

# **Introduction To Islam**

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## **Allah**

Islam is the complete submission and obedience to Allah (God). The name Allah (God) in Islam never refers to Muhammad (pbuh), as many Christians may think; Allah is the personal name of God.

### ***What do Muslims believe about Allah?***

- He is the one God, Who has no partner.
- Nothing is like Him. He is the Creator, not created, nor a part of His creation.
- He is All-Powerful, absolutely Just.
- There is no other entity in the entire universe worthy of worship besides Him.
- He is First, Last, and Everlasting; He was when nothing was, and will be when nothing else remains.
- He is the All-Knowing, and All-Merciful, the Supreme, the Sovereign.
- It is only He Who is capable of granting life to anything.
- He sent His Messengers (peace be upon them) to guide all of mankind.
- He sent Muhammad (pbuh) as the last Prophet and Messenger for all mankind.
- His book is the Holy Qur'an, the only authentic revealed book in the world that has been kept without change.
- Allah knows what is in our hearts.

These are some of the basic guidelines Muslims follow in their knowledge of God:

- Eliminate any anthropomorphism (human qualities) from their conception of Allah. His attributes are not like human attributes, despite similar labels or appellations.
- Have unwavering faith in exactly what Allah and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) described Allah to be, no more, no less.
- Eradicate any hope or desire of learning or knowing the modality of His names and attributes.
- Belief totally in all the names and attributes of Allah; one cannot believe in some and disbelieve the others.
- One cannot accept the names of Allah without their associated attributes, i.e. one cannot say He is Al-Hayy - 'The Living' and then say that He is without life.
- Similarity in names (or meanings) does not imply similarity in what is being described (referents). As a robotics arm differs from a human

arm, so the "hand" of Allah is nothing like a human hand, His speech is nothing like human speech, etc.

- Certain words are ambiguous or vague in their meanings, and thus may be susceptible to misinterpretation. Only those meanings that are in accordance with what is specified by Allah and His Prophet (pbuh) are acceptable.

## **Cleanliness**

Islam places great emphasis on cleanliness, in both its physical and spiritual aspects. On the physical side, Islam requires the Muslims to clean their bodies, clothes, houses, and the whole community, and they will be rewarded by God for doing so. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, for example:

*"Removing any harm from the road is charity (that will be rewarded by Allah)." [Bukhari]*

While people generally consider cleanliness a desirable attribute, Islam insists on it, making it an indispensable fundamental of the faith. A Muslim is required to be pure morally and spiritually as well as physically. Through the Qur'an and Sunnah Islam requires sincere believers to sanitize and purify their entire way of life.

In the Qur'an Allah commends those who are accustomed to cleanliness:

*"Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean." [2: 22]*

In Islam the Arabic term for purity is Taharah. Books of Islamic jurisprudence often contain an entire chapter with Taharah as a heading. Allah orders the believer to be tidy in appearance:

*"Keep your clothes clean." [74:4]*

The Qur'an insists that the believer maintain a constant state of purity:

*"Believers! When you prepare for prayer wash your faces, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; rub your heads (with water) and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. If you are ritually impure bathe your whole body..." [5: 6]*

Ritual impurity refers to that resulting from sexual release, menstruation and the forty days after childbirth. Muslims also use water, not paper or anything else to clean after ejecting body wastes.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advised the Muslims to appear neat and tidy in private and in public. Once when returning home from battle he advised his army:

*"You are soon going to meet your brothers, so tidy your saddles and clothes. Be distinguished in the eyes of the people." [Abu Dawud]*

On another occasion he said:

*"Don't ever come with your hair and beard disheveled like a devil." [Al-Tirmidhi]*

And on another:

*"Had I not been afraid of overburdening my community, I would have ordered them to brush their teeth for every prayer." [Bukhari]*

Moral hygiene was not ignored, the Prophet (pbuh) encouraged the Muslims to make a special prayer upon seeing themselves in the mirror:

*"Allah, You have endowed me with a good form; likewise bless me with an immaculate character and forbid my face from touching the Hellfire." [Ahmad]*

And modesty in dress, for men as well as for women, assists one in maintaining purity of thought.

Being charitable is a way of purifying one's wealth. A Muslim who does not give charity (Sadaqah) and pay the required annual Zakah, the 2.5% alms-tax, has in effect contaminated his/her wealth by hoarding that which rightfully belongs to others:

*"Of their wealth take alms so that you may purify and sanctify them." [9: 103]*

All the laws and injunctions given by Allah and His Prophet (pbuh) are pure; on the other hand, man-made laws suffer from the impurities of human bias and other imperfections. Thus any formal law can only be

truly just when it is purified by divine guidance - as elucidated by the Qur'an and the Sunnah - or if it is divinely ordained to begin with - the Shari'ah.

## **Muslims Contribution To Science**

Muslims have always had a special interest in astronomy. The moon and the sun are of vital importance in the daily life of every Muslim. By observing the moon, Muslims determine the beginning and the end of the months in their lunar calendar. By observing the sun the Muslims calculate the times for prayer and fasting. It is also by means of astronomy that Muslims can determine the precise direction of the Qiblah, to face the Ka'bah in Makkah, during prayer. The most precise solar calendar, superior to the Julian, is the Jilali, devised under the supervision of Umar Khayyam.

The Qur'an contains many references to astronomy.

*"The heavens and the earth were ordered rightly, and were made subservient to man, including the sun, the moon, the stars, and day and night. Every heavenly body moves in an orbit assigned to it by God and never digresses, making the universe an orderly cosmos whose life and existence, diminution and expansion, are totally determined by the Creator." [Qur'an 30:22]*

These references, and the injunctions to learn, inspired the early Muslim scholars to study the heavens. They integrated the earlier works of the Indians, Persians and Greeks into a new synthesis. Ptolemy's Almagest (the title as we know it is Arabic) was translated, studied and criticized. Many new stars were discovered, as we see in their Arabic names - ALGOL, Deneb, Betelgeuse, Rigel, Aldebaran. Astronomical tables were compiled, among them the Toledan tables, which were used by Copernicus, Tycho Brahe and Kepler. Also compiled were almanacs - another Arabic term. Other terms from Arabic are zenith, nadir, albedo, azimuth.

