

# Ten Things Everyone Needs to Know about Islam



by

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## **Preface**

Islam and Muslims today suffer unjustly from a bad reputation. Largely as a result of media coverage of criminal terrorist activities carried out by a tiny minority of extremist elements in the last decade or so, many people have developed a negative image or stereotype of Islam and Muslims.

The Columban Mission Institute is publishing *Ten Things Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* to counter these negative stereotypes and prejudices and to provide accurate information on Muslims and Islam.

Professor John L. Esposito is a leading authority on Islam in the English-speaking world. He is the editor-in-chief of several encyclopaedias about Islam, the author of more than forty books and countless articles on Islam and his works have been translated into more than thirty languages. He is the Founding Director of Georgetown University's *Centre for Christian-Muslim Understanding*.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, Professor Esposito was called upon to address a wide range of audiences seeking explanation of those events. He collated the pressing questions that his audiences constantly asked him and published his answers in *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*. The book is the fruit of his many years of study, scholarship, lecturing, publishing and dialogue with Muslims. His answers are clear, direct, balanced, and informative.

In this handy-sized booklet, the nearly one hundred questions and answers are whittled down to ten core questions and answers. For those who want a comprehensive explanation of the various facets of Islam and Muslim life, we recommend the original book. But for those who need to start with the basics, these are answers to the top ten most urgent questions about Islam that are on everyone's mind.

We are very grateful to Professor Esposito for granting us permission to re-print this text. We hope it will help to overcome negative stereotypes and prejudices and contribute to a just appreciation of Muslims and Islam.

Rev Dr Patrick J McNerney  
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## 1. Why do we need to know about Islam?

- Islam is the second largest religion in the world (after Christianity) and will soon be the second largest religion in America.
- Muslims are and will increasingly be our neighbours, colleagues at work, and fellow citizens.
- Although Islam is similar in many ways to Judaism and Christianity, most Americans and Europeans think of Muslims as strange, foreign, and frightening, inevitably linked to headline terrorist events. This state of affairs needs to change—and *can* change with better information and deeper understanding.
- We must put an end to the spiral of fear, hatred and violence, spawned by ignorance, that no longer only afflicts other countries but has come home to America.

## 2. What do Muslims believe?

Like Jews and Christians, Muslims are monotheists. They believe in one God, the creator, sustainer, ruler, and judge of the universe. Muslims believe in prophets, not just the Prophet Muhammad but the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, including Abraham and Moses, and of the New Testament, Jesus and John the Baptist. They also believe in angels, heaven, hell, and the Day of Judgement. Islam acknowledges that God's revelation was received in the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Quran:

We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel in which is guidance and light, and confirmation of the Torah that had come before him, a guidance and an admonition to those who fear God. (Quran 5:46)

Thus Muslims view Jews and Christians as "People of the Book", a community of believers who received revelations, through prophets, in the form of scriptures or revealed books from God.

As Christians view their revelation as both fulfilling and completing the revelation of the Old Testament, Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad received his revelations from God through the angel Gabriel to correct human error that had made its way into the scriptures and belief systems of Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, Muslims believe that Islam is not a new religion with a new scripture. Far from being the youngest of the major monotheistic world religions, from a Muslim point of view Islam is the oldest because it represents the original as well as the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad:

He established for you the same religion as that which He established for Noah, that which We have sent to you as inspiration through Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, namely that you should remain steadfast in religion and make no divisions within it. (Quran 42:13)

### 3. Why is Arabic so important in Islam?

Muslims believe that the Quran, as well as the Torah and the Gospels, is based on a tablet written in Arabic that exists in heaven with God. They believe that the teachings of these scriptures, revealed at different times in history, originate from this source. The Quran, recited by Muhammad as it was revealed to him by the angels, and later recorded in Arabic, is thus believed to be the direct word of God. All Muslims, regardless of their native language, memorize and recite the Quran in Arabic, the language in which it was revealed, whether they fully understand this language or not. So too, all over the world, regardless of their local language, when Muslims pray they do so in Arabic. Until modern times, the Quran was printed in Arabic only. Even now, in translations, which more correctly are viewed by Muslims as "interpretations", the Arabic text is often printed alongside.

The oral recitation of the Quran has remained a powerful source of inspiration to the present day. Chanting of the Quran in Arabic is an art form, and Quran reciters are held in an esteem comparable to that of opera stars in the West. Recordings of the Quran are enjoyed for their aesthetic as well as their religious value. Walking in the streets of a Muslim country, a visitor is bound to hear the Quran being recited on radios or cassettes in shops or passing taxis. Crowds fill stadiums throughout the Islamic world for public Quran recitation contests. Memorization of the entire Quran brings great prestige as well as merit.

### 4. What are the core beliefs that unite all Muslims?

Despite a rich diversity in Islamic practice, there are five simple required observances prescribed in the Quran that all practicing Muslims accept and follow. These "*Pillars of Islam*" represent the core and common denominator that unites all Muslims and distinguishes Islam from other religions. Following the Pillars of Islam requires dedication of your mind, feelings, body, time, energies, and possessions. Meeting the obligations required by the Pillars reinforces an ongoing presence of God in Muslims' lives and reminds them of their membership in a single worldwide community of believers.

