

Dr. Culture's® Guide to Understanding Islam

*“The less you know about a culture,
the more dependent you become on
stereotyping, word-of-mouth and
other ill-informed sources that only blur and confuse.”*

Dr. Culture's Cultural Competency Rule #1

In western religion, many devote their lives to the study of the religion they feel is the “true” religion. Islam is no different. The study of Islam fills libraries and consumes lifetimes and in many regions of the Middle East you can easily become involved in a discussion of religion/Islam that goes on for hours. This guide is intended to be just that; an introduction to a religion and resulting way of life with similarities to our own experiences as well as differences. The differences are not insurmountable. Moreover, if one can understand the part Islam plays in the daily lives of Muslims, much of the difficulty and misunderstandings simply melt away. Does this mean you have to accept or agree with Islamic outlooks, etc? No. But, to be culturally competent asks that you learn about many different areas of a region or culture and religion is one those.

Islam is both a religion and a way of life. There is no separation of Church and State, as we in the US understand it. For instance, the Saudi Flag is Green (The color of The Prophet) and has Arabic script on it. The content of the writing is the *Shahada* that is the following saying: “There is no god but the God and Muhammad is His Prophet.” Could you imagine the American flag with the Lord's Prayer or some other religious saying on it? We view religion as a personal and certainly separate component to our lives -- particularly concerning government, judicial system, etc. Our tradition is freedom to worship God as we see fit – indeed, this was one of the primary founding elements of what would become the United States of America; we have the constitutionally protected freedom *of* religion as well as a protected right to freedom *from* religion. Many of my Muslim friends shake their heads and ask me how Americans can separate God and religion from government and other areas of our lives if it is God's will that we be here now?

Almost a fifth of the world's people—1.3 billion in some 60 countries--are Muslims, embracing this faith first preached by the Prophet Muhammad fourteen centuries ago in the Arabian Peninsula. The world of Islam stretches from the heartland of Saudi Arabia eastward through west Asia and the Indian subcontinent to Indonesia--the largest Muslim country--and the southern Philippines; northward into central Asia and Southeastern Europe; and westward across north and sub-Saharan Africa and the Atlantic into South and North America.

This geographic spread contains people of many races and cultures, thus creating diversity among Muslims. And, although there are some variations in interpretations there is a general feeling of "common territory" among those who embrace Islam.

A Faithful Way of Life: "God is One"

They believe in an all-powerful God, the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. Their faith is summed up in the creed:

"There is no god but the God and Muhammad is His Messenger"

Allah is the name of God in Arabic and in fact means "the God," which serves to emphasize that "He is One and there is no other." Islam means "submission," connoting that total commitment to God brings health, peace and justice. Islam also refers to the worldwide "nation" or community of all believers. These believers are Muslims (also spelled/pronounced *Moslems*) -- that is, "one who submits to the will of Allah (God)."

Islam is not just a religion, if religion means only a system of belief and worship; rather, Islam is a way of life. It proclaims faith and sets forth rituals. It also prescribes order for individuals and society: codifying law, family relationships, matters of business, etiquette, dress, food, personal hygiene and much more. Islam is a complete, complex *civilization*, in which ideally, individuals, societies and governments should all reflect the will of God. In essence, it is a system of rules or laws to be followed in which the sacred is not separated from the secular. The Western concept of such separation is alien to Islamic thought.

The Koran: Word of God

The teachings of Islam are found in the Koran (al-Qur'an, or "recitation") which Muslims hold to be the immutable word of God and the unrivaled source of authority in almost all aspects of individual and group living. It was given in classical Arabic, transmitted through the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad was commanded to recite the revelations he received from God, which were first written down during the lifetime of the Prophet but duplicated for distribution only after his death. Muslims the world over, no matter what their tongue, memorize and recite as much of the Koran in Arabic as Possible for this is believed to be the word or language of God.

The Koran came to be supplemented by the Traditions and Sayings (Hadith) statements about what Muhammad said or did, as remembered by his companions and passed down during succeeding generations as part of the Sunnah, the "beaten path" for devout Muslims to follow. The Sunnah recounts the deeds, sayings and silent approval of the Prophet covering details of community life.