Muslim astronomers were the first to establish observatories, like the one built at Mugharah by Hulagu, the son of Genghis Khan, in Persia, and they invented instruments such as the quadrant and astrolabe, which led to advances not only in astronomy but in oceanic navigation, contributing to the European age of exploration.

- ***Geography***

Muslim scholars paid great attention to geography. In fact, the Muslims' great concern for geography originated with their religion. The Qur'an encourages people to travel throughout the earth to see God's signs and patterns everywhere. Islam also requires each Muslim to have at least enough knowledge of geography to know the direction of the Qiblah (the position of the Ka'bah in Makkah) in order to pray five times a day. Muslims were also used to taking long journeys to conduct trade as well as to make the Hajj and spread their religion. The far-flung Islamic empire enabled scholar-explorers to compile large amounts of geographical and climatic information from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Among the most famous names in the field of geography, even in the West, are Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Batuta, renowned for their written accounts of their extensive explorations.

In 1166, Al-Idrisi, the well-known Muslim scholar who served the Sicilian court, produced very accurate maps, including a world map with all the continents and their mountains, rivers and famous cities. Al-Muqdishī was the first geographer to produce accurate maps in color.

It was, moreover, with the help of Muslim navigators and their inventions that Magellan was able to traverse the Cape of Good Hope, and Da Gama and Columbus had Muslim navigators on board their ships.

- ***Humanity***

Seeking knowledge is obligatory in Islam for every Muslim, man and woman. The main sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad's traditions), encourage Muslims to seek knowledge and to be educated, since this is the best way for people to know Allah (God), to appreciate His wondrous creations and be thankful to Him. Muslims were therefore eager to seek knowledge, both religious and secular, and within a few years of Muhammad's mission, a great civilization sprang up and flourished. The outcome is shown in the spread of Islamic universities; Al-Zaytunah in Tunis, and Al-Azhar in Cairo go back more than 1,000 years and are the oldest existing universities in the world. Indeed, they were the models for the first European universities, such as Bologna, Heidelberg, and the Sorbonne. Even the familiar academic cap and gown originated at Al-Azhar University.

Muslims made great advances in many different fields, such as geography, physics, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, pharmacology, architecture, linguistics and astronomy. Algebra and the Arabic numerals were introduced to the world by Muslim scholars. The astrolabe, the quadrant, and other navigational devices and maps were developed by Muslim scholars and played an important role in world progress, most notably in Europe's age of exploration.

Muslim scholars studied the ancient civilizations from Greece and Rome to China and India. The works of Aristotle, Ptolemy, Euclid and others were translated into Arabic. Muslim scholars and scientists then added their own creative ideas, discoveries and inventions, and finally transmitted this new knowledge to Europe, leading directly to the Renaissance. Many scientific and medical treatises, having been translated into Latin, were standard text and reference books as late as the 17th and 18th centuries.

- ***Mathematics***

It is interesting to note that Islam so strongly urges mankind to study and explore the universe. For example, the Holy Qur'an states:

*"We (Allah) will show you (mankind) Our signs/patterns in the horizons/universe and in yourselves until you are convinced that the revelation is the truth." [Qur'an, 14:53]*

This invitation to explore and search made Muslims interested in astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, and the other sciences, and they had a very clear and firm understanding of the correspondences among geometry, mathematics, and astronomy.

The Muslims invented the symbol for zero (The word "cipher" comes from Arabic sifr), and they organized the numbers into the decimal system - base 10. Additionally, they invented the symbol to express an unknown quantity, i.e. variables like x.

The first great Muslim mathematician, Al-Khawarizmi, invented the subject of algebra (al-Jabr), which was further developed by others, most notably Umar Khayyam. Al-Khawarizmi's work, in Latin translation, brought the Arabic numerals along with the mathematics to Europe, through Spain. The word "algorithm" is derived from his name.

Muslim mathematicians excelled also in geometry, as can be seen in their graphic arts, and it was the great Al-Biruni (who excelled also in the fields of natural history, even geology and mineralogy) who established trigonometry as a distinct branch of mathematics. Other Muslim mathematicians made significant progress in number theory.

- ***Medicine***

In Islam, the human body is a source of appreciation, as it is created by Almighty Allah (God). How it functions, how to keep it clean and safe, how to prevent diseases from attacking it or cure those diseases, have been important issues for Muslims.

Prophet Muhammad himself urged people to "take medicines for your diseases", as people at that time were reluctant to do so. He also said,

*"God created no illness, but established for it a cure, except for old age. When the antidote is applied, the patient will recover with the permission of God."*

This was strong motivation to encourage Muslim scientists to explore, develop, and apply empirical laws. Much attention was given to medicine and public health care. The first hospital was built in Baghdad in 706 AC. The Muslims also used camel caravans as mobile hospitals, which moved from place to place.

Since the religion did not forbid it, Muslim scholars used human cadavers to study anatomy and physiology and to help their students understand how the body functions. This empirical study enabled surgery to develop very quickly.

Al-Razi, known in the West as Rhazes, the famous physician and scientist, (d. 932) was one of the greatest physicians in the world in the Middle Ages. He stressed empirical observation and clinical medicine and was unrivaled as a diagnostician. He also wrote a treatise on hygiene in hospitals. Khalaf Abul-Qasim Al-Zahrawi was a very famous surgeon in the eleventh century, known in Europe for his work, (Kitab al-Tasrif).

Ibn Sina (d. 1037), better known to the West as Avicenna, was perhaps the greatest physician until the modern era. His famous book, Al-Qanun fi al-



Tibb, remained a standard textbook even in Europe, for over 700 years. Ibn Sina's work is still studied and built upon in the East.

Other significant contributions were made in pharmacology, such as Ibn Sina's Kitab al-Shifa' (Book of Healing), and in public health. Every major city in the Islamic world had a number of excellent hospitals, some of them teaching hospitals, and many of them were specialized for particular diseases, including mental and emotional. The Ottomans were particularly noted for their building of hospitals and for the high level of hygiene practiced in them.

