

# What is Islam?



## An important question

Catholics have always been encouraged to learn more about their own faith, but since the Second Vatican Council an emphasis has also been placed on the need to understand the faiths of other people. At a general audience in St. Peter's Square in Rome, in June 1985, Pope John Paul II stated that among the non-Christian religions, *Islam* "deserved special attention by reason of its *monotheistic* character and its link with *the faith of Abraham*". But *What is Islam?* The purpose of these notes is to help readers to answer this question.

Several answers could be given. The first is that *Islam* is the religion – more specifically, the way of life – followed by millions of *Muslims* throughout the world. But that does not take us very far. It might be argued that only Muslims are in a position to answer the question satisfactorily, because they know what it means to belong to the *ummah* (the Islamic community) from the inside, so to speak. In one sense they are right, but there are things that non-Muslims can and should know about *Islam*. Recent estimates suggest that the number of Muslims living in Britain is somewhere between one and two millions. Whatever the precise figures may be, it is

clear that there is a substantial minority of Muslims in this country, most of whom live and work in great conurbations such as Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, and London. Getting to know Muslims may not be easy, but Christians (and Catholics in particular) are encouraged to make the effort.

This is more necessary than ever, because there is an understandable (though in some respects an irrational) fear in the West of *Islam* and of the activities of Islamic fundamentalists.

During the Pope's talk mentioned above, he reminded his listeners of a passage in one of the Second Vatican Council's Documents (*Nostra Aetate*, 'In Our Time'):

"The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they honour Jesus as a prophet. His

virgin mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further they await the Day of Judgement and the reward of God, following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.”

Several points of interest to Christians will be apparent from what has been said so far. *Islam*, like Christianity, is a monotheistic religion. Muslims, like Christians, believe in one God. God is the Creator of everything that exists, is merciful to those whom he has created, and requires obedience from everyone to what he has revealed (or ‘spoken’). For Muslims, the will of God has been revealed in *al-Quran* (the Koran), the Holy Book of *Islam*. Reference to Abraham is a reminder that Muslims, as well as Jews and Christians, think of him as their father in faith (cf. *Romans* 4.16). Muslims believe that *Ibrahim* (the Arabic form of Abraham) was the first Muslim. Note that they also have a respect for Jesus, but only as a created human being, whom God sent as a special messenger at an appointed time in history. Mary is also honoured in *Islam* as the virgin mother of the Prophet Jesus. From the Islamic point of view, chapter 19 of the *Quran* speaks about the Virgin Birth of Jesus. They also believe that there will be a Day of Judgement, on which all will be raised bodily, to be rewarded with Heaven if they have been faithful to God in following the teachings of *Islam*, but punished with the torments of Hell if they have been unbelievers. The last point to be noted here is that, according to *Islam*, belief and unbelief have important moral and physical consequences.

### Understanding *Islam*

At the beginning of these notes the answer to the question What is *Islam*? was the obvi-

ous one. “*Islam* is a religion, a way of life.” We can take this a little further, first by summarising, and then by commenting on three answers which Muslims might well give to the same question.

- (a) *Islam* is a world religion, and it is the true religion for everyone.
- (b) *Islam* is a complete and integrated way of life.
- (c) *Islam* is an Arabic word which means both ‘peace’ and ‘submission to God’.

Here are a few more detailed notes on each of these sub-headings:

- (a) *Islam* is a world religion, and it is the true religion for everyone

There are hundreds of millions of Muslims in the world today, but it is not only because of the number of its adherents that *Islam* is a world religion. For the past thirteen centuries, since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (c.570-632 AD), the unchanging message of *Islam* has challenged the world to obey the revealed will of God. Muhammad is said by Muslims to have preached *Islam* to his people in the part of the world now known as Saudi Arabia. It is further claimed that he did not found a religion. His task was to preach once more a faith that had been forgotten or disregarded by faithless human beings. *Islam*, in other words, did not begin with Muhammad, but with God. Indeed, as Muslims insist, before there were Jews and Christians, there was *Islam*. *Ibrahim* (Abraham), ‘the friend of God’, not Muhammad, was the first Muslim. Recent events in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Syria, Pakistan, Indonesia (the most populous Islamic country in the world), and many other parts of the globe, show that