1. The first Pillar is called the *Declaration of Faith*. A Muslim is one who bears witness, who testifies that "there is no god but God [*Allah*] and Muhammad is the messenger of God." This declaration is known as the *shahada* (witness, testimony). Allah is the Arabic name for God, just as Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God used in the Old Testament. To become a Muslim, one need only make this simple proclamation.

The first part of this proclamation affirms Islam's absolute monotheism, the uncompromising belief in the oneness or unity of God, as well as the doctrine that association of anything else with God is idolatry and the one unforgivable sin. As we see in Quran 4:48:

God does not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He does forgive whomever He wishes to for anything else. Anyone who gives God associates [partners] has invented an awful sin.

This helps us to understand the Islamic belief that its revelation is intended to correct such departures from the "straight path" as the Christian concept of the Trinity and veneration of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism.

The second part of the confession of faith asserts that Muhammad is not only a prophet but also a messenger of God, a higher role also played by Moses and Jesus before him. For Muslims, Muhammad is the vehicle for the last and final revelation. In accepting Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets", they believe that his prophecy confirms and completes all of the revealed messages, beginning with Adam's. In addition, somewhat like Jesus Christ, Muhammad serves as the pre-eminent role model through his life example. The believer's effort to follow Muhammad's example reflects the emphasis of Islam on practice and action. In this regard Islam is more like Judaism, with its emphasis upon the law, than Christianity, which gives greater importance to the importance of doctrines or dogma. This practical orientation of Islam is reflected in the remaining four Pillars of Islam.

2. The second Pillar of Islam is *Prayer (salat)*. Muslims pray (or, perhaps more correctly, worship) five times throughout the day: at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. Although the times for prayer and the ritual actions were not specified in the Quran, Muhammad established them.

In many Muslim countries, reminders to pray, or "calls to prayer", echo out across the rooftops. Aided by a megaphone, from high atop a mosque's minaret, the muezzin calls out:

God is most great [*Allahu Akbar*], God is most great,  
God is most great, God is most great,  
I witness that there is no god but God [*Allah*];  
I witness that there is no god but God.  
I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.  
I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.  
Come to prayer; come to prayer!  
Come to prosperity; come to prosperity!  
God is most great. God is most great.  
There is no god but God.

These reminders throughout the day help to keep believers mindful of God in the midst of everyday concerns about work and family with all their attractions and distractions. It strengthens the conscience, reaffirms total dependence on God, and puts worldly concerns within the perspective of death, the last judgement, and the afterlife.

The prayers consist of recitations from the Quran in Arabic and glorification of God. These are accompanied by a sequence of movements: standing, bowing, kneeling, touching the ground with one's forehead, and sitting. Both the recitations and accompanying movements express submission, humility, and adoration of God. Muslims can pray in any clean environment, alone or together, in a mosque or at home, at work or on the road, indoors or out. It is considered preferable and more meritorious to pray with others, if possible, as one body united in the worship of God, demonstrating discipline, brotherhood, equality, and solidarity.

As they prepare to pray, Muslims face Mecca, the holy city that houses the Kaaba (the house of God believed to have been built by Abraham and his son Ismail). Each act of worship begins with the declaration that "God is most great" ("*Allahu Akbar*") and is followed by fixed prayers that include the opening verse of the Quran.

At the end of the prayer, the *shahada* (declaration of faith) is again recited, and the "peace greeting"—"Peace be upon all of you and the mercy and blessings of God"—is repeated twice.

3. The third Pillar of Islam is called the *Zakat*, which means "purification." Like prayer, which is both an individual and communal responsibility, zakat expresses a Muslim's worship of and thanksgiving to God by supporting the poor. It requires an annual contribution of 2.5 per cent of an individual's wealth and assets, not merely a percentage of annual income. In Islam, the true owner of things is not man but God. People are given their wealth as a trust from God. Therefore, zakat is not viewed as "charity"; it is an obligation for those who have received their wealth from God to respond to the needs of less fortunate members of the community. The Quran (9:60) as well as Islamic law stipulates that alms are to be used to support the poor, orphans, and widows, to free slaves and debtors, and to support those working in the "cause of God" (e.g. construction of mosques, religious schools, and hospitals). Zakat, developed fourteen hundred years ago, functions as a form of social security in a Muslim society. In Shii Islam, in addition to the zakat, which is not limited to 2.5 percent, believers pay a religious tax (*khums*) on their income to a religious leader. This is used to support the poor and needy.

4. The fourth Pillar of Islam, the *Fast of Ramadan*, occurs once each year during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and the month in which the first revelation of the Quran came to Muhammad. During this month-long fast, Muslims whose health permits must abstain from dawn to sunset from food, drink, and sexual activity. Fasting is a practice common to many religions, sometimes undertaken as penance, sometimes to free us from undue focus on physical needs and appetites. In Islam the discipline of the Ramadan fast is intended to stimulate reflection on human frailty and dependence upon God, focus on spiritual goals and values, and identification with and response to the less fortunate.

At dusk the fast is broken with a light meal popularly referred to as breakfast. Families and friends share a special late evening meal together, often including special foods and sweets served only at this time of the year. Many go to the mosque for the evening prayer, followed by special prayers recited only during Ramadan. Some will recite the entire Quran (one-thirtieth each night of the month) as a special act of piety, and public recitations of the Quran or Sufi chanting can be heard throughout the evening. Families rise before sunrise to take their first meal of the day, which must sustain them until sunset.