## **Definition**

The word ISLAM has a two-fold meaning: peace, and submission to God. This submission requires a fully conscious and willing effort to submit to the one Almighty God. One must consciously and conscientiously give oneself to the service of Allah. This means to act on what Allah enjoins all of us to do (in the Qur'an) and what His beloved Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh) encouraged us to do in his Sunnah (his lifestyle and sayings personifying the Qur'an).

Once we humble ourselves, rid ourselves of our egoism and submit totally to Allah, and to Him exclusively, in faith and in action, we will surely feel peace in our hearts. Establishing peace in our hearts will bring about peace in our external conduct as well.

Islam is careful to remind us that it not a religion to be paid mere lip service; rather it is an all-encompassing way of life that must be practiced continuously for it to be Islam. The Muslim must practice the five pillars of the religion: the declaration of faith in the oneness of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh), prayer, fasting the month of Ramadan, alms-tax, and the pilgrimage to Makkah; and believe in the six articles of faith: belief in God, the Holy Books, the prophets, the angels, the Day of Judgment and God's decree, whether for good or ill.

There are other injunctions and commandments which concern virtually all facets of one's personal, family and civic life. These include such matters as diet, clothing, personal hygiene, interpersonal relations, business ethics, responsibilities towards parents, spouse and children, marriage, divorce and inheritance, civil and criminal law, fighting in defense of Islam, relations with non-Muslims, and so much more.

## **Human Rights**

Islam has been from its inception very concerned with issues of human rights. Privacy, freedom, dignity and equality are guaranteed in Islam. The holy Qur'an states clearly:

*"There is no compulsion in religion."*

And there are no reliable reports to confirm the old accusations that when the Muslim armies were expanding into Asia, Africa and Europe the people were put to the sword if they failed to convert to Islam. The best proof is that not only did the Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Hindus in those areas not perish or otherwise disappear, they actually flourished as protected minority, and many individuals rose to prominent positions in the arts, sciences, even in government.

The lives, property and privacy of all citizens in an Islamic state are considered sacred, whether or not the person is Muslim. Non-Muslims have freedom of worship and to practice their religions, including their own family laws and religious courts. They are obliged to pay a different tax (Jizyah) instead of the Zakah, and the state is obligated to provide both protection and government services. Before the modern era it was extremely rare to find a state or government anywhere in the world that was as solicitous of its minorities and their civil rights as the Islamic states.

In no other religion did women receive such a degree of legal and moral equality and personal respect. Moreover, racism and tribalism are incompatible with Islam, for the Qur'an speaks of human equality in the following terms:

*"Mankind! We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may come to know one another. Truly, the most honored of you in God's sight is the greatest of you in piety."*

## **Jesus**

Islam honors all the prophets who were sent to mankind. Muslims respect all prophets in general, but Jesus in particular, because he was one of the prophets who foretold the coming of Muhammad. Muslims, too, await the second coming of Jesus. They consider him one of the greatest of Allah's

prophets to mankind. A Muslim does not refer to him simply as "Jesus," but normally adds the phrase "peace be upon him" as a sign of respect.

No other religion in the world respects and dignifies Jesus as Islam does. The Qur'an confirms his virgin birth (a chapter of the Qur'an is entitled "Mary"), and Mary is considered to have been one of the purest women in all creation. The Qur'an describes Jesus' birth as follows:

*"Behold!" the Angel said, God has chosen you, and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations. Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him, whose name shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and in the Hereafter, and one of those brought near to God. He shall speak to the people from his cradle and in maturity, and he shall be of the righteous. She said: "My Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?" He said: "Even so; God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing, He says to it, 'Be!' and it is." [3:42-47]*

Muslims believe that Jesus was born immaculately, and through the same power which had brought Eve to life and Adam into being without a father or a mother.

*"Truly, the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, and then said to him, 'Be!' and he was." [3:59]*

During his prophetic mission, Jesus performed many miracles. The Qur'an tells us that he said:

*"I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it and it becomes a bird by God's leave. And I heal the blind, and the lepers, and I raise the dead by God's leave." [3:49]*

Muhammad and Jesus, as well as all other prophets, were sent to confirm the belief in ones God. This is referred to in the Qur'an when Jesus is reported as saying that he came:

*"To attest the law which was before me, and to make lawful to you part of what was forbidden you; I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear God and obey me." [3:50]*

Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of Jesus by saying:

*"Whoever believes there is no god but Allah, alone without partner, that Muhammad is His messenger, that Jesus is a servant and messenger of God, His word breathed into Mary and a spirit emanating from Him, and that Paradise and Hell are true, shall be received by God into Heaven. [Bukhari]"*

## **Knowledge**

Islam urges people to read and learn on every occasion. The verses of the Qur'an command, advise, warn, and encourage people to observe the phenomena of nature, the succession of day and night, the movements of stars, the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies. Muslims are urged to look into everything in the universe, to travel, investigate, explore and understand them, the better to appreciate and be thankful for all the wonders and beauty of God's creations. The first revelation to Muhammad showed how much Islam cares about knowledge.

*"Read, in the name of your Lord, Who created..." [96:1]"*

Learning is obligatory for both men and women. Moreover, education is not restricted to religious issues; it includes all fields of knowledge, including biology, physics, and technology. Scholars have the highest status in Islam, second only to that accorded to prophets.

Almost from the very beginnings of the Islamic state Muslims began to study and to master a number of fields of so-called secular learning, beginning with linguistics and architecture, but very quickly extending to mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, medicine, chemistry and philosophy. They translated and synthesized the known works of the ancient world, from Greece, Persia, India, even China. Before long they were criticizing, improving and expanding on that knowledge. Centuries before the European Renaissance there were Muslim "Renaissance" men, men who were simultaneously explorers, scientists, philosophers, physicians and poets, like Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Umar Khayyam, and others.

## Main Pillars

- *Shahadah*

The first pillar of Islam is that a Muslim believe and declare his faith by saying the Shahadah (lit. 'witness'), also known as the Kalimah:

*La ilaha ila Allah; Muhammadur-rasul Allah. 'There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.'*

This declaration contains two parts. The first part refers to God Almighty, the Creator of everything, the Lord of the Worlds; the second part refers to the Messenger, Muhammad (pbuh) a prophet and a human being, who received the revelation through the Archangel Gabriel, and taught it to mankind.