The Koran and the Sunnah provide the framework for the Shari'a; Islam's body of law. In many, but not all, Islamic countries, the Shari'a still provides the legal basis for judgment and punishment, at least in some areas of life. Although problems in dealing with non-Muslims and the colonial imposition of other legal systems have caused the Shari'a to be supplemented with Western legal codes in some countries, many Muslims nations have recently extended and reinforced the application of Koranic law.

The Five Pillars and Other Practices

Islam has five essential practices or "pillars of faith." These are:

- (1) Bearing Witness to the one true God, and acknowledging Muhammad as his Messenger (Shahada)
- (2) Praying five times daily--dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and night facing Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Islam's holiest city (Salat)
- (3) Giving alms to help the needy and for communal purposes (Zakat)
- (4) Fasting from dawn to sunset throughout Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar (Saum)
- (5) Making the pilgrimage to Mecca, once in a lifetime, for those who are able (Hajj)

Daily prayers are performed by practicing Muslims whether individually or, preferable in a group. When the time for prayer comes, in many countries Muslims stop wherever they are, ritually wash themselves, and face the Ka'ba in Mecca to pray. Facing in a common direction symbolizes unity of purpose for the millions of Muslims offering their prayers at the same time. Prayers said in mosques (the Muslim place of worship) have greater merit. An Iman may lead prayers; however, this function does not give him any special religious status. Similarly, a man of the community, the Mu'azzin, who happens to have a particularly good voice, rather than someone who claims religious status calls the summons to prayer, the Azan. The call to prayer begins Allahu Akbar, "God is Great," a cry heard throughout the Muslim world.

Because of the uncompromising nature of Islamic monotheism, no images of pictures of any kind are permitted in the mosque. Islam preaches that all men are equal. Therefore, there are no pews and generally no reserved places for dignitaries. The mosque is usually furnished with simple mats and occasionally with rugs. Worshippers form lines behind the Iman as they arrive with no distinction of rank.

The belief in the equality of all men further means that Islam rejects the concept of ordained clergy. There are, nonetheless, religious leaders, many of who exert power in the political as well as the strictly theological sphere, and who may be their followers. There is no separate religious organization or "church".

In addition to the "five pillars," there are other practices commonly observed throughout the Islamic world. Muslims are forbidden to use intoxicating beverages or to consume pork, blood, or anything that might be harmful. In order to be eaten, animals must be ritually slaughtered and drained of blood. Similar dietary laws are found in Judaism.

There are no prescribed patterns of dress. Women and men are asked, however, not to dress or act in a provocative or indecent way. Customs in different Muslim societies reflect a range of outlooks. Women in some areas of the Muslim world are covered completely from head to toe, while in other places they dress in styles usually seen in Europe, US, Asia – generally described as the Western world. Some Muslim women cover their heads with a scarf at all times or part of the time. Individual cultural expectations vary across the vast Islamic regions and dictate what is expected, what is appropriate/proper, and what is not. Often what is expected in one region contrasts with another. Don't try to explain or reconcile it. Just understand that the outlook in this area has many different interpretations. The Western, dichotomous, (right or wrong, yes or no) outlook simply doesn't translate here.

Many customs are currently under active discussion in the Muslim world, including the roles of women. The Koran states that God created all mankind from a male and a female, and as all are equal, none is better than another in His sight except through deeds. Within Islam, women, like men, have moral and religious duties and are viewed as responsible. In the words of the Prophet, basic education is a right and also a duty for both men and women. Marriage and family are important. The concept of "Original Sin" is not found in Islam. Indeed, it is surprising to many westerners how sexual issues are viewed. Sexual activities within marriage are meritorious; outside that bond, premarital or extramarital sex is a serious offense, punishable under the law of Islam – and this varies tremendously as well. The degree to which men and women's lives are separated, and women's lives are restricted, varies considerable in Muslim societies. It is determined by custom of keeping women in seclusion practiced in parts of the Muslim world seems oppressive to Westerners and to some modernist Muslims, but is viewed by many other Muslims as being protective and respectful of women. The feeling is that the honor of the family resides in the woman. Resultantly, by protecting her you protect the family name, etc.