Near the end of Ramadan (the twenty-seventh day) Muslims commemorate the "Night of Power" when Muhammad first received God's revelation. The month of Ramadan ends with one of the two major Islamic celebrations, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, called *Eid al-Fitr*, which resembles Christmas in its spirit of joyfulness, special celebrations, and gift giving.

5. The fifth Pillar is the *Pilgrimage* or *Hajj* to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. At least once in his or her lifetime, every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to make the sacrifice of time, possessions, status, and normal comforts necessary to make this pilgrimage, becoming a pilgrim totally at God's service. The pilgrimage season follows Ramadan. Every year over two million believers representing a tremendous diversity of cultures and languages travel from all over the world to the holy city of Mecca to form one community living their faith. In addition to the hajj there is a devotional ritual that is referred to as the "lesser pilgrimage." It is called the *umrah* (visitation) and involves visiting the holy sites at other times of the year. Many who are on pilgrimage also perform the *umrah* rituals before, during, or after the hajj. However, performing the *umrah* does not fulfil the hajj obligation.

## **5. Are there any divisions in Islam?**

As a world religion, Islam is practiced in diverse cultures in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and America. Differences in religious and cultural practices are therefore wide-ranging. Although there are no denominations in Islam such as exist in the Christian faith (Roman Catholic, Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, etc.), like all faiths, Islam has developed divisions, sects, and schools of thought over various issues. While all Muslims share certain beliefs and practices, such as belief in God, the Quran, Muhammad, and the Five Pillars of Islam, divisions have arisen over questions of political and religious leadership, theology, interpretations of Islamic law, and responses to modernity and the West.

The division of opinion about political and religious leadership after the death of Muhammad led to the division of Muslims into two major branches - Sunnis (85 per cent of all Muslims) and Shiis (15 per cent). In addition, a small but significant radical minority known as the Kharijites should be mentioned. Although they have never won large numbers of followers, their unique theological position has continued to influence political and religious debate up to the present day.

Sunni Muslims believe that because Muhammad did not designate a successor, the best or most qualified person should be either selected or elected as leader (*caliph*). Because the Quran declared Muhammad to be the last of the prophets, this caliph was to succeed Muhammad as the political leader only. Sunnis believe that the caliph should serve as the protector of the faith, but he does not enjoy any special religious status or inspiration.

Shiis, by contrast, believe that succession to the leadership of the Muslim community should be hereditary, passed down to Muhammad's male descendants (descended from Muhammad's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali), who are known as Imams and who are to serve as both religious and political leaders. Shiis believe that the Imam is religiously inspired, sinless, and the interpreter of God's will as contained in Islamic law, but not a prophet. Shiis consider the sayings, deeds, and writings of their Imams to be authoritative religious texts, in addition to the Quran and Sunnah. Shiis further split into three main divisions as a result of disagreement over the number of Imams who succeeded Muhammad.

The Kharijites (from *kharaja*, to go out or exit) began as followers of the caliph Ali, but they broke away from him because they believed him to be guilty of compromising God's will when he agreed to arbitrate rather than continue to fight a long, drawn-out war against a rebellious general. After separating from Ali (whom they eventually assassinated), the Kharijites established a separate community designed to be a "true" charismatic society strictly following the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. The Kharijite world was separated neatly into believers and non-believers, Muslims (followers of God) and non-Muslims (enemies of God). These enemies could include other Muslims who did not accept the uncompromising Kharijite point of view. Sinners were to be excommunicated and were subject to death unless they repented. Therefore, a caliph or ruler could only hold office as long as he was sinless. If he fell from this state, he was outside the protection of law and must be deposed or killed. This mentality influenced the famous medieval theologian and legal scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and has been replicated in modern times by Islamic Jihad, the group that assassinated Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, as well as by Osama bin Laden and other extremists who call for the overthrow of "un-Islamic" Muslim rulers.

Differences of opinion about political and religious leadership have led Sunnis and Shiis to hold very different visions of sacred history. Sunnis experienced a glorious and victorious history under the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs and the expansion and development of Muslim empires under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Sunnis can thus claim a golden age in which they were a great world power and civilization, which they see as evidence of God's guidance and the truth of the mission of Islam. Shiis, on the other hand, struggled unsuccessfully during the same time period against Sunni rule in the attempt to restore the imamate they believed God had appointed. Therefore, Shiis see in this time period the illegitimate usurpation of power by the Sunnis at the expense of creating a just society. Shii historical memory emphasizes the suffering and oppression of the righteous, the need to protest against injustice, and the requirement that Muslims be willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives, in the struggle with the overwhelming forces of evil (Satan) in order to restore God's righteous rule.

Divisions of opinion also exist with respect to theological questions. One historical example is the question of whether a ruler judged guilty of a grave (mortal) sin should still be considered legitimate or should be overthrown and killed. Most Sunni theologians and jurists taught that the preservation of social order was more important than the character of the ruler. They also taught that only God on Judgment Day is capable of judging sinners and determining whether or not they are faithful and deserving of Paradise. Therefore, they concluded that the ruler should remain in power since he could not be judged by his subjects. Ibn Taymiyya was the one major theologian and jurist who made an exception to this position and taught instead that a ruler should and must be overthrown.