By sincerely uttering the Shahadah the Muslim acknowledges Allah as the sole Creator of all, and the Supreme Authority over everything and everyone in the universe. Consequently the Muslim closes his/her heart and mind to loyalty, devotion and obedience to, trust in, reliance on, and worship of anything or anyone other than Allah. This rejection is not confined merely to pagan gods and goddesses of wood and stone and created by human hands and imaginations; this rejection must extend to all other conceptions, superstitions, ideologies, ways of life, and authority figures that claim supreme devotion, loyalty, trust, love, obedience or worship. This entails, for example, the rejection of belief in such common things as astrology, palm reading, good luck charms, fortune-telling and psychic readings, in addition to praying at shrines or graves of "saints", asking the dead souls to intercede for them with Allah. There are no intercessors in Islam, nor any class of clergy as such; a Muslim prays directly and exclusively to Allah.

Belief in the prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh) entails belief in the guidance brought by him and contained in his Sunnah (traditions of his sayings and actions), and demands of the Muslim the intention to follow his guidance faithfully. Muhammad (pbuh) was also a human being, a man with feelings and emotions, who ate, drank and slept, and was born and died, like other men. He had a pure and upright nature, extraordinary righteousness, and an unwavering faith in Allah and commitment to Islam, but he was not divine. Muslims do not pray to him, not even as an intercessor, and Muslims abhor the terms "Mohamedan" and "Mohamedanism".

- ***Salah (Prayer)***

Prayer (Salah), in the sense of worship, is the second pillar of Islam. Prayer is obligatory and must be performed five times a day. These five times are dawn (Fajr), immediately after noon (Dhuhr), mid-afternoon ('Asr), sunset (Maghrib), and early night (Isha'). Ritual cleanliness and ablution are required before prayer, as are clean clothes and location, and the removal of shoes. One may pray individually or communally, at home, outside, virtually any clean place, as well as in a mosque, though the latter is preferred. Special is the Friday noon prayer, called Jum'ah. It, too, is obligatory and is to be done in a mosque, in congregation. It is accompanied by a sermon (Khutbah), and it replaces the normal Dhuhr prayer.

There is no hierarchical clerical authority in Islam, no priests or ministers. Prayers are led by any learned person who knows the Qur'an and is chosen by the congregation. He (or she, if the congregation is all women) is called the imam. There is also no minimum number of congregates required to hold communal prayers. Prayer consists of verses from the Qur'an and other prayers, accompanied by various bodily postures - standing, bowing, prostrating and sitting. They are said in Arabic, the language of the revelation, though personal supplications (Du'ah) can be offered in one's own language. Worshippers face the Qiblah, the direction of the Ka'bah in the city of Makkah.

The significance of prayer lies in one's maintaining a continuous link to God five times a day, which helps the worshipper avoid misdeeds if he/she performs the prayers sincerely. In addition it promotes discipline, God-consciousness and placing one's trust in Allah alone, and the importance of striving for the Hereafter. When performed in congregation it also provides a strong sense of community, equality and brotherhood/sisterhood.

- ***Sawm (Fasting)***

The fourth pillar of Islam is fasting. Allah prescribes daily fasting for all able, adult Muslims during the whole of the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar, beginning with the sighting of the new moon. Exempted from the fast are the very old and the insane. On the physical side, fasting is from first light of dawn until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations. On the moral, behavioral side, one must abstain from lying, malicious gossip, quarreling and trivial nonsense.

Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are menstruating, pregnant, or nursing are permitted to break the fast, but must make up an equal number of days later in the year. If physically unable to do so, they must feed a needy person for each day missed. Children begin to fast (and to observe the prayers) from puberty, although many start earlier.

Although fasting is beneficial to the health, it is regarded principally as a method of self-purification. By cutting oneself off from worldly pleasures and comforts, even for a short time, the fasting person gains true sympathy for those who go hungry regularly, and achieves growth in his spiritual life, learning discipline, self-restraint, patience and flexibility.

In addition to the fast proper, one is encouraged to read the entire Qur'an. In addition, special prayers, called Tarawih, are held in the mosque every night of the month, during which a whole section of the Qur'an (Juz') is recited, so that by the end of the month the entire Qur'an has been completed. These are done in remembrance of the fact that the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was begun during Ramadan.

During the last ten days - though the exact day is never known and may not even be the same every year - occurs the Night of Power (Laylat al-Qadr). To spend that night in worship is equivalent to a thousand months of worship, i.e. Allah's reward for it is very great.

On the first day of the following month, after another new moon has been sighted, a special celebration is made, called 'Id al-Fitr. A quantity of staple food is donated to the poor (Zakat al-Fitr), everyone has bathed and put on their best, preferably new, clothes, and communal prayers are held in the early morning, followed by feasting and visiting relatives and friends.

There are other fast days throughout the year. Muslims are encouraged to fast six days in Shawwal, the month following Ramadan, Mondays and Thursdays, and the ninth and tenth, or tenth and eleventh of Muharram, the first month of the year. The tenth day, called Ashurah, is also a fast day for the Jews (Yom Kippur), and Allah commanded the Muslims to fast two days to distinguish themselves from the People of the Book.

While fasting per se is encouraged, constant fasting, as well as monasticism, celibacy, and otherwise retreating from the real world, are condemned in Islam. Fasting on the two festival days, 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha, the feast of the Hajj, is strictly forbidden.

- ***Zakah (Charity)***

The third pillar of Islam is the alms-tax (Zakah). It is a tax on wealth, payable on various categories of property, notably savings and investments, produce, inventory of goods, salable crops and cattle, and precious metals, and is to be used for the various categories of distribution specified by Islamic law. It is also an act of purification through sharing what one has with others.

