

# Background of Islam

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## I. HISTORY AND EVENTS

Muhammad, the founder of Islam was born in Mecca (in modern day Saudi Arabia) in A.D. 570. At that time, the religious setting of the Arabian Peninsula was "a rather primitive polydemonism and worship of stones, stars, caves and trees."<sup>1</sup> Around A.D. 610 he came to believe he was receiving visions, which he claimed were from the angel Gabriel. The Islamic scriptures, known as the "Koran," are the "reciting" of the revelations he claimed to have received for the next 22 years.

Muhammad's preaching of these visions in Mecca met with considerable resistance. The reason for this was because Muhammad's message threatened not only popular polytheism, but the political and economic powers. As a result, Muhammad found his first followers among the lower class and those who were ripe for a new social order.

In 622 he traveled to Yathrib, which is now called Medina. This event, called the "Hejira," is viewed as the turning point of Islam. From then on, Islam was no longer just a religion but a distinct political power. In Medina, the community of believers became a state with Muhammad as its religious and political leader.<sup>2</sup>

In 630, Muhammad and his followers took over Mecca without resistance. Muhammad declared the Kaaba (the temple in Mecca) was the holiest shrine in Islam. To this day, Muslims direct their prayers facing the city of Mecca and the shrine of Kaaba.<sup>3</sup>

By the time Muhammad died in 632, Islam had already reached large portions of Asia, Africa and part of Europe. Today, Islam claims over 450 million followers.<sup>4</sup> According to Carmody and Carmody, "Islam is the world's fastest growing religion today. It is a great force in Africa, a middling presence in China and the Soviet Union, a shareholder in the petropolitics of the Middle East, a huge presence in Indonesia, and the religion of more than 6 million North Americans."<sup>5</sup>

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## II. TEACHINGS OF ISLAM

"The faith and practice of Islam are governed by the two great branches of Muslim learning, theology and jurisprudence, to both of which some reference has already been made. Muslim theology (usually called "Tawhid" from its central doctrine of the Unity of the Godhead) defines all that a man should believe, while the law (Shari'a) prescribes everything that he should do. There is no priesthood and no sacraments... Unlike any other system in the world today the Shari'a embraces every detail of human life, from the

prohibition of crime to the use of the toothpick, from the organization of the State to the most sacred intimacies -- or unsavory aberrations -- of family life."<sup>6</sup>

These practices are mainly true of Sunni Islam, not of the divergent sects.

## **A. The Articles of Faith**

These are basic doctrines every Muslim is required to believe.

"O believers, believe in God and His messenger and the Book He has sent down before. Whoso disbelieves in God and his angels and His books, and His Messengers, and the Last Day, has surely gone astray into far error. Those who believe, and then disbelieve, then believe, then disbelieve, and then increase in unbelief--God is not likely to forgive them, neither to guide them on any way." (The Koran, Sura 4:135)

1. God-- There is one true God and His name is "Allah"; Allah is all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Yet, Allah is not a personable, but a transcendent God, for He is so far above man that He is not personally knowable.

"Say: 'He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and was not begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.'"<sup>7</sup>

2. Angels-- The chief angel is Gabriel, who was instrumental in revealing the visions to Muhammad. Different than angels are the jinn (jeanies or demons). The leader of the jinn is Shaitan (Satan).
3. Scripture-- There are four books Muslims consider inspired: the Torah of Moses (first five books of the Old Testament), the Zabur (Psalms of David), the Injil, (the gospel of Jesus) and the Koran. Muslims believe the former three contain error because they have been tampered with by Jews and Christians. Since the Koran is God's most recent and final word, it is viewed as superior to all other writings.

When asked for a miracle to attest his claim to be a prophet, Muhammad would refer to the miracle of the Koran. "Qur'an" (or "Koran") is an Arabic word which means "recite."

"It is seen as a perfect revelation of God, faithful reproduction of an original engraved on a tablet in heaven which has existed from all eternity. Copies of the Qur'an are therefore venerated very highly and are only touched and read by Muslims after ceremonial cleansing. According to Islamic tradition, the Qur'an was originally written on palm leaves, on shoulder-blade bones of camels and on stones.

Following Muhammad's death in A.D. 632, tradition states that the first caliph, Abu Bakr, ordered Muhammad's former secretary, Zaid, to collect and arrange writings. This was done in cooperation with other and finally an authorized

revision of the text was established by Caliph Uthman. Other versions in existence were ordered to be destroyed."<sup>8</sup>

4. Judgment Day --On the last day the dead will be resurrected. Allah will judge each person according to their deeds, sending them to heaven or hell. Heaven is a place of sensual pleasure.