Ibn Taymiyya's ire was directed at the Mongols. Despite their conversion to Islam, they continued to follow the Yasa code of laws of Genghis Khan instead of the Islamic law, Shariah. For Ibn Taymiyya this made them no better than the polytheists of the pre-Islamic period. He issued a *fatwa* (formal legal opinion) that labelled them as unbelievers (*kafirs*) who were thus excommunicated (*takfir*). This fatwa established a precedent: despite their claim to be Muslims, their failure to implement Shariah rendered the Mongols apostates and hence the lawful object of jihad. Muslim citizens

thus had the right, indeed duty, to revolt against them, to wage jihad. Ibn Taymiyya's opinions remain relevant today because they have inspired the militancy and religious worldview of organizations like Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Other examples of divisions over theological questions include arguments over whether the Quran was created or uncreated and whether it should be interpreted literally or metaphorically and allegorically. Historically, Muslims have also debated the question of free will versus predestination. That is, are human beings truly free to choose their own actions or are all actions predetermined by an omniscient God? What are the implications of such beliefs upon human responsibility and justice?

Islamic law provides one of the clearest and most important examples of diversity of opinions. Islamic law developed in response to the concrete realities of daily life. Since the heart of Islam and being a Muslim is submission to God's will, the primary question for believers was "What should I do and how?" During the Umayyad Empire (661-750), rulers set up a rudimentary legal system based upon the Quran, the Sunnah, and local customs and traditions. However, many pious Muslims became concerned about the influence of rulers on the development of the law. They wanted to anchor Islamic law more firmly to its revealed sources and make it less vulnerable to manipulation by rulers and their appointed judges.

Over the next two centuries, Muslims in the major cities of Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and Damascus sought to discover and delineate God's will and law through the science of jurisprudence. Although each city produced a distinctive interpretation of the law, all cities shared a general legal tradition. The earliest scholars of Islamic law were neither lawyers nor judges nor students of a specific university. They were men who combined professions such as trade with the study of Islamic texts. These loosely connected scholars tended to be gathered around or associated with major personalities. Their schools of thought came to be referred to as law schools.

While many law schools existed, only a few endured and were recognized as authoritative. Today, there are four major Sunni law schools (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafii) and two major Shii schools (Jafari and Zaydis). The Hanafi came to predominate in the Arab world and South Asia; the Maliki in North, Central, and West Africa; the Shafii in East Africa and Southeast Asia; and the Hanbali in Saudi Arabia. Muslims are free to follow any law school but usually select the one that predominates in the area in which they are born or live.

Perhaps nowhere are the differences in Islam more visible than in the responses to modernity. Since the nineteenth century, Muslims have struggled with the relationship of their religious tradition developed in pre-modern times to the new demands (religious, political, economic, and social) of the modern world. The issues are not only about Islam's accommodation to change but also about the relationship of Islam to the West, since much of modern change is associated with Western ideas, institutions, and values. Muslim responses to issues of reform and modernization have spanned the spectrum from secularists and Islamic modernists to religious conservatives or traditionalists, "fundamentalists", and Islamic reformists.

Modern secularists are Western oriented and advocate a separation between religion and the rest of society, including politics. They believe that religion is and should be strictly a private matter. Islamic modernists believe that Islam and modernity, particularly science and technology, are compatible, so that Islam should inform public life without necessarily dominating it. The other groups are more "Islamically" oriented but have different opinions as to the role Islam should play in public life. Conservatives, or traditionalists, emphasize the authority of the past and tend to call for a reimplementation of Islamic laws and norms as they existed in that past. "Fundamentalists" emphasize going back to the earliest period and teachings of Islam, believing that the Islamic tradition needs to be purified of popular, cultural, and Western beliefs and practices that have "corrupted" Islam. However, the term *fundamentalist* is applied to such a broad spectrum of Islamic movements and actors that, in the end, it includes both those who simply want to reintroduce or restore their pure and puritanical vision of a romanticized past and others who advocate modern reforms that are rooted in Islamic principles and values. There are a significant number of Islamic reformers, intellectuals, and religious leaders who also emphasize the critical need for an Islamic reformation, a wide-ranging program of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and reform urging fresh approaches to Quranic interpretation as well as to issues of gender, human rights, democratization, and legal reform.

## 6. What is Wahhabi Islam?

Until recently, most Westerners had never heard of Wahhabi Islam, but we have now repeatedly heard this term with respect to Osama bin Laden and Saudi Arabia. There are many interpretations of Islam, many schools of theology and law. Among the most ultraconservative is Wahhabi Islam, the official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi movement takes its name from Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), a scholar of Islamic law and theology in Mecca and Medina. Disillusioned by the decline and moral laxity of his society, Abd al-Wahhab denounced many popular beliefs and practices as un-Islamic idolatry and a return to the paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia. He rejected blind imitation or following (*taqlid*) of past scholarship. He regarded the medieval law of the *ulama* (religious scholars) as fallible and, at times, unwarranted innovations (*bida*) or heresy. Abd al-Wahhab called for a fresh interpretation of Islam that returned to the "fundamentals" of Islam, the Quran and the *Sunnah* (example) of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab joined with Muhammad Ibn Saud, a local tribal chief, to form a religious-political movement. Ibn Saud used Wahhabism to legitimate his jihad to subdue and unite the tribes of Arabia, converting them to this puritanical version of Islam. Like the Kharijites, Wahhabi theology saw the world in white and black categories—Muslim and non-Muslim, belief and unbelief, the realm of Islam and that of warfare. They regarded all Muslims who did not agree with them as unbelievers to be subdued (that is, fought and killed) in the name of Islam. Central to Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's theology was the doctrine of God's unity (*tawhid*), an absolute monotheism reflected in the Wahhabis' self-designation as "Unitarians" (*muwahiddun*)—those who uphold the unity of God. In imitation of Muhammad's destruction of the pantheon of pre-Islamic tribal gods in Mecca's sacred shrine (Kaaba) and its restoration to worship of the one true God (Allah), Wahhabi puritanism spared neither the sacred tombs of Muhammad and his Companions in Mecca and Medina nor the Shiite pilgrimage site at Karbala (in modern Iraq) that housed the tomb of