The rationale behind this is that Muslims believe that everything belongs to God, and wealth is held by man as a trust. This trust must be discharged, moreover, as instructed by God, as that portion of our wealth legally belongs to other people and must be given to them. If we refuse and hoard this wealth, it is considered impure and unclean. If, for example one were to use that wealth for charity or to finance one's pilgrimage to Makkah, those acts would also be impure, invalid, and of course UN-rewarded. Allah says:

*"Of their wealth, take alms so you may purify and sanctify them."*  
[9:103]

The word Zakah means purification and growth. Our possessions are purified by setting aside that portion of it for those in need. Each Muslim calculates his or her own Zakah individually.

For most purposes this involves the payment each year of 2.5% of one's capital, provided that this capital reaches a certain minimum amount that which is not consumed by its owner. A generous person can pay more than this amount, though it is treated and rewarded as voluntary charity (Sadaqah). This amount of money is provided to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, and can be used in many useful projects for the welfare of the community.

Historically the pillar of Zakah became mandatory on Muslims from the second year after the Hijrah, 622 CE. It is mentioned more than thirty times in the Qur'an, usually in the same breath as Salah. So important is this pillar that one is not considered a part of the Islamic brotherhood if one ignores this obligation.

- ***Hajj (Pilgrimage)***

The fifth pillar of Islam is to make a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah, in Saudi Arabia, at least once in one's lifetime. This pillar is obligatory for every



Muslim, male or female, provided that he/she is physically and financially able to do so. Prerequisites for performing the Hajj are to be a Muslim, to be free, to be an adult or mature enough, to be of sound mind, and to have the ability to afford the journey and maintain one's dependents back home for the duration. The reward for the Hajj is nothing less than Paradise.

The Hajj is the ultimate form of worship, as it involves the spirit of all the other rituals and demands of the believer great sacrifice. On this unique occasion, nearly two million Muslims from all over the globe meet one another in a given year. Regardless of the season, pilgrims wear special clothes (Ihram) - two, very simple, UN-sewn white garments - which strips away all distinctions of wealth, status, class and culture; all stand together and equal before Allah (God).

The rites of Hajj, which go back to the time of Prophet Abraham who built the Ka'bah, are observed over five or six days, beginning on the eighth day of the last month of the year, named Dhul-Hijjah (pilgrimage). These rites include circumambulating the Ka'bah (Tawwaf), and going between the mountains of Safa and Marwah, as Hajar (Abraham's wife) did during her search for water for her son Isma'il. Then the pilgrims stand together on the wide plain of Arafah and join in prayers for God's forgiveness, in what is often thought of as a preview of the Last Judgment. The pilgrims also cast stones at a stone pillar which represents Satan. The pilgrimage ends with a festival, called 'Id al-Adha, which is celebrated with prayers, the sacrifice of an animal, and the exchange of greetings and gifts in Muslim communities everywhere.

## **Muhammad**

Muhammad (pbuh) was an illiterate but wise and well-respected man who was born in Makkah in the year 570 C.E., at a time when Christianity was not yet fully established in Europe. His first years were marked by the deaths of his parents. Since his father died before his birth, his uncle, Abu Talib, from the respected tribe of Quraysh, raised him. As Muhammad (pbuh) grew up, he became known for his truthfulness, generosity and sincerity, so that he was sought after for his ability to arbitrate in disputes. His reputation and personal qualities also led to his marriage, at the age of twenty-five, to Khadijah, a widow whom he had assisted in business. Thenceforth, he became an important and trusted citizen of Makkah. Historians describe him as calm and meditative.

Muhammad (pbuh) never felt fully content to be part of a society whose values he considered to be devoid of true religious significance. It became his habit to retreat from time to time to the cave of Hira', to meditate near the summit of Jabal al-Nur, the "Mountain of Light", near Makkah.

At the age of 40, while engaged in one such meditative retreat, Muhammad (pbuh) received his first revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel. This revelation, which continued for twenty-three years, is known as the Qur'an, the faithful recording of the entire revelation of God. The first revelation read:

*"Recite: In the name of your Lord Who created man from a clot (of blood). Recite: Your Lord is Most Noble, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know." [96:1-5]*

It was this reality that he gradually and steadily came to learn and believe, until he fully realized that it is the truth.

His first convert was Khadijah, whose support and companionship provided necessary reassurance and strength. He also won the support of some of his relatives and friends. Three basic themes of the early message were the majesty of the one, unique God, the futility of idol worship, the threat of judgment, and the necessity of faith, compassion and morality in human affairs. All these themes represented an attack on the crass materialism and idolatry prevalent in Makkah at the time. So when he began to proclaim the message to others the Makkans rejected him. He and his small group of followers suffered bitter persecution, which grew so fierce that in the year 622 C.E., God gave them the command to emigrate. This event, the Hijrah (migration), in which they left Makkah for the city of Madinah, some 260 miles to the north, marked the beginning of a new era and thus the beginning of the Muslim calendar. During his suffering, Muhammad (pbuh) drew comfort from the knowledge revealed to him about other prophets, such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, each of whom had also been persecuted and tested.

After several years and some significant battles, the Prophet and his followers were able to return to Makkah, where they forgave their enemies and established Islam definitively. By the time the Prophet died, at the age of 63, the greater part of Arabia had accepted Islam, and within a century of his death, Islam had spread as far west as Spain and as far east as China. It was clear that the message was not limited to Arabs; it was for the whole of humanity.

The Prophet's sayings (Hadith), are also believed to be revelation. The number of sayings collected by his followers and scholars is about 10,000. Some typical examples of his sayings are as follows:

*"To pursue knowledge is obligatory on every believing (man and woman)." [Ibn Majah]*

*"Removing a harmful thing from the road is charity." [Bukhari, Muslim]*

*"Those who do not show tenderness and love cannot expect to have tenderness shown to them." [Bukhari]*

*"Adore Allah (God) as though you see Him; even if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you." {Bukhari, Muslim}*

Although Muhammad is deeply loved, revered and emulated by Muslims as God's final messenger, he is not an object of worship.

## **Other Religions**

Islam is the religion of all prophets. Muslims believe that all the prophets were sent to their respective peoples from God (Allah). They all had the same mission and message - guiding people to the right path.

The three revealed, monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, go back to Abraham. The prophets of these religions were directly descended from him - Moses, Jesus and others from Isaac, but Muhammad from Isma'il. It was Prophet Abraham who had established the settlement which today is the city of Makkah, and with his son Isma'il built the Ka'bah, which Muslims all over the world face when they pray.

