting and abstinence during Ramadan from before sunrise to after sunset. Helps Muslim grow in god-consciousness *taqwa*. Last 10 days to coincide with Night of Power. Finishes with *‘Id al-Fitr* after paying *Zakat*.
5. **Hajj:**
Shi’a pillars are ten in number but built up upon the five.

A MUSLIM LIFE.

Birth: Imam whispers call to prayer in baby's ear. After two children contraception is allowed to space more children out. Abortion seldom. Named within ten days: *Abd* (servant of) then one of beautiful names; prophet names; plus son-of *Ibn* or *Bint*. Named baby's head shaved and weighed and similar in silver or gold to charity. Later 'father of' *Abu*.

Mother bathes after 40 days then can do *salat* again at home. Circumcision in Hadith. Female circumcision in Hadith to say 'don't cut severely'.

Education & Childhood: Taught immediately to say pious phrases. Respect of parents and right hand eating. Arabic phonetically. Madrasa evenings in single-sex classes.

From puberty women must cover from necks to ankles and wrists, men from navel to knees. Music may lead to immorality so differing opinions. In India the *nasheed* is song to prayer Prophet.

Qur'an bans alcohol or drug that alters mental state unless prescribed. No gambling. No career touching these things is allowed.

Marriage: 'marriage is half your religion' – celibacy not being an option. Forced marriage illegal but a marriage concerns all family members. Prophet married his daughter Fatima to Ali his cousin so allowed. *Sharif* or *sayyid* can trace back to Mohammed. Contract drawn up and promulgated in *nikah* ceremony in mosque or at home. Dowry *mahr* given by man to woman can be money or a service. Qur'an allowed four wives if equity, but then says you won't manage it, so many Muslims are monogamous, some not – esp in Africa. UK law simply does not recognise 2nd. Only husband may see woman's allurements says Qur'an, so interpreted variously. Modest, loose-fitting clothing is called *hijab*.

Divorce is preceded by swift arbitration. Hadith: 'divorce is most detestable of permitted things'. A triple renunciation *talaq* must be followed by three month cooling-off period. Wife can divorce through a Shari'a court. If woman thought to be pregnant by another, man swears 4 times, woman may do same in which case it is left to Allah to decide fate. Divorced woman encouraged to remarry. Children's custody usually goes to father.

Family Life: Married person has responsibility for partner's extended family. (Separated families therefore feel really wrenched apart). Togetherness in prayer and community essential – *umma*.

Woman must be accompanied by *mahram*, but close family indoors can mix freely. Married woman has *always* been allowed to own and manage property. Entitled to full education, sexual fulfilment, engage in any profession or business, being consulted in public affairs. Husband is expected to provide for family and lay hot food before his wife. She must be open to bear children. Qur'an allows beating with *miswak* (like toothbrush) for religious negligence.

Four perfect Muslims: Khadija (Md's wife) Fatima and Mary (Q.66.12) Asiyah, wife of Pharaoh, who was Muslim by nature not from prophet.

Food may be *haram* forbidden ~ blood, pork, carrion, sacrificed to idols. No animal may see suffering of another. Cutting throat cuts blood from brain for that purpose. May be a vegetarian but must never say meat is wrong (it's in the Q)

Taking or giving with left hand offensive. Women visitors can eat with men until familiar friend. Transplant from dead person allowed but not suicide because 'life at all costs'. Homosexual acts *haram* but some simply counsel abstinence and fasting.

Death: dying person faced towards *quibla* and *shahada* repeated. Dead are uneasy until buried. Washed but minimum interference – dressed in their Hajj garments. A martyr needs no preparation. *Salat* said but all outside the prayer area of the *masjid* – no prostration. Cremation not allowed. Body laid on right side with head facing Mecca. Angels interrogate body in grave so first night in grave is most difficult and demands family prayer. Widow mourns 4 months 10 days.

REMEMBERING GOD CONSTANTLY ~ TAQWA:

Shari'a: means a well-trodden highway. Absolute revelation in *Qur'an* and *Sunna* (lived example of the life of Mohammed). Reason seen as gift of Allah to help judgement from Q & Sunna

Qur'an: Because revealed over 23 years, necessary to know context. Later *suras* sometimes go further than earlier ones ~ a gradual process equivalent to a convert's life of conversion. Schools of interpretation and commentary

Sunna: (the lived examples in the life of Mohammed). The *Hadith* are Traditions of Mohammed. The words of Allah are in *Qur'an* and then there are Mohammed's own words, then the *hadith qudsi* words of God not in *Qur'an*. Each Hadith has note of chain of succession of the hadith's authentication. They are graded as to how authentic any Hadith is. Western scholarship has lent weight to Muslims scholars to criticise claims of some Hadiths.