Hussein. The destruction of this venerated site has never been forgotten by Shii Muslims and contributed to the historic antipathy between the Wahhabi of Saudi Arabia and Shii Islam both in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Centuries later, many would point to Wahhabi-inspired iconoclasm as the source behind the Taliban's wanton destruction of Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan, an action condemned by Muslim leaders worldwide.

In the early nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali of Egypt defeated the Saudis, but the Wahhabi movement and the House of Saud proved resilient. By the early twentieth century, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud recaptured Riyadh, united the tribes of Arabia, restored the Saudi kingdom, and spread the Wahhabi movement. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia melded the political and religious in a self-declared Islamic state, using the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as the official basis for state and society.

Internationally, the Saudis, both government-sponsored organizations and wealthy individuals, have exported their ultraconservative version of Wahhabi Islam to other countries and communities in the Muslim world and the West. They have offered development aid, built mosques, libraries, and other institutions, funded and distributed religious tracts, and commissioned imams and religious scholars. Wahhabi puritanism and financial support have been exported to Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics, China, Africa, Southeast Asia, the United States, and Europe. At the same time, some wealthy businessmen in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have provided financial support to extremist groups who follow a militant "fundamentalist" brand of Islam (commonly referred to as Wahhabi or Salafi) with its jihad culture.

The challenge is to distinguish between the export of an ultraconservative theology on the one hand and militant extremism on the other. This difficulty is compounded by the propensity of authoritarian governments in Central Asia and China, especially since 9/11, to use the label "Wahhabi extremism" for all opposition, legitimate and illegitimate, and thus justify widespread repression of all opposition to their rule and policies.

## **7. Is Islam intolerant of other religions?**

Despite the recent example of the Taliban in Afghanistan and sporadic conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia, theologically and historically Islam has a long record of tolerance.

The Quran clearly and strongly states that "there is to be no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and that God has created not one but many nations and peoples. Many passages underscore the diversity of humankind. The Quran teaches that God deliberately created a world of diversity (49:13):

O humankind, We have created you male and female and made you nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another.

Muslims, like Christians and Jews before them, believe that they have been called to a special covenant relationship with God, constituting a community of believers intended to serve as an example to other nations (2:143) in establishing a just social order (3:110).

Moreover, Muslims regard Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," people who have also received a revelation and a scripture from God (the Torah for Jews and the Gospels for Christians). The Quran and Islam recognize that followers of the three great Abrahamic religions, the children of Abraham, share a common belief in the one God, in biblical prophets such as Moses and Jesus, in human accountability, and in a Final Judgement followed by eternal reward or punishment. All share the common hope and promise of eternal reward:

Surely the believers and the Jews, Christians and Sabians [Middle East groups traditionally recognized by Islam as having a monotheistic orientation], whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and whoever does right, shall have his reward with his Lord and will neither have fear nor regret. (2:62)

Historically, while the early expansion and conquests spread Islamic rule, Muslims did not try to impose their religion on others or force them to convert. As "People of the Book", Jews and Christians were regarded as protected people (*dhimmi*), who were permitted to retain and practice their religions, be led by their own religious leaders, and be guided by their own religious laws and customs. For this protection, they paid a poll or head tax (*jizya*). While by modern standards this treatment amounted to second-class citizenship, in pre-modern times it was very advanced. No such tolerance existed in Christendom, where Jews, Muslims, and other Christians (those who did not accept the authority of the pope) were subjected to forced conversion, persecution, or expulsion. Although the Islamic ideal was not followed everywhere and at all times, it existed and flourished in many contexts.

In recent years, religious intolerance has become a major issue in self-styled Islamic governments in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan under the Taliban, Iran, and Sudan, as well as in the actions of religious extremist organizations from Egypt's Islamic Jihad to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda who have been intolerant toward not only non-Muslims but also other Muslims who do not accept their version of "true Islam". The situation is exacerbated in some countries where Muslims have clashed with Christians (Nigeria, the Philippines, and Indonesia), Hindus (India and Kashmir), and Jews (Israel). These confrontations have sometimes been initiated by the Muslim community and sometimes by the Christian. In some cases it becomes difficult to distinguish whether conflicts are driven primarily by politics and economics or by religion. Finally, more secular governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, Syria, and elsewhere have often proven to be intolerant of mainstream Islamic organizations or parties that offer an alternative vision of society or are critical of government policies.