Christians and Jews hold a special place in Islam. They are called the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab), since the original Torah and Gospel were also divinely revealed and they shared in the prophetic tradition. Islamic states have nearly always shown their religious minorities tolerance and respect and those communities flourished under Islamic rule. God says:

*"...[T]hose who believe (in the message of Islam), and the Jews, the Sabaeans, and the Christians - all those who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and act righteously - no fear shall come upon them..." [5:69]*

Setting up the Islamic state in Madinah, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) further warned:

*"Whoever oppresses any Dhimmi (non-Muslim citizen of the Islamic state), I shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgment."*

In setting up the Islamic state, Prophet Muhammad made it inclusive of the Arabian Jews and Christians. Their persons, properties, churches and synagogues were protected, freedom of worship was guaranteed, and they controlled their own community affairs with their own civil and religious laws and courts. For most of the first century of the Islamic state, in fact, the majority of the citizens were Christians, enjoying peace and liberty such as they had not had even under Christian Rome or Byzantium.

The Jews, from the very beginning in Madinah, and later everywhere else, were lifted from the burden of being clients of individual Arab tribes to being citizens of the state, thus freeing them to focus on their Jewishness. When the Islamic state expanded outside Arabia the Jews of other lands were treated for the first time as liberated citizens. Judaism flourished as never before, with Jews even serving in Muslim armies and administrations while their culture bloomed in the arts, sciences, medicine and philosophy. This knowledge they transmitted to their brethren in the hostile climate of Christian Europe. Even Jewish mysticism originated under the influence of sufism and spread to northern Europe.

When Islam reached Persia the concept of People of the Book was extended to the Zoroastrians as well. Later, when the Muslims conquered parts of India and encountered Buddhists and Hindus, who appeared to worship idols, the question was referred to the ulema (council of scholars), who judged that even they could have the same protected status as the Jews and Christians, so long as they did not fight Islam and they paid the Jizyah tax.

## **Peace**

"Peace" is the most common word on a Muslim's tongue. Whenever two people meet, they exchange greetings, wishing each other peace: "Peace be upon you." But peace cannot prevail except through justice. Since the concept of justice may differ from one man to another, or from one society to another, Muslims believe that real justice is that which is specified by Allah (God).

Islam permits fighting in self-defense, in defense of the religion, or by those who have been expelled forcibly from their homes. At the same time, Islam requires one to treat one's enemy mercifully. It lays down strict rules of combat which include prohibitions against harming civilians and against destroying crops, trees, and livestock. Islam also requires that if an enemy declares his desire to end hostilities and seek peace, the Muslims must do the same.

The concept of Jihad (struggling in the cause of Allah) is stated in the Qur'an. Allah said: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors." [2:19] Jihad is never to be waged to force anybody to choose a particular religion. On the contrary, it is to be waged to protect his right to choose freely. Therefore, if there is a force in the world that tries to prevent a person from practicing this right, Jihad may lead to fighting the force that is trying to prevent him from exercising free will.

## **Relevance**

Since Islam is the last religion revealed by Allah, it possesses some elements that make it unique. One of these is its relevance for human beings regardless of place and time.

This means that Islam - submission to God - is a comprehensive institution which includes all the guidelines necessary for all aspects of life. Therefore, the best way to understand Islam is to look at it as more than a religion - as a complete way of life. In other words, it is a system which regulates every aspect of life, dealing with all issues - social, economic, educational, judicial, health, and even military. Thus, it is suitable for all human beings and for all times, since it is the final religion. Islamic law aims to achieve five goals for human beings in life: protecting the religion, protecting one's self, protecting one's possessions, protecting one's mind, and protecting one's offspring.

Therefore, God (Allah) decided on two main domains of law:

1. If the domain always requires change and progress, Allah legislated comprehensive yet flexible rules and gave people the chance to create and develop the necessary laws to satisfy the specific needs of a certain period of time. For example, in the

rule of consultation (Shura), Allah decided that it should be the general rule for any government; however, its form and style are left open for people to choose and decide according to their needs.

2. If the domain does not require or lend itself to change or progress, Allah legislated fixed and detailed laws that govern all issues related to a specific area. Thus, there is no way for man to change or develop those laws, which were made for the welfare of all mankind. For example, the area of worshipping God contains fixed details which cannot be changed at all. These regard prayer, fasting, making pilgrimage, etc. Another example is in family matters, such as the laws of marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

To show how Islam cares for the environment, one can cite the many laws that protect the environment. About fourteen hundred years ago. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:

*"The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you as His stewards over it. He sees how you acquit yourselves."*

Muhammad showed how important plants and trees are by saying:

*"Whoever plants a tree and looks after it with care until it matures and becomes productive will be rewarded in the Hereafter."*

Even in the territory of an enemy, Islam's care for plants, animals, and trees is profound. Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, or successor, to Muhammad (pbuh), instructed his troops that he was sending into battle not to cut down any trees or kill any animals except for food.

These are but a few examples of how Islam remains relevant in the modern world.

## **Two Sources**

- ***Qur'an***

The ultimate manifestation of God's grace for man, the ultimate wisdom, and the ultimate beauty of expression: in short, the word of God. This is how the German scholar, Muhammad Asad, once described the Qur'an. If one were to ask any Muslim to depict it, most likely they would offer

similar words. The Qur'an, to the Muslim, is the irrefutable, inimitable Word of God. It was revealed by God Almighty, through the instrument of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) himself had no role in authoring the Qur'an, he was merely a human secretary, repeating the dictates of the Divine Creator:

*"He (Muhammad) does not speak of his own desire. It is no less than an Inspiration sent down to him." [53:3-4]*

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), over a period of twenty-three years. It is composed in a style so unique, that it cannot be deemed either poetry or prose, but somehow a mixture of both. The Qur'an is inimitable; it cannot be simulated or copied, and God Almighty challenges mankind to pursue such an endeavor if he thinks he can:

*"Or do they say he forged it? Say: Bring then a chapter like unto it, and call (to your aid) anyone you can, beside God, if it be you speak the truth." [10:38].*