"Muhammad is His Messenger"

Islam teaches that God revealed His existence to a number of prophets through the ages. They include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. According to Muslims, however, God's final and complete revelation was given to Muhammad.

Muhammad was born in Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia, about 570 A.D. He was unsatisfied with the pagan religions of his people as well as with the prevailing social conditions, and contemplated religious and social questions.

During one of his frequent meditations alone in the desert hills near Mecca in the lunar month of Ramadan in 610 A.D., Muhammad heard revelations from the angel Gabriel and began to receive the Koran. This process of revelation continued for more than 20 years until his death. At God's commandment, the Prophet Muhammad began reciting God's work and preaching the message revealed to him. His wife Khadija and some of his closest friends were the first believers. The ruling oligarchy in Mecca fought bitterly to stamp out this movement. During this period, tradition holds that Muhammad went on night journey in which he was transported from Mecca to the site of The Dome of The Rock in Jerusalem and from there ascended to heaven for a preview of the after-life. (According to Biblical tradition, the Dome of the Rock is the site on which Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, and is revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Next to it has been built the Aqsa Mosque, one of Islam's most sacred places of worship.)

In 622, after continued persecution, Muhammad and his followers left Mecca and took refuge in Yathrib, which came to be known as al Medina, "The City." This emigration (Hijra) marks the year one of the Islamic calendar. A.H., used in denoting years in this calendar, stands for Anno Hegira, "in the year of the emigration," in the same way A.D. stands for Anno Domini, "in the year of Our Lord."

In Medina, Muhammad became the ruler of the community as well as its religious teacher. Both the Koran and the examples of the Prophet governed daily life and gave the community its laws. Muhammad gathered more and more followers and, eight years later, returned to Mecca victorious. There he smashed the idols in and around the temple of the Ka'ba. The Grand Mosque erected around the Ka'ba is the most holy place in Islam and marks the direction in which Muslims pray. Mecca, Medina with Muhammad's life and because of the mosques that have been built to commemorate these events. Before he died in 632 A.D., Muhammad was able to break down tribal loyalties and unify his followers who came from different groups.

In Islam, Muhammad is honored as God's final Prophet. He did not create but received the Koran. Muslims do not worship Muhammad, only Allah.

"People of the Book"

Muslims view Muhammad as the last in a succession of prophets who preached parts of the same message. Their earlier sacred writings, the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel of Jesus, are constantly mentioned in the Koran. In contrast to pagans, who worshiped idols and believed in many gods, Jews and Christians are called "people of the book," and are given special protection under Muslim law.

Muslims grant Jesus particular respect. However, because of their belief in the oneness of God, they reject the Christian concept of the Trinity. Respecting "people of the book" underlines the common heritage Muslims believe that they share with Christians and Jews.

Sunnis, Shias, and Sufis

When Muhammad died, a dispute arose over leadership of the Muslim community, which was also the first Islamic state. One faction, the Sunnis (derived from the Arabic word for "tradition"), felt that the Caliph (Khalifa, Arabic for "successor") should be chosen, as Arab chiefs customarily are, by election. Therefore they support the succession of the first four, or "rightly guided," Caliphs, who were Muhammad's companions.

The other group maintained that Muhammad chose his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his spiritual and secular heir, and that succession should be through his bloodline. In 680 A.D. one of Ali's sons, Hussein, led a band of rebels against the ruling Caliph and they were massacred. Hussein's martyrdom began the Shia (sometimes called shi'ite) movement, whose name comes from a word meaning "partisans of Ali."

The Shia and the Sunni are the two major branches of Muslims, with the Sunni comprising about 85 percent of the total. The differences between these two major divisions are not so much in belief or law, which are fundamentally the same for both, as in practice and political theory. The Shia, mainly located in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, have developed a hierarchical religious leadership. Both the Shia and Sunni are further divided among themselves in ritual and practice, structure and political orientation.

Cutting across these branches is Sufism. Sufism is a mystical strain of Islam which reflects the need felt by many individuals to go a step beyond formal religious observances and experience direct communion with God.