From Egypt to Indonesia and Europe to America, many Muslims today work to re-examine their faith in the light of the changing realities of their societies and their lives, developing new approaches to diversity and pluralism. Like Jews and Christians before them, they seek to reinterpret the sources of their faith to produce new religious understandings that speak to religious pluralism in the modern world. The need to redefine traditional notions of pluralism and tolerance is driven by the fact that in countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Malaysia, and Indonesia, Muslims live in multi-religious societies, and also by new demographic realities. Never before have so many Muslim minority communities existed across the world, in particular in America and Europe. The spectre of living as a permanent minority community in non-Muslim countries has heightened the need to address and redefine

questions of pluralism and tolerance. Like Roman Catholicism in the 1960s, whose official acceptance of pluralism at the Second Vatican Council was strongly influenced by American Catholics' experience as a minority, Muslim communities in America and Europe are now struggling with their questions of identity and assimilation.

Reformers emphasize that diversity and pluralism are integral to the message of the Quran, which teaches that God created a world composed of different nations, ethnicities, tribes, and languages:

To each of you We have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people [professing one faith]. But He wished to try and test you by that which He gave you. So try to excel in good deeds. To Him will you all return in the end, when He will tell you how you differed. (5:48)

Many point to the example of the Prophet and his community at Medina. The Constitution of Medina accepted the coexistence of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Muhammad discussed and debated with, and granted freedom of religious thought and practice to, the Jews and Christians, setting a precedent for peaceful and cooperative interreligious relations. Many challenge the exclusivist religious claims and intolerance of Islamic groups who believe that they alone possess the "true" interpretation of Islam and attempt to impose it on other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In many ways, Islam today is at a crossroads as Muslims, mainstream and extremist, conservative and progressive, struggle to balance the affirmation of the truth of their faith with the cultivation of a pluralism and tolerance rooted in mutual respect and understanding.

## **8. Are women second-class citizens in Islam?**

The status of women in Muslim countries has long been looked to as evidence of "Islam's" oppression of women in matters ranging from the freedom to dress as they please to legal rights in divorce. The true picture of women in Islam is far more complex.

The revelation of Islam raised the status of women by prohibiting female infanticide, abolishing women's status as property, establishing women's legal capacity, granting women the right to receive their own dowry, changing marriage from a proprietary to a contractual relationship, and allowing women to retain control over their property and use their maiden name after marriage. The Quran also granted women financial maintenance from their husbands and controlled the husband's free ability to divorce.

The Quran declares that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; man and woman were created to be equal parts of a pair (51:49). The Quran describes the relationship between men and women as one of "love and mercy" (30:21). Men and women are to be like "members of one another" (3:195), like each other's garment (2:187).

Men and women are equally responsible for adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam. Quran 9:71-72 states:

The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another; they enjoin in what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, pay zakat and

obey God and His Messenger. On them will God pour His mercy: for God is exalted in Power, Wise. God has promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein.

This verse draws added significance from the fact that it was the last Quran verse to be revealed that addressed relations between men and women. Some scholars argue on the basis of both content and chronology that this verse outlines the ideal vision of the relationship between men and women in Islam - one of equality and complementarity.

Most Islamic societies have been patriarchal, and women have long been considered to be the culture-bearers within these societies. Prior to the twentieth century, the Quran, *hadith* (traditional stories of the Prophet), and Islamic law were interpreted by men in these patriarchal societies, and these interpretations reflect this environment. Women were not actively engaged in interpreting the Quran, *hadith*, or Islamic law until the twentieth century. Since then, however, reformers have argued that Quranic verses favouring men need reinterpretation in light of the new social, cultural, and economic realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Women have been assigned second-class status in Islam based upon Quran 4:34, which says:

Men have responsibility for and priority over women, since God has given some of them advantages over others and because they should spend their wealth [for the support of women].

However, contemporary scholars have noted that the "priority" referred to in this verse is based upon men's socio-economic responsibilities for women. It does not say women are incapable of managing their own affairs, controlling themselves, or being leaders. Nowhere in the Quran does it say that all men are superior to, preferred to, or better than all women. God's expressed preference for certain individuals in the Quran is based upon their faith, not their gender.

Quranic interpretation is at the centre of many debates. Some note that the Quran itself specifically distinguishes between two types of verses: those that are universal principles and those that were responding to specific social and cultural contexts or questions and were subject to interpretation (3:7). They believe that those verses that assign greater rights to men (such as 2:223 and 2:228) reflect a patriarchal context in which men were dominant and solely responsible for supporting women. Today, rather than being interpreted literally, these verses should be reformulated to reflect the interests of public welfare. Reformers further argue that gender equality is the intended order established by God, because God does not make distinctions based upon gender in matters of faith.

However, Muslims who advocate a literal interpretation of the Quran believe that the gender inequalities it prescribes apply to every time and place as God's revealed social order. Biology is often used as a justification; because only women can bear children, they argue, the man must provide for and maintain the family so that the woman can do her job of bearing and raising children.

Another apparent example of second-class status for women appears in the Quranic stipulation (2:282) that two female witnesses are equal to one male witness. If one female witness errs, the other can remind her of the truth:

And call to witness two of your men; if two men are not available then one man and two women you approve of, so that if one of them is confused, the other would remind her.

Over time, this was interpreted by male scholars to mean that a woman's testimony should always count for one-half of the value of a man's testimony. Contemporary scholars have re-visited this question also, offering several observations about the socio-historical context in which the verse was revealed.