"For many men the best part of the heavenly garden was the *bur*: dark-eyed buxom virgins. In addition to his earthly wife, each male in heaven could expect to have seventy *bur*. They would never be sick, menstruating, pregnant (unless he wished), bad-tempered, or jealous." He would be able to de-flower them at will, and return to find them virgins again.<sup>9</sup>

5. Prophets -- The Koran lists 28 prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah and Jesus. Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet.<sup>10</sup>
6. Predestination --Allah has determined what he pleases and no one can change what he has decreed.<sup>11</sup> This is a sixth article of faith that is considered by many to be part of the five articles.

This strong fatalism has played a central role in Muslim culture, and may be connected to the lack of modern progress that has characterized Muslim countries until recently.

## **B. The Five Pillars of Faith**

1. The Creed (Shahada)-- "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet." This must be stated publicly to become a Muslim. The creed is repeated regularly by worshippers.
2. Prayer (Salat)-- "The practice of prayer (salat) is five times a day (upon rising, at noon, in midafternoon, after sunset, and before retiring). The worshiper must recite the prescribed prayers (the first surah and other selections from the Koran) in Arabic while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca. The Hadith (book of tradition) has turned these prayers into a mechanical procedure of standing, kneeling, hands and face on the ground, and so forth. The call to prayer is sounded by the muezzin (a Muslim crier) from a tower called a minaret which is part of the mosque (the place of public worship)"<sup>12</sup>
3. Almsgiving (Zakat)-- Muslims are required to give one-fortieth of their income to help the poor.
4. Fasting (Ramadan)-- Faithful Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset everyday during this holy month.
5. The Pilgrimage (Hajj)-- The Pilgrimage to Mecca is expected of every Muslim at least once in their lifetime, unless prevented by war or other conditions beyond the worshipper's control. "It is the duty of all men towards God to come to the House a pilgrim, if he is able to make it there."<sup>13</sup> "The Kaaba (in Mecca) is the most sacred place for believers. Much more than a mosque, it is believed to be the place where heavenly power touches the earth directly."<sup>14</sup>

## C. Holy War

There is a sixth religious duty associated with the Five Pillars, Jihad or Holy War.

The Koran teaches:

"Prescribed for you is fighting, though it be hateful to you. Yet it may happen that you will hate a thing which is better for you; and it may happen that you will love a thing which is worse for you; God knows, and you know not.

They will question thee concerning the holy month, and fighting in it. Say: `Fighting in it is a heinous thing, but to bar from God's way, and disbelief in Him, and the Holy Mosque, and to expel its people from it--that is more heinous in God's sight; and persecution is more heinous than slaying. They will not cease to fight with you..." (Sura 2:212).

"So let them fight in the way of God who sell the the present life for the world to come; and whosoever fight in the way of God is slain, or conquers, We shall bring him a mighty wage. How is it with you, that you do not fight in the way of God, and for the men, women, and children who, being abased, say, `Our Lord, bring us forth from this city whose people are evildoers, and appoint to us a protector from Thee, and appoint to us from Thee a helper'? The believers fight in the way of God, and the unbelievers fight in the idols' way. Fight you therefore against the friends of Satan; surely the guile of Satan is ever feeble" (Sura 4:77).

Islamic scholars explain:

"Jihad literally means an effort or striving. It includes a religious war against unbelievers with the object of converting them to Islam or subduing all opposition. (See Koran 9:5; 4:76; 2:214; 8:39.) It is the sacred duty of the Muslim nation to ensure that Islam triumphs over all religions. It is considered a general duty of the nation as a whole, not of individuals. Furthermore, it is a duty which relates only to religion. It has nothing to do with economic exploitation, political repression or imperialism in any form.

In his early career Mohammed spread Islam by teaching and persuasion: several early Meccan suras stated that he was sent only to preach. When, at Medina, he declared that God had allowed him and his followers to defend themselves against infidels, and later when he proclaimed that he had divine leave to attack them and set up the true faith by the sword. Muhammad himself fought in nine battles and ordered many more."<sup>15</sup>

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## III. ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

1. God-- Muslims deny the doctrine of the trinity, considering it polytheistic. They consider it blasphemous to call God "Father" because it implies to them that He had sexual relations.

