

Glossary about Islam

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Islam (Willful submission to Allah (God))

Islam is the religion that God has chosen for mankind. All religions to God are Islam. All of God's prophets submitted their will to God and obeyed Him. Islam is a continuation of previous Divine messages and it affirms Judaism and Christianity

"The religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His will)"
Al-Imran 3: 19

"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion"
Al-Maeda 5: 3

"Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but he was upright but bowed his will to Allah (Islam), and he did not worship others besides Allah"
Al-Imran 3: 67

"The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah, that which We inspired to you (Muhammad) and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely that you should establish the religion and do not become divided therein"
Ash-Shura' 42: 13

Muslims believe in all of God's prophets

They brought the same message from the One and Only God: the God of all. He is the same God who sent the message to Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon all of them). The basic message is the same: worship and serve God. The details varied according to the needs of each society:

"Every messenger that We sent before you We inspired to him that there is no god but I: therefore, worship and serve Me"
Al-Anbia'a 21: 25

"The messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do people Of faith: each one of them believes in Allah, His Angels, His books, and His messengers. "We make no distinction between one and another of His messengers" and they say: "We hear and we obey, we seek Your forgiveness our Lord, to You is the end of all journeys"
Al-Baqara 2: 285

“To those who believe in Allah and His messengers and make no distinction between any of His messengers, We shall soon give their due rewards, for Allah is often-forgiving, most merciful”

An-Nesa’a 4: 152

The Qur’an

The Qur’an is God’s own literal words. The Qur’an was inspired to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who was illiterate (could not read or write). It was safeguarded and preserved by two methods: memorized in the hearts of the Prophet’s companions, and in written form by scribes whose job was to write down the verses revealed to the Prophet by inspiration. The Qur’an was revealed interrupted over 23 years that the Muslims may be able to read it, understand it, memorize it, apply it and teach it, and spread its useful message. The Qur’an came down to answer questions and to guide to the straight path of Allah. The authenticity of the Qur’an is in the Qur’an itself: it is clear and logical with no contradiction between its verses, and none of its verses were proven wrong. No one has been able to produce such a Qur’an. The Qur’an is a guidance and mercy from God:

“You were not able to recite a book before this, nor were you able to write it with your right hand. In that case, those who talk vanities would have doubted. No, here are signs self-evident in the hearts of those endowed with knowledge”

Al-Ankabut 29: 48 & 49

“Those who reject faith say: “Why is not the Qur’an revealed to him all at once?” Thus it was revealed in order that We may strengthen your heart thereby, and We have rehearsed it in slow well-arranged stages gradually. And no question do they bring to you, but We reveal to you the truth and the best explanation thereof”

Al-Furqan 25: 32 & 33

“O mankind there has come to you from your Lord an admonition and a healing for the ills in your hearts; and for those who believe a guidance and a mercy”

Yunus 10: 57

“Do they not consider the Qur’an? Had it been from other than Allah they would surely have found therein much discrepancy”

An-Nesa’a 4: 82

How do we understand the Qur’an?

Some Muslims follow the explanation provided by old scholars arguing that the Prophet’s companions witnessed the revelation of Qur’anic verses and knew the specific situation underlying such verses, and knew the Arabic language, and if they had any doubt would have asked the Prophet for clarification.

Others respect the opinions of the classic scholars but do not feel that their views are infallible. Some verses may have been revealed regarding a specific incident or situation that is not relevant to us today. But if we follow the spirit and concept then these verses will have better understanding and wider application. We need to think and

reflect on the meaning of Qur'anic verses and how we can apply its guidance, concepts and spirit in our lives. The Qur'an only gives guidelines, but does not restrict us with details. Therefore, its guidance can be applied at all times and for all societies. Since the Qur'an is God's last Divine revelation then its message and guidance must be applicable at all times. The Qur'an was sent to all mankind.