First, the verse specifies that witnessing is relevant in cases of a written transaction, contract, or court case. At the time the Quran was revealed, most women were not active in business or finance. A woman's expertise in these fields would most likely have been less than a man's. Another interpretation argues that the requirement for two female witnesses to equal the testimony of one man was based upon the concern that male family members might pressure a woman into testifying in their favour.

Some contemporary female scholars have argued that the requirement of two female witnesses demonstrates the need for women to have access to education, both secular and religious, in order to receive the training and experience to be equal to men in a business environment—something that is not prohibited by the Quran. In light of the right of women to own property and make their own investments, this interpretation is in keeping with broader Quranic values.

The Quran counsels compassion and tolerance as well as mediation in divorce and stresses that spouses “be generous towards one another” (2:237). Ideally, divorce is a last resort, discouraged rather than encouraged as reflected in a tradition of the Prophet, “of all things permitted, divorce is the most abominable with God.” However, historically this ideal has been undermined and compromised by realities of patriarchal societies so that divorce rather than polygamy has been the more serious social problem. This situation has been compounded by the fact that women have been unable to exercise their rights either because they were unaware of them or because of pressures in a male dominated society. In many Muslim countries, modern reforms have been introduced to limit a husband's rights and expand those of women. However, these reforms have been limited and challenged by more conservative and fundamentalist forces.

The twenty-first century has brought numerous significant reforms for women's rights in both the public and the private spheres. In the overwhelming majority of Muslim countries, women have the right to public education, including at the college level. In many countries, they also have the right to work outside of the home, vote, and hold public office. Particularly notable in recent years have been reforms in marriage and divorce laws.

Among the most important of these reforms have been the abolition of polygamy in some countries and its severe limitation in others, expanded rights for women seeking divorce, including the right to financial compensation, expanded rights for women to participate in contracting their marriage and to stipulate conditions favourable to them in the marriage contract, the requirement that the husband provide housing for his divorced wife and children as long as the wife holds custody over the children, raising the minimum age for marriage for both spouses, prohibiting child marriage, and expanding the rights of women to have custody over their older children.

## 9. Does the Quran condone terrorism?

This is the kind of question no one asks of his or her own religion; we save it for others! Historically, some Muslims have engaged in terrorism and used religion to justify their actions. For many who have little previous knowledge of Islam or Muslims, acts of terrorism committed by extremists, in particular 9/11, raise the question of whether there is something in Islam or the Quran that fosters violence and terrorism.

Islam, like all world religions, neither supports nor requires illegitimate violence. The Quran does not advocate or condone terrorism. The God of the Quran is consistently portrayed as a God of mercy and compassion as well as a just judge. Every chapter of the Quran begins with a reference to God's mercy and compassion; throughout the Quran in many contexts, Muslims are reminded to be merciful and just. Indeed, whenever a pious Muslim begins an activity such as a meal, writing a letter, or driving a car, he or she says, "*Bismillah Al-Rahman al-Rahim*" (In the name of God the Merciful and Compassionate). However, Islam does permit, indeed at times requires, Muslims to defend themselves and their families, religion, and community from aggression.

Like all scriptures, Islamic sacred texts must be read within the social and political contexts in which they were revealed. It is not surprising that the Quran, like the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament, has verses that address fighting and the conduct of war. The world in which the Islamic community emerged was a rough neighbourhood. Arabia and the city of Mecca, in which Muhammad lived and received God's revelation, were beset by tribal raids and cycles of vengeance and vendetta. The broader Near East, in which Arabia was located, was itself divided between two warring superpowers, the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) and the Sasanian (Persian) empires.

The earliest Quranic verses dealing with the right to engage in a "defensive" jihad, or struggle, were revealed shortly after the *hijra* (emigration) of Muhammad and his followers to Medina in flight from their persecution in Mecca. At a time when they were forced to fight for their lives, Muhammad is told:

Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God.' (22:39-40)

The defensive nature of jihad is clearly emphasized in 2:190:

And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors."

At critical points throughout the years, Muhammad received revelations from God that provided guidelines for the jihad.

As the Muslim community grew, questions quickly emerged as to what was proper behaviour during times of war. The Quran provided detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of war: who is to fight and who is exempted (48:17, 9:91), when hostilities must cease (2:192), and how prisoners should be treated (47:4). Most important, verses such as 2:294 emphasized that warfare and the response to violence and aggression must be proportional:

Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind.

However, Quranic verses also underscore that peace, not violence and warfare, is the norm. Permission to fight the enemy is balanced by a strong mandate for making peace:

If your enemy inclines toward peace, then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God. (8:61)

and

Had Allah wished, He would have made them dominate you, and so if they leave you alone and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah allows you no way against them. (4:90)

From the earliest times, it was forbidden in Islam to kill non-combatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were given the promise of immunity unless they took part in the fighting.

But what of those verses, sometimes referred to as the "sword verses", that call for killing unbelievers, such as:

When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush (9:5)?

This is one of a number of Quranic verses that are cited by critics to demonstrate the inherently violent nature of Islam and its scripture. These same verses have also been selectively used (or abused) by religious extremists to develop a theology of hate and intolerance and to legitimate unconditional warfare against unbelievers.