"This doctrine, which makes God different from His creatures, is strong in Islam. Allah is so different that it makes it (1) difficult to really know very much about him, and (2) unlikely that he is affected by his creatures' attitudes or actions. Although Allah is said to be loving, this aspect of his nature is almost ignored, and his supreme attribute of justice is thought to overrule love. "<sup>16</sup>

2. The Bible-- The Muslims trace their roots to the Bible, but feel free to pick and choose the parts that support their view. Islam, for example, would not consider our New Testament to be the Injil (gospel of Jesus). It is not the words of Jesus, it is others' words about Jesus. His original words have been corrupted and many have been lost. Only the Qur'an is infallible. Muhammad and the Qur'an are that which Islam is to follow.

"It is well known that at many points the Qur'an does not agree with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Therefore, from the Muslim point of view, it follows of necessity that these Scriptures must have been corrupted. Historical evidence makes no impression on the crushing force of the syllogism. So it is, and it can be no other way. The Muslim controversialist feels no need to study evidence in detail. The only valid picture of Jesus Christ is that which is to be found in the pages of the Qur'an."<sup>17</sup>

References to the Bible in the Koran make it evident that Muhammad was confused about the message of Christianity and also what the Old Testament said. In Gleason Archer's study we find that there are blatant anachronisms and historical inaccuracies in the Koran.<sup>18</sup> If God revealed the Koran, he not only contradicted some of his earlier revelation in the Old and New Testaments (including the parts that Muslims consider to be inspired) but he forgot some of the historical details of his own revelation. The distinction between what are Christ's actual words and what was "corrupted" by Christians is completely arbitrary, leaving the Muslim interpreter as the final authority.

As was pointed out earlier, when Muhammad was asked to validate his prophetic claim, he neither claimed to be divine, nor to have been raised from the dead. Rather, he pointed to the miracle of the Qur'an. Unfortunately, the book lends itself neither to falsification nor verification. There is no predictive prophecy such as that used by the God of the Bible to verify his word.

## **The Koran's view of women**

In the Koran's teaching on women, we see a striking difference from the Bible.

"Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear

may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them" (Sura 4:34).

In these few words, God has made known the status of women in relation to men. In relation to other matters the status, rights and duties of women are defined with various degrees of rigidity, but in this the message is clear, finite and complete; it is not a matter for discussion or compromise. The Koran also states:

'Your women are a tillage for you; so come unto your tillage as you wish' (Sura 2:223)."<sup>19</sup>

The following passage is a summary of Islamic attitudes on women given by Denise Carmody:

The status of women in Islam says a great deal about Muslim society. In the Qur'an there is some basis for sexual equality: Reward and punishment in the afterlife depend on deeds, not gender; marriage and conjugal life are precious; women have dowry rights in some divorces, inheritance rights, rights to remarry, and rights to protection in time of pregnancy and nursing. However, women's rights were not equal to those that the Qur'an gave males in either divorce or inheritance. Moreover, the Qur'an does not even consider the possibility that women might assume leadership roles in the community, receive an education equal to that of males, teach law or theology, or engage in polygamy (as males could).

Furthermore, the misogyny latent in most patriarchal religions had dark effects in Muslim society. As late as 1970, an Arab sheik offered the opinion that "educated or not a woman is a woman and the Prophet--God's prayers and peace on him--had said that women are lacking in mind and religion. The tradition placed more women in the Fire than in the Garden, and the prime determinant of their destiny was their treatment of their husbands. In legend Muhammad virtually despised female nature as stupid and irreligious. Its specific defects were menstruation, which interfered with prayer and fasting, and unreliability, which made a woman's witness worth only half a man's in court. Obedience to her husband was the woman's first duty; failure to obey can still get her killed today.

The Muslim woman was considered erotic and empty-headed. Thus she was subject to purdah (seclusion and veiling), polygyny, concubinage and the harem. Women were not to be taught to read and write ("a great calamity"), and they were morally "bent" because they came from Adam's bent rib. Thus, in many men's eyes, they had a dismal existence: "It were best for a girl not to come into existence, but being born she had better be married or buried." Recent Muslims, especially Africans, have defended clitoridectomy and kindred operations, frequently with the following sort of rationale: "Circumcision of women releases them from their bondage to sex, and enables them to fulfill their real destiny to mother."<sup>20</sup>

## **Other Problems with the Koran**

Another reason for suspicion in regard to the Koran's authenticity is cited by Christy Wilson:

"There are alterations and abrogations within the Qur'an itself. For example, Muhammad originally ordered his followers to pray towards Jerusalem (sura 2:150), but when the Jewish people refused to follow him, he changed the direction of prayer to Mecca (sura 2:125). Such alterations are explained by sura 2:106, 'If we abrogate a verse or consign it to oblivion, we offer something better than it or something of equal value.'"<sup>21</sup>

## **The Koran and Jesus Christ**

The Koran denies that Jesus was God, although it describes the virgin birth in a passage similar to Luke 1:26-38 (Sura 3:45-47). Islam does believe Jesus was a sinless prophet though not as great as Muhammad.