“A book which We have sent to you, full of blessings, that they may consider its signs, and that people of understanding may receive admonition”
Sa D 38: 29

“Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion to His servant that it may be a reminder to all mankind”
Al-Furqan 25: 1

“A book which We have revealed to you in order that you might lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light by the leave of their Lord”
Ibrahim 14: 1

Some verses of the Qur'an were revealed in response to specific situations that occurred at the time of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, and are relevant in that context. These verses should not be taken out of historical context. For example some verses talk about the behavior of the Jewish tribes in Madina (city to which the prophet and the Muslims immigrated to from Macca). This does not mean that the Qur'an is anti-Jewish. On the contrary the Qur'an praises the Children of Israel in many of its verses because of their faith and patient perseverance, and that at one time they were favored and chosen by God. But they broke their covenant with God and therefore suffered the consequence of their actions. We learn from their example, as well as from their mistakes. A good portion of the Qur'an talks about Prophet Moses and the Israelites, as well as other communities and civilizations of the past that we may learn from their behavior and outcome

“And We wish to be gracious to those who were oppressed in the land, and to make them leaders and make them heirs”
Al-Qasas 28: 5

“And We appointed from among them leaders giving guidance under Our command, as long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our signs”
As-Sajda 32: 24

“O Children of Israel call to mind the special favors which I bestowed upon you and that I preferred you to all others”
Al-Baqara 2: 122

The Muslims were guided and blessed by God, and were to serve as examples for others in their character and behavior. God praised them too as long as they behaved properly, portraying and guiding to morality and confirming their faith in God:

“You are the best of people evolved for mankind: enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong and believing in Allah”

Al-Imran 3: 110

Being chosen or preferred by God does not mean that we are better than other people. It means that we must shoulder our responsibility and serve as examples of proper faith and behavior. Such blessing is not inherited; rather it is earned through hard work and patient perseverance. We cannot claim to be righteous because our parents or grandparents were good people, or because we are descendants of Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad (God’s peace be upon all of them). We are close to God by the faith that we exhibit and by our proper actions, not because of our lineage:

“Indeed the most honored among you in the sight of God is the person of most service (God-conscious) to others”

Al-Hujerat 49: 13

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

Was sent as a universal messenger to all mankind

He is the last messenger of God: there will be no other prophets or messengers after him

He guides us through his example, in his character and behavior

His sayings and his actions have been recorded and authenticated.

“Say: “O mankind I am the messenger of Allah to all of you”

Al-Araf 7: 158

“We sent you but as a messenger to all mankind”

Sa Ba 34: 28

“We sent you but as a mercy to all creatures”

Al-Anbia’a 21: 107

“You have indeed in the messenger of Allah a beautiful example of conduct to those who rest their hopes in Allah and the Last Day, and remember Allah often”

Al-Ahzab 33: 21

“You are indeed on an exalted standard of morals and character”

Al-Qalam 68: 4

The Sunnah (tradition of prophet Muhammad PBUH)

The Sunnah is the sayings and actions of the Prophet (PBUH), and what he approved, and what he did not disapprove of.

The Hadeeth is the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH)

The Sunnah has been recorded and authenticated in various books of Hadeeth, notable among them Bokhari, Muslim, Ahmad, Malik, Termedhi, Nesa'ee, Abou Dawood, Ibn Majja and others.

The sayings of the Prophet were memorized and some were written at his time. Scholars have labored for years to verify every Hadeeth. They used strict criteria to authenticate what has been attributed to God's messenger. Such criteria include the person's honesty and integrity and ability to memorize, as well as his teachers and where he heard the Prophet's Hadeeth, did he meet the person he heard it from? Then the Hadeeth was cross-referenced to other Hadeeth. Also the content was scrutinized to make sure they were actually the Prophet's words. Many of the alleged sayings were rejected because of insufficient evidence or lack of criteria of proper authenticity. Hadeeth is classified as authentic (Saheeh) or acceptable (Hasan) or weak and unacceptable.

Since the Qur'an gives only guidelines, we need the Sunnah in order to apply these guidelines in our lives. For example the Qur'an orders Muslims to pray and illustrates the rationale of prayer. The Prophet explained how we should pray, and what we should say in our prayers. He said: (Pray as you see me pray) Bokhari

How do we understand the Sunnah?

Some follow the literal words of the Hadeeth

Others follow the concept and the spirit of the Prophet's sayings, because he may have said words in response to a specific incident at his time that is no longer relevant to our lives today. He was addressing people with a certain culture and tradition quite different from ours today. The Prophet's sayings should not be taken out of historical context.