The Qur'an's language is indeed sublime, its recitation moving, as one non-Muslim scholar noted, it was like other cadence of my heartbeat. Due to its unique style of language, the Qur'an is not only highly readable, but also relatively easy to remember. This latter aspect has played an important role not only in the Qur'an's preservation, but in the spiritual life of Muslims as well. God Himself declares,

*"And We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to understand and remember; then is there anyone that will receive admonition?" [54:17]*

One of the most important characteristics of the Qur'an is that it remains today, the only holy book which has never changed; it has remained free from any and all adulterations. Sir William Muir noted, "There is probably in the world no other book which has remained (fourteen) centuries with so pure a text." The Qur'an was written down during the lifetime and under the supervision of the Prophet, who himself was illiterate, and it was canonized shortly after his death by a rigorous method which scrutinized both written and oral traditions. Thus its authenticity is unblemished, and its preservation is seen as the fulfillment of God's promise:

*"We have, without doubt, sent down the Message, and We will assuredly guard it from corruption." [15:9]*

The Qur'an is a book which provides the human being the spiritual and intellectual nourishment he/she craves. Its major themes include the oneness of God, the purpose of human existence, faith and God-consciousness, the Hereafter and its significance. The Qur'an also lays a heavy emphasis upon reason and understanding. In these spheres of human understanding, the Qur'an goes beyond just satisfying the human intellect; it causes one to reflect on implications. There are Qur'anic challenges and prophecies. One of the most exciting fields in recent years has been the discovery that, of the significant amount of scientific information in the Qur'an, including the event of the Big Bang, embryological data, and other information concerning astronomy biology, etc., there is not a single statement that has not been borne out by modern discoveries. In short, the Qur'an fulfills the heart, the soul, and the mind.

Perhaps the best description of the Qur'an was given by Ali, the cousin of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) when he expounded upon it as,

*"The Book of God. In it is the record of what was before you, the judgment of what is among you, and the prophecies of what will come after you. It is decisive, not a case for levity. Whoever is a tryant and ignores the Qur'an will be destroyed by God. Whoever seeks guidance from other than it will be misguided. The Qur'an is the unbreakable bond of connection with God; it is the remembrance full of wisdom and the straight path. The Qur'an does not become distorted by tongues. nor can it be deviated by caprices; it never dulls from repeated study; scholars will always want more of it. The wonders of the Qur'an are never ending. Whoever speaks from it will speak the truth, whoever rules with it will be just, and whoever holds fast to it will be guided to the straight path."*  
[Al-Tirmidhi]

- **Sunnah**

The term Sunnah comes from the root word sanna, which means to pave the way or make a path easily passable, such that it becomes a commonly followed way by everyone afterwards. Thus sunnah can be used to describe a street or road or path on which people, animals, and cars travel. Additionally, it can apply to a prophetic way, i.e. the law that they brought and taught as an explanation or further clarification of a divinely revealed book. Normally, the prophetic way includes references to his sayings, actions, physical features and character traits.



From the Islamic standpoint, Sunnah refers to anything narrated or related about the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), authentically traced to him regarding his speech, actions, traits, and silent approvals, before and after the revelation.

Each narration is composed of two parts: the isnad and the matn. The isnad refers to a chain of people who narrated a particular narration. The matn is the actual text of the narration. The isnad must comprise upright and sincere individuals whose integrity is unquestionable.

### ***The Speech of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)***

The speech of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) refers to his sayings. For example, he said:

*"Actions are judged by their intentions; everyone will be rewarded according to his/her intention. So whoever migrates for the sake of Allah and His Prophet then his migration will be noted as a migration for the sake of Allah and His Prophet. Conversely, one who migrates only to obtain something worldly or to marry a woman, then his migration will be worth what he had intended."*  
[Bukhari].

*The Prophet (pbuh) also said: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should say something good or keep quiet."*

The above two accounts clearly show that the Prophet (pbuh) spoke these words. Consequently, these are known as his speech.

### ***The Actions of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)***

His actions pertain to anything he did, as authentically reported by the Sahabah (Companions). For instance, Hudhayfah reported that whenever the Prophet (pbuh) got up at night, he would clean his teeth with a tooth-stick. Also A'ishah reported that the Prophet (pbuh) loved to do everything starting with the right side - putting on shoes, walking, cleaning himself, and in all his affairs generally.

### ***The Silent Approvals of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)***

His silent approvals on different issues meant his not opposing or minding what he saw, heard or knew of the actions or sayings of his Companions.

On one occasion, for example, the Prophet (pbuh) learned of actions of some of his Companions from other Companions. Soon after the battle of Khandaq, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) gave the order to the Companions to move quickly to surround the tribe of Banu Quraydah, encouraging them to hurry so that perhaps they would pray 'Asr (the late afternoon prayer) there. Some of the Companions of the Prophet (pbuh) responded immediately and left without praying 'Asr. They arrived after sunset, pitched camp and prayed 'Asr- after sunset. At the same time another group of Companions formulated their judgment differently. They thought that the Prophet (pbuh) was merely encouraging them to hasten to their destination, rather than to delay 'Asr until after sunset. Consequently, they decided to stay in Madinah until they had prayed 'Asr. Immediately thereafter, they hastened towards the tribe of Banu Quraydhah. When the Prophet (pbuh) was told of how each group responded differently to his announcement, he (pbuh) affirmed both judgments.