"People of the Book, go not beyond the bounds in your religion, and say not as to God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not, 'Three.' Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God."<sup>22</sup>

"They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' For the Messiah said, 'Children of Israel, serve God, my Lord and . . . . They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Third of Three.' No god is there but One God. If they refrain not from what they say, there shall afflict those of them that disbelieve a painful chastisement. Will they not turn to God and pray His forgiveness? God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a Messenger; Messengers before him passed away; his mother was a just woman; they both ate food. Behold, how We make clear the signs to them; then behold, how they perverted are!"<sup>23</sup>

It should be pointed out that Jesus left no room for such a claim (Jn. 8:58; 10:30; 14:6).

## **Regarding the crucifixion, the Koran states:**

" And for their unbelief, and their uttering against Mary a mighty calumny, and for their saying, 'We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God'--yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and they slew him not of a certainty--no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise."<sup>24</sup>

"The death of Christ at the hand of the Jews is rejected by Muslims on a priori grounds, which are absolutely convincing if the major premise is admitted. It is impossible that God should so desert a prophet in the fulfillment of his mission. It would be contrary to His justice to permit the suffering of an innocent on behalf of others. It would be contrary to His omnipotence not to be able to rescue a prophet in danger. Therefore Jesus cannot have been left helpless in the hand of his enemies."<sup>25</sup>

Most Muslims believe Judas died on the cross, not Jesus. Here again, the historical reliability of the New Testament documents are being denied without evidence by a book with less credibility.

## **The Koran on Sin and Salvation**

As we have seen above, the Muslim must earn salvation by good works. This contradicts the Torah (Gen. 15:6), which Islam affirms as being from Allah. Islam cannot explain how a righteous God can accept sinful men without compromising his own moral character. It is also unclear where the cut off line is between a saved Muslim and an unsaved Muslim. It does not require keeping the laws perfectly, but neither does Islam specify how close you have to come to be given eternal life.

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[1](#) Denise L. Carmody and John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center: An Introduction to World Religions (Belmont, California:Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984) p.307

[2](#) Denise L. Carmody & John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center. p.309

[3](#) Lothar Schmalfluss, "Muhammad" in Eerdman's Handbook to the World's Religions, R. Pierce Beaver, et al. (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1983) p.311

[4](#) Josh McDowell, Understanding Non-Christian Religions (San Bernadino:Here's Life Publishers, 1982) p.150

[5](#) Denise L. Carmody & John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center, p.307 The claim that Islam is the fastest growing religion is not universally accepted.

[6](#) Sir Norman Anderson, ed., The World's Religions (Grand Rapids:William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976) p.78

[7](#) The Koran, Sura 112:all

[8](#) Christy Wilson, "The Qur'an" in Eerdman's Handbook to World Religions, (Grand Rapids, MI:William Eerdman Publishing Company, 1982) p.315

[9](#) Denise L. Carmody & John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center, p.333

[10](#) D.S. Roberts, Islam: A Concise Introduction, (San Francisco:Harper and Row, 1981) p.35

[11](#) D.S. Roberts, Islam p.35

[12](#) Kenneth Boa, Cults, World Religions, and You (Wheaton, IL:Victor Books, 1977) p.53

[13](#) The Koran, Sura 3:92

[14](#) D.S. Roberts, Islam, p.43

[15](#) D.S. Roberts, Islam, p.42

[16](#) Sir Norman Anderson, World Religions, p.79

[17](#) Stephen Neill, Christian Faith and Other Faiths (London:Oxford University Press, 1970) p.64

[18](#) Gleason L. Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, (Chicago: Moody Press 1980) p.498-500

[19](#) D.S. Roberts, Islam, p.130

[20](#) Denise L. Carmody & John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center, p.332,333

[21](#) Christy Wilson, "The Qur'an" in Eerdmans, p.315

[22](#) The Koran 4:169

[23](#) The Koran 5:76-79

[24](#) The Koran 4:157

[25](#) Stephen Neill, Christian Faith and Other Faiths, p.66,6

1340 Community Park Dr., Columbus OH 43229 (614) 823-6500  
Send questions or feedback to [webmaster@xenos.org](mailto:webmaster@xenos.org)

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