The Prophet (PBUH) said: (I have been commanded to fight An-Nas (people) till they bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and that I am His messenger) Muslim. An-Nas here means the tribe of Quraish, who were fierce enemies of the Muslims and fought them several times, and their goal was to destroy the Muslim state in Madina. The prophet did not say that he was ordered to fight all mankind or to force them to become Muslims, because this understanding is clearly against the teachings of the Qur'an which forbids Muslims from forcing anyone against his will, and because under normal circumstances the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is that of peace, kindness, justice and working together, and not a constant state of war or hatred.

To give another example of how the Prophet's sayings can be taken out of context and misunderstood is the following Hadeeth: (What is below the ankles is in hell fire) Nesa'ee & Ahmad. This does not mean that we should wear short pants. The Prophet (PBUH) was reacting to what he saw: a man walking arrogantly and his robe washing the floor. So he wanted to emphasize humility and to forbid arrogance. The Qur'an confirms this understanding:

"Do not walk on earth with insolence, for you cannot pierce the earth, nor reach the mountains in height"

Al-Isra'a 17: 37

Prophet Muhammad's sayings should not be taken out of historical context, and we need to understand the specific circumstances surrounding his Hadeeth (saying). For example the Prophet (PBUH) said: (I am free of any Muslim residing among Mushrekeen, because their faith is quite different) Abou Dawood & Termedhi. This does not mean that Muslims cannot live in America or in Europe among non-Muslims. The Hadeeth merely relates to an incident that occurred at the time of the Prophet when a group of Muslims decided to stay in Macca, rather than immigrate to Madina. They were killed by the Quraish tribe. The Prophet was merely expressing that their death was the result of their own choice and actions, and that he does not bear their responsibility. The moral of the saying is quite different. What we learn today is that as Muslims we must make sure that we can safeguard our faith and convictions. If we feel that we cannot practice our faith in one place then we must move on to a safer place. The Qur'an confirms such a concept:

"When the Angels take the souls of those who die in sin against their souls they say: "In what plight were you?" They reply: "We were weak and oppressed on earth". They say: "Was not the earth of Allah spacious enough for you to move yourselves away?"

An-Nesa'a 4: 97

We follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his kindness, caring, humility, ability to forgive, being merciful, being wise, being just, and in spreading useful knowledge

Khilafa (government)

Means ruling or who is to be the ruler over Muslims. Since Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not have any male children that survived, and Khilafa is not to be inherited, Sunni Muslims believe that any Muslim who is well qualified can become a Khalifa (ruler) if he gets the allegiance of Muslims (Bay' a). This occurred when the Muslims gave their pledge to Abou Bakr, who was the closest friend and advisor to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The Shi'te sect of Islam, on the other hand, believe that Khilafa can only be in the descendants of Muhammad (PBUH), which are represented by Ali & Fatima. Ali was his cousin, and Fatima his daughter. Their children Hassan & Hussein and their descendants are the only ones deserving of Khilafa. Anyone else usurps their right according to Shi'te thinking

How to elect a Khalifa in Islam?

According to Sunni thinking the pledge is given first by those in power or those who possess the knowledge. This is followed by the majority of Muslims.

Or a ruler can nominate his successor as occurred with Omar who was nominated by Abou Bakr

According to Shi'te thinking only a descendant of Ali can become a ruler

Human interpretation of Divine text

As human beings we have certain obligations towards the Qur'an:

- 1-To read it as often as possible, in the proper way with attention and devotion
- 2-To try and understand its message
- 3-To apply its guidelines in our lives, character and behavior
- 4-To teach the Qur'an to others and spread its useful message
- 5-To defend the Qur'an against distortions and false accusations

Since we differ in our knowledge, experience and intellectual abilities, it is expected that we would differ in our understanding of the divine text. These differences do not involve the basic principles of Islam or the core teachings of the Qur'an like the presence of God, His Oneness or our accountability to Him; or that we should treat each other with justice, kindness and respect; or that we should be good to our parents and neighbors; or that we should reach out and help those who are poor, needy or disadvantaged; or that we should pray, fast and give charity. We can differ in other issues or in our understanding of how to apply Qur'anic guidelines in our lives, or how it relates to us in a particular society.