During the period of expansion and conquest, many of the *ulama* (religious scholars) enjoyed royal patronage and provided a rationale for caliphs to pursue their imperial dreams and extend the boundaries of their empires. They said that the "sword verses" abrogated or overrode the earlier Quranic verses that limited jihad to defensive war: in fact, however, the full intent of

When the sacred months have passed,  
slay the idolaters wherever you find them

is missed or distorted when quoted in isolation. For it is followed and qualified by:

But if they repent and fulfil their devotional obligations and pay the *zakat* [the charitable tax on Muslims], then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind (9:5).

The same is true of another often quoted verse:

Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor hold the religion of truth [even if they are] of the People of the Book

which is often cited without the line that follows,

Until they pay the tax with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (9:29)

Throughout history, the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been used and abused, interpreted and misinterpreted, to justify resistance and liberation struggles, extremism and terrorism, holy and unholy wars. Terrorists like Osama bin Laden and others go beyond classical Islam's criteria for a just jihad and recognize no limits but their own, employing any weapons or means. They reject Islamic law's regulations regarding the goals and legitimate means for a valid jihad: that violence must be proportional and that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, that innocent civilians should not be targeted, and that jihad must be declared by the ruler or head of state. Today, individuals and groups, religious and lay, seize the right to declare and legitimate unholy wars of terrorism in the name of Islam.

## 10. What is Islamic law?

*Islam* means submission to the will of God. Therefore Muslims put primary emphasis on obeying God as prescribed in Islamic law. Islam's world view is a vision of individual and communal moral responsibility; Muslims must strive or struggle (*jihad*) in the path (*shariah*) of God in order to implement God's will on earth, expand and defend the Muslim community, and establish a just society. The purpose of Islamic law is to provide the guidelines and requirements for two types of interactions: those between human beings and God, or worship, and those between human beings, or social transactions. Both have private and public dimensions, and both give Islam a prominent public role in Muslim community life.

Throughout history Islamic law has remained central to Muslim identity and practice, for it constitutes the ideal social blueprint for the believer who asks, "What should I do?" It is important to note that elaborating the law was the work of religious scholars (*ulama*), rather than judges, courts, or governments. The law's comprehensive coverage, including regulations ranging from religious rituals to marriage, divorce, and inheritance to setting standards for penal and international law, provided a common code of behaviour and connection for all Muslim societies.

While in Christianity theology is the queen of sciences, in Islam, as in Judaism, law is the primary religious science. There is a strong distinction between Christianity's emphasis on orthodoxy (or correct doctrine or belief) and Islam's emphasis on orthopraxy (or correct action).

Sunni Muslims recognize four official sources to guide the development of Islamic law: the Quran, the *Sunnah* (example) of Muhammad, analogical reasoning (*qiyas*), and consensus (*ijma*). Shii accept the Quran and Sunnah as well as their own collections of traditions of Ali and other Imams whom they regard as supreme authorities and legal interpreters.

The Quranic texts provide moral directives, setting out what Muslims should aspire to as individuals and achieve as a community. The Sunnah of Muhammad (recorded in hundreds of traditions describing the Prophet's private and public life and his individual and communal activities) illustrates Islamic faith in practice and supplements and explains Quranic principles. Qiyas is used to provide parallels between similar situations or principles when no clear text is found in the Quran or Sunnah. For example, a broad prohibition of alcohol is deduced from a specific prohibition of wine, based on the altered mental state that both substances cause. The fourth source of law, *ijma*, originated from Muhammad's reported saying, "My community will never agree on an error". This came to mean that a consensus among religious scholars could determine permissibility of an action. Concern for justice led to the development of other legal principles that guide decision making where there are several potential outcomes. Among them were equity (*istihsan*), which permits exceptions to strict or literal legal reasoning in favour of the public interest (*maslaha*) or human welfare to assure a flexibility enabling judges to arrive at just and equitable decisions. These mechanisms allowed for multiple interpretations of texts based on context, necessity, and consensus.

Differences exist between the major Islamic law schools that reflect the diverse geographic, social, historical, and cultural contexts in which the jurists were writing. In the modern world, Islamic law faces the challenge of distinguishing the divine prescriptions and eternal principles of the Quran from regulations arising from human interpretations in response to specific historical situations. Many ulama, representing the traditional and conservative strains in Islam, continue to equate God's divinely revealed law with the laws in the legal manuals developed by the early law schools. Reformers, however, call for change in laws that are the products of social custom and human reasoning. Reformers say that what is unchanging relates to the Muslim's duties and obligations to God (worship). Laws that relate to relations with one's fellow man (social obligations), which are contingent on social and historical circumstances, are subject to change. Consequently, leaders of Islamic activist movements have reclaimed the right to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to reinterpret Islam to address contemporary issues and meet needs in modern societies.

Legal reforms remain a contested issue in many contemporary Muslim countries. Most Muslim states have Western-inspired legal codes addressing all areas, including the regulation of Islamic banking, which prohibits the use of interest. However, family law, which is viewed as the "heart of the Shariah" and the basis for a strong, Islamically oriented family structure and society, has remained intact in most Muslim countries. Nevertheless, significant reforms have occurred beginning in the twentieth century, most notably to protect and expand women's rights, although some scholars argue that these modern gains have not gone far enough in securing women's Quranically ordained rights.