The Spread of Islam

Perhaps no single historical event between the fall of Rome and the European voyages of discovery was more significant than the rise of Islam. Islam provided a focus for political order and intellectual growth affecting the entire world, not just those people who embraced it.

To describe the expansion in general terms, however: Islam soon brought North Africa under its sway. In the Middle East, from modern Iraq to the Atlantic, most of the converts became *Arabized*, adopting Arabic language and culture. Elsewhere conversion did not bring "Arabization." Today, only 15 to 20 percent of all Muslims are Arabs.

Although this initial expansion was halted in France in 732 A.D., Sicily and parts of Europe were later conquered. The Ottoman Turks later added most of previously Christian southeastern Europe to the domain of Islam. In a different direction, Islam crossed the Sahara into the kingdoms of Sub Sahara Africa. Arab Muslims and non-Arab converts carried Islam beyond India into central Asia and to what are now Malaysia, Indonesia and a part of the southern Philippines.

The rise of Islam not only brought empires into being, it also fostered the flowering of civilizations and the development of centers of learning. A melding of new thought with ancient, of ideas from east and west took place, producing great contributions in medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, language, literature and history. Eventually crucial ideas and concepts were transmitted, either directly or indirectly, from Islamic centers to medieval Christian Europe. Much ancient Greek learning was passed on. Basic mathematical concepts such as Arabic numerals, algebra and the idea of zero were refined and later conveyed into European thought. Sophisticated instruments, which were to make possible the European voyages of discovery, were developed, among them the astrolabe, the quadrant and good navigational maps.

From the 7th to the 11th centuries, the Muslim community was economically and militarily more powerful than Christian Europe, rivaling Chinese civilization in its achievements. However, Islam's success in spreading rapidly over such an expanse of territories and peoples led to political fragmentation. It was this, which in the 12th and 13th centuries made possible the Christian Crusades, events still remembered by Muslim Arabs as Western aggression. While in the 15th and 16th centuries the Ottomans imposed some political unity, the original dynamism of Islamic civilization slowed and equilibrium of forces in many Islamic societies was struck.

In the meantime, Europe discovered new wellsprings of vitality, partly fed from Islamic sources. The Renaissance in the 14th to 17th centuries led to the creation of powerful secular institutions, in particular the nation-state. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual, complimented the Renaissance. Advancements in science and the industrial revolution generated new methods of organization and of physical strength. Europe was therefore able to dominate large portions of the rest of the world, including much of the Muslim world. The New World grew out of the European voyages of discovery, and the industrial revolution spawned both capitalist theories, giving rise to the present superpowers.

Both the earlier period of Muslim dominance and the later reversal of historical fortunes, the oil crisis of the 1970s and subsequent energy difficulties, wars and terrorist activity created stereotypes and misperceptions of Muslims and Islam in the non-Muslim world that continue today. These are reinforced by the lack of knowledge and contact between most Westerners and Muslims both personally and institutionally. Example: Recall that after the 9-11 attack it was discovered that within the FBI *there was no one* who spoke fluent Arabic or Farsi (spoken in Iran and other locations -- often referred to as Persian). Hence Islam -- in many ways closely related to Western civilization -- is often seen as hostile, dangerous or incomprehensible. Having an understanding of Islam is critical in order to avoid cross-cultural contamination in analysis of information and interpretation of events in the Islamic world. I hope this guide helps you in that pursuit.

Additional recommendations:

Ali, M.M., *A Manual of Hadith*, The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, Lahore.

Endress, G., *An Introduction to Islam*, trans. Carole Hillenbrand, New York.

Espisito, John, ed., *Islam in Asia*, New York

Long, J.M., *The Other Gulf War: Politics, Religion, and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait*, Univ. of Texas Press.

Matar, N.I., *Islam For Beginners*, Airlift Book Company

Mitchell, George, ed., *Architecture of the Islamic World*, London.

Nydell, M., *Understanding the Arab Mind*, Intercultural Press.

Credits: Information contained in this guide compiled from a variety of sources. Especially helpful were the extremely knowledgeable Interlink Consulting Services Middle East trainers. Additionally, Muslim friends and colleagues also provided very helpful interpretation regarding the part that Islam plays in day-to-day life in the Islamic world.