Some Muslims follow the teachings of old scholars as if it is written in stone. Others follow common sense and a logical approach to religion, and follow the concepts and spirit of Qur'anic guidelines.

Some Muslims follow the literal words of the Prophet's sayings. Others realize that the Prophet (PBUH) lived in a different time and addressed people with a certain culture and tradition, different from ours today, therefore they follow the concept and spirit of the Prophet's teachings, but not necessarily the literal words. This approach allows them to apply a more progressive understanding of Islam to a plural democratic society.

Relationship with non-Muslims

The Qur'an lays down broad guidelines for the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims:

- 1-Kindness, not hatred
- 2-Justice, so that no one is wronged
- 3-Talking to each other in a good way
- 4-Respecting the rights of every person to his beliefs, and not forcing anyone to become a Muslim against his will
- 5-Cooperating in good deeds and not in sin or transgression
- 6-Not prejudging the fate of others
- 7-Invite to God through wisdom and good example

"God forbids you not, regarding those who do not fight you because of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes, to treat them with kindness and justice, for God loves those who are just"

Al-Mumtahina 60: 8

“And tell My servants to say that which is best, for Satan incites enmity between them, for Satan is an avowed enemy to Man”

Al-Isra'a 17: 53

“And cooperate in virtue and righteousness, but not in sin or transgression”

Al-Maeda 5: 2

“If it had been the will of your Lord, everyone on earth would have believed, are you then forcing people to believe against their will?”

Yunus 10: 99

“Let there be no compulsion in religion”

Al-Baqara 2: 256

“Your job (O Muhammad) is to deliver the message, accountability belongs to Us”

Ar-R'd 13: 40

“Invite to your Lord by wisdom and good example, and argue with them only in ways that are best, for your Lord knows who has strayed from His path and who is guided”

An-Nahl 16: 125

The Qur'an tells us to respect the right of every person to his/ her beliefs. Our job is to invite to God by our example and how we live our lives. Guidance comes from God: we cannot guide even those whom we love:

“You will not be able to guide evryone whom you love, but it is Allah Who guides whom He pleases, and He knows who is ready to receive guidance”

Al-Qasas 28: 56

Shari'a (Laws)

Shari'a means the application of Qur'anic guidelines and the Sunnah of the Prophet in the lives of Muslims. Few laws apply to punishment of major crimes like killing or adultery. The majority of Shari'a relates to our rituals of worship and our relationship with each other.

When a Muslim is praying or fasting Ramadan he is applying the Shari'a in his life.

When he is doing his work honestly and to the best of his ability, he is applying Shari'a in his life. When he is good to his spouse and children he is complying with the guidelines in the Qur'an and applying Shari'a in his life.

Therefore, the limited interpretation that Shari'a is stoning the person who is committing adultery is a superficial and wrong understanding of Shari'a. The crimes of adultery and for murder are punished according to the norms in the society where the person is living. If I live in America and the law states that a certain crime is punishable by a certain punishment then as a Muslim I must comply with the law of the land, and not impose my own understanding of what divine law states. The punishment for major

crimes (Hudood) in the Qur'an or Sunnah was applicable at a society with culture and tradition different from ours today. Cutting the hand of a thief as punishment for stealing does not apply in our society today. We should not confuse the issue by what some rigid ignorant people say in Afghanistan or Pakistan or Saudi Arabia about the application of Shari'a law. They live in a different world, and their opinions may apply to their own culture, but certainly not in America.

Ijtihad (Critical thinking and coming up with answers to current problems)

Ijtihad must be alive at all times, because we face problems and challenges that were not present before. We can think and come up with answers to our challenges based on the basic principles and spirit of the religion, and guided by the work done before, but we should not limit ourselves to opinions presented by old scholars, who lived in a different time and were not exposed to our current problems.