### ***Physical and Moral Traits of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)***

Everything authentically narrated concerning the Prophet's complexion and the rest of his physical features is also included in the definition of sunnah. Umm Ma'bad described what she saw of the great Prophet (pbuh). She said:

*"I saw a man, his face radiant with a bright glow, not too thin or too fat, elegant and handsome. His eyes had a deep black hue with long eyelashes. His voice was pleasant and his neck long. He had a thick beard. His long black eyebrows were beautifully arched and connected to each other. In silence, he remained dignified, commanding utmost awe and respect. When he spoke, his speech was brilliant. Of all people he was the most handsome and the most pleasant, even when approaching from a distance. In person, he was unique and most admirable. Graced with eloquent logic, his speech was moderate. His logical arguments were well organized as though they were a string of gems. He was not too tall or too short, but exactly in between. Among three, he appeared the most radiant and most vibrant. He had companions who affectionately honored him. When he spoke, they listened to him attentively. When he gave orders, they were quick to execute them. They rallied around him guarding him. He never frowned or spoke frivolously." [Hakim]*

Along with his physical features, his Companions also described his habits and behavior with people. Once Anas reported:

*"I served the Prophet of Allah (pbuh) for ten years. Never once did he so much as express any bit of displeasure nor did he ever ask 'Why did you do it?' for something I did or 'Why didn't you do it?' for something I didn't do."*

From the above we can clearly see that when the term sunnah appears in a general context referring to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) it comprises anything narrated about the Prophet (pbuh) and authentically traced to him. Once a Muslim learns of the authenticity of any narration, he/she is obliged to follow and obey it accordingly. Such obedience is mandated by Allah as He declares

*"...and obey Allah and His Prophet and do not turn away when you hear (him speak)." [8:20]*

At times, some Muslims are perplexed when people say that sunnah is something only recommended and is not mandatory. Thus they conclude that we are only required to follow the Qur'an and not the Sunnah. Such an argument results from a gross misunderstanding. Scholars of Islamic jurisprudence use the term sunnah to denote what is authentically established of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in deeds which were not subsequently made mandatory by Allah.

They further hold that this includes any saying of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) where he encourages Muslims to do a particular task and compliments those who imbibe such attributes. Thus to them, the term sunnah denotes what is authentically established of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in deeds which he did voluntarily and which were not subsequently made mandatory by Allah. They further hold that this includes any saying of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) where he encourages Muslims to do a particular task and compliments those who imbibe such attributes. Thus to them, the term sunnah refers to what is "recommended" and is not mandatory (fard or wajib).

From the above, we can clearly see that the term sunnah takes on different meanings when used by different Islamic disciplines.

## **Tolerance**

Freedom of belief is guaranteed in Islam. It should be very clear that Islam tolerates not only other faiths but even its enemies. This is stated clearly in the Qur'an:

*"God forbids you not with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them, for God loves those who are just." [60:8]*

It is one function of Islamic law to protect the privileged status of minorities, and this is why non-Muslim places of worship have flourished all over the Islamic world. Islamic law also permits non-Muslim minorities to set up their own courts to implement family laws drawn up by the minorities themselves and to govern their own affairs.

History provides many examples of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths. When the great leader and second Caliph, Umar, entered Jerusalem in the year 634, Islam guaranteed freedom of worship to all religious communities in the city. In fact, so careful was Umar in setting an example for his people that he not only went to a church to pray, he prayed outside in the courtyard, lest his followers after his death be tempted to convert the church into a mosque.

Islam teaches that the closest to Allah and the most beloved of Allah are those who are the best in piety. Thus all people, male and female, and regardless of race, color, nationality or ethnicity, are considered and treated as equal before Allah and before the law. This concept of tolerance did not reach the West even in theory until the 18th century, and in practice not until the 20th century.

## **Universality**

In the Qur'an, Allah says:

*"We have sent you (Muhammad) as a mercy for all nations."  
[21:107]*

Thus Islam is not restricted to any particular race or nation, as many other religions are, but is universal, meaning that its message applies to all humanity, at all times, in all places.

Since Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the last prophet and messenger, his message applies to all future generations. All previous prophets, from Adam, Noah and Abraham to Moses and Jesus, were also Muslims:

*"Not a single messenger did We send before you without this inspiration sent by Us to him - that there is no god but I, therefore worship and serve Me." [21:25]*

Since the Qur'an is the final testament, with every word and every letter unadulterated and unchanged, and protected by Allah from any change or tampering, it is the final revelation, and no other law will ever supersede it.

It applies, moreover, to every aspect of one's daily life, including personal, social, legal, economic, political, even military. Furthermore, Islam affects every part of the individual - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

## **Women**

At a time when the rest of the world, from Greece and Rome to India and China, considered women as no better than children or even slaves, with no rights whatsoever, Islam acknowledged women's equality with men in a great many respects. The Qur'an states:

*"And among His signs is this: that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect." [30:21]*

Prophet Muhammad said:

*"The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manners and kindest to his wife." [Abu Dawud]*

Muslims believe that Adam and Eve were created from the same soul. Both were equally guilty of their sin and fall from grace, and both were forgiven by Allah. Many women in Islam have had high status; consider the fact that the first person to convert to Islam was Khadijah, the wife of Muhammad, whom he both loved and respected. His favorite wife after Khadijah's death, A'isha, became renowned as a scholar and one of the greatest sources of Hadith literature. Many of the female Companions accomplished great deeds and achieved fame, and throughout Islamic history there have been famous and influential scholars, jurists and mystics.

With regard to education, both women and men have the same rights and obligations. This is clear in Prophet Muhammad's saying:

*"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every believer." [Ibn Majah]*

This implies men and women.

A woman is to be treated as God has endowed her, with rights, such as to be treated as an individual, with the right to own and dispose of her own property and earnings, enter into contracts, even after marriage. She has the right to be educated and to work outside the home if she so chooses. She has the right to inherit from her father, mother, and husband. A very interesting point to note is that in Islam, unlike any other religion, a woman can be an imam, a leader of communal prayer, for a group of women.

A Muslim woman also has obligations. All the laws and regulations pertaining to prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, doing good deeds, etc., apply to women, albeit with minor differences having mainly to do with female physiology.

Before marriage, a woman has the right to choose her husband. Islamic law is very strict regarding the necessity of having the woman's consent for marriage. A marriage dowry is given by the groom to the bride for her own personal use. She keeps her own family name, rather than taking her husband's. As a wife, a woman has the right to be supported by her husband even if she is already rich. She also has the right to seek divorce and custody of young children. She does not return the dowry, except in a few unusual situations.

Despite the fact that in many places and times Muslim communities have not always adhered to all or even many of the foregoing in practice, the ideal has been there for 1,400 years, while virtually all other major civilizations did not begin to address these issues or change their negative attitudes until the 19th centuries, and there are still many contemporary civilizations which have yet to do so.