Shi'a Muslims believe the early Imams are infallible interpreters. Many differing schools of interpretation exist all around! Contemporary jurisprudence *fiqh* offers guidance through lawyers *Faqih*. Guidance offered by a *mufti* (outstanding scholar) as a learned opinion *fatwa*.

No state today is fully Islamic since corruption or inequality is outlawed.

Qur'an offers a *had* as a top limitation on punishments but some see these as prescribed punishment.

Jihad: is religious struggle. Can take up arms to defend Islamic life against injustice – to defend rights of Allah. Not permitted to expand territory or *jihad* against other Muslims so first declared *kafir* (non-believer). Non-combatants not attacked and enemies must be allowed

sustenance. Samson is not in Qur'an because he killed non-combatants (although some modern scholars have now allowed Palestinian suicide bombers given 'overwhelming oppression').

Sufism: the journey within. Personal relationship with God **dhikr** is rarely spoken of but expected of all. The mystical dimension is called *tasawwuf* or *sufism*. To remember God without ceasing. The *silsilas* teachers trace their lineage back to those around Mohammed and offer *batini* knowledge of ways into God. Caliph Abu Bakr had a renunciate life-style so is model for *faqirs*.

Greatest female sufi Rabi'a said love of God was only motivation, not fear of hell or like of Paradise. Some Sufis spoke of selves as one with God – made heretic. 13th century Rumi was famous sufi. Many strange practices plus chanting, breathing etc so many Muslims disavow sufis.

ISLAM AND OTHER RELIGIONS:

Ahl al-Kitab are 'People of the Book' – presumably Jews and Christians but Vedic Hindus have been assumed too. Regarding Christians and Jews: 'Our God and your God are One' Q29.46. and both Covenants with God and so allowed to practise faith. *Dhimmi* protected people. We are called to become Muslims. Most detested sin however is ascribing equivalence with Allah – idolatry. Asking saints to pray can be suspect – Wahhabis acted like Christian iconoclasts. Similarly, no religion can claim to be revealed *after* Mohammed. Muslim men may take *ahl al-kitab* wives and allow them to continue, but not wives from other faiths.

Jews: First met in Medina and shared much. But Jews hold that prophets can only be Jews. During the battle with Mecca some Jews reneged on treaty with Islam and after that, Jews exiled. Now accused of amending their Torah. But fared better under Islam than European Christians!

Christians: Mohammed knew 'heretical' Christians – eg. Collyridians who said Trinity was Father, Jesus and Mary. Q5.82 says we are 'nearest in affection with Believers'.

630 AD the war with Byzantium context for Q.9.1-29 – subdue the People of the Book until they recognise mastery of Islam.

The title 'Son of God' creates barrier: Q 112: God is one and "begets not nor is God begotten."

P175 Q4.171 God is "far exalted above having a son." But neither do Xns believe the Grecian notion of a 'coupling' of Mary and God – as interpreted by Islam – but God creates by Word. Islamic tradition likewise struggles to speak of the *Kalam Allah* or Speech of God. We might voice this as Qur'an being Word of God 'inbible' and Jesus as God 'incarnate'.

The Holy Trinity is another stumbling block in dialogue Q5.73: "Say not of God that God is one of three." Muslims hear a reference to three gods in Trinity.

Js *Injil* is mentioned 93 times in Qur'an, as a 'servant of God'. Sufis see him as wonderful ascetic. Jesus was prophet to Hebrew nation not universal prophet – that was Mohammed alone.

Angel announces to Virgin Mary (Q3:35-47 & 19:16-35) She goes to secluded place in silence and on return Js proclaims self a prophet from his cradle – she remains silent. Js also worked miracles.

In Last Days Js will return to lead forces of good in great battle. Js *Injil* says the Paracletos will come – who is Mohammed. *Injil* is taken up to God, not killed by Jews (Q 4:157-159) Perhaps he was not crucified or maybe was but not to death. He will be buried in Medina alongside Mohammed. Then General Resurrection.

10. MUSLIMS IN TODAY'S WORLD

Coins from Offa's time inscribed with Arabic Islamic words. But living in Britain from 16th century.

High degree of civilisation attracted others to Islam, Uni seat at Cambridge in 1630sl, Turkish baths and medicines. Mid-19th cent wealthy Indians arrive to study in UK. Commonwealth passports accepted from 1948-1962. Areas in GB linked to areas in originating countries. Partition 1947 and East Pakistan War 1971 brought Sylhetis to UK. Also early 1960s African immigrants. Ugandan Asians. In 2000 there were one thousand registered Mosques.

Schools began to allow shalwar/kameez etc and 1975 multifaith curriculum. *Madrasas* community based schooling.

2001 Census

1,600,000 Muslims, with young age profile.

Union of Muslim Organisations: 1970

Council of Mosques 1985s

Muslim Council of Great Britain 1996 is widest representation.