Those involved in Ijtihad must possess the necessary qualifications including knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunnah, understanding of Fiqh (Jurisprudence) and how to reach conclusions after proper study and analysis, and knowledge and experience in the subject matter presented. They can and should seek help from experts in the appropriate fields of study. Religion should be alive and not rigid or dogmatic, and should address current relevant issues and not dwell too much on the past. Thus religion becomes relevant to and part of our lives, and a means of improving our lives and of making us better human beings

Infidel or Kuffar (unbelievers)

The Qur'an describes those who have rejected faith (Kuffar) and those who worship others besides Allah (Mushrekeen). It also describes Ahl-AlKitab (the family or people of the Book). Mushrekeen are those who worship multiple gods or worship others besides Allah (God). This reference applies primarily to those who used to worship deities besides Allah like the tribe of Quraish at the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It may apply today to those who worship other gods besides the One and only God. Kuffar means those who reject God. Kufr (rejection of God) may involve denying His existence or our accountability to Him, or may involve not believing in the Qur'an as God's Divine revelation, or rejecting Muhammad as God's messenger. In that sense Christians and Jews have rejected faith in God because they do not believe in the Qur'an and do not acknowledge Muhammad (PBUH) as a messenger and prophet from God. But their rejection of faith is different because they still believe in the presence of God and believe in being accountable to Him. They are also distinguished by being given a Divine revelation before the Qur'an came down, in the form of a Torah (God's message given to Moses) or the Injeel (the Bible given to Jesus). Sometimes the Qur'an refers to the Book as singular to emphasize that all three Divine revelations : the Torah, the Injeel and the Qur'an, represent one single truth that came from the same God. The Kufr of the people of the Book, therefore, is not rejection of God, but rejection of the Qur'an and of Muhammad (PBUH).

“Those who say that God is Jesus the son of Mary have rejected faith”

Al-Maeda 5: 72

“Those who say that God is one of a Trinity have rejected faith, for there is only One God”

Al-Maeda 5: 73

“Say: “O people of the Book come to common terms between us and you: that we worship none but God, and that we associate no partners with Him, and that we erect not , from among ourselves, lords and patrons, other than God”

Al-Imran 3: 64

Jihad (striving in the cause of Allah)

Jihad does not mean fighting in Islam. Jihad means striving and struggling in the way or cause of Allah. This may involve striving to control our vain desires and learn patience, perseverance, self-control and discipline. It may involve resisting the temptations of Satan, and obeying God’s orders and living our lives as He has commanded. It may involve spreading useful knowledge, and fighting misconceptions and misinformation about Islam and the Muslims. Fighting is the last resort, and is only done for self-defense and not in aggression or transgression. Fighting has morals and ethics in that we do not fight to gain or advance a personal agenda, and we do not wrong others, and we do not kill women, children, the elderly or those not involved in the fighting, and that we accept offers of peace. Only a leader with legitimate authority can rally Muslims in Jihad when a Muslim country is under attack. The calls for Jihad issued by terrorists and extremists have no validity, for they do not represent Muslims and their actions are anti-Islamic.

“And fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you and do not transgress, for Allah loves not transgressors”

Al-Baqara 2: 190

“To whom against whom war is made permission (to fight) is given because they are wronged, and indeed Allah is most powerful for their aid. Those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right for no reason except that they say: “Our Lord is Allah”

Al-Hajj 22: 39 & 40

“But if the enemy inclines towards peace, you should also incline towards peace, and put your trust in Allah, for He hears and knows all things”

Al-Anfal 8: 61

Therefore, the concept that Jihad means fighting the Kuffar to force them to become Muslims against their will is wrong. This understanding is wrong on several accounts: Muslims only fight to defend themselves or their country against aggression. And Muslims do not force anyone to accept Islam against his will, because God gave man the freedom to choose or reject faith, and we cannot force others against their will. Islam must be accepted freely and after proper understanding and with full conviction. Fighting is the last resort. Nowadays we fight by exposing stereotypes, bias and

prejudice, and by contrasting falsehood to the truth. The Qur'an explains that the way to combat misinformation is through patient perseverance and by showing the truth:

"You will be tested in your possessions and in yourselves, and you will hear a lot that will grieve you, from those who were given divine revelation before you and from those who worship other gods besides Allah, but if you patiently persevere and guard against wrong/evil that requires resolve and commitment"

Al-Imran 3: 186