*Islam* continues to have an important impact on world affairs. The countries mentioned are among those where *Islam* is the dominant religion, and where society is moulded and regulated according to Islamic principles. Of course, not all Muslims live in Islamic countries, but the claim that *Islam* is the true religion for everyone reflects the deep conviction of Muslims everywhere. Muslims want others to share their faith, not least Jews and Christians, as well as those who have no religion. This makes *Islam* a potentially powerful missionary religion. This is because every Muslim has a responsibility to spread the faith. This responsibility does not devolve upon a small *cadre* of professional 'missionaries'.

(b) *Islam is a complete and integrated way of life*

In *Islam* the distinction, commonly made in Europe, between things which are 'religious' and things which are 'not religious' finds no final acceptance. In other words, the division of daily life into parts that are 'sacred' and other parts that are 'secular' is not accepted by devout Muslims. To be a Muslim is to be committed to a way of life in which everything – work no less than worship, pleasure no less than prayer, education no less than politics – is considered as an integrated whole. Everything comes from God. Everything belongs to God. Everything is to be returned to God. Muslims are required to be obedient to the sovereign will of God (*Allah*). Only by submission to God's will can anyone truly be at peace with God, with neighbours and with self.

(c) *Islam is an Arabic word which means both 'peace' and 'submission to God'*

The Arabic language is of the greatest importance to Muslims, whether or not it

happens to be their native tongue. Arabic, so they believe, is 'the language of the Angels'. It is the language in which God chose to reveal *al-Quran* (the Koran), the holy scripture of *Islam*. Arabic is also the language in which public prayer and worship is conducted by Muslims throughout the Islamic world. It is useful, therefore, to look at the word *Islam* again in order to establish its root meaning for Arabic speakers.

The key to the meaning of the Arabic word *Islam* is to be found in the three consonants it contains, i.e. *slm*. The root meaning of this particular combination of consonants is 'peace'. Other shades of meaning, other subtle nuances, are derived from this. So, for instance, the word *Islam* signifies 'inner peace', 'harmony', 'integration', 'personal welfare'. Collectively, these translations point to a sense of well being, or rightness with God and the created world. You find the same three consonants, in the same order, in the words *Muslim* and *Salam*. The prefix *mu*, as in the word *Muslim*, means 'one who' is, or does, something. Thus, a *Muslim* is 'one who has entered (or who is entering) into peace, on the basis of submission to the will of God'. The word *Salam* is a form of greeting among Muslims, which few will fail to recognise. It conveys all the qualities of well-being, mentioned earlier, which are exchanged between believers. At the heart of *Islam* there is a paradox. It is that the freedom, happiness, and well-being of human beings depends upon their willingness to submit their own wills to the will of God. It is only through submission to God that one can ever be truly free. Muslims believe that God, the Creator and the Sustainer of all that exists, requires our submission in order that we can serve him freely. Ideally a human being is '*abd-ullah*' (cf the name, *Abdullah*), i. e. a 'servant of God'.

### **Divisions among Muslims**

The world of *Islam* does not present a unified front to the outside world. There are divisions and differences of emphasis in *Islam*, as anyone reading the newspapers or watching television will know. Other leaflets in this series will attempt to explain the nature of the differences which exist between the two most important branches of *Islam*, that is to say between *Sunni* and *Shi 'i* Muslims.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. In the western world we have recently heard a good deal of talk about

*Islamophobia* (fear of *Islam*). Is such fear justified in this country, and if so, what can Christians do to minimise its influence?

2. How much do you know about the faith of Muslims in your neighbourhood? How much do they know about your faith? What steps might be taken to make contact with Muslims?

3. Muslims believe that 'there is no part of life that does not belong to God'. How far does your Christian faith affect your own life?

*This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.*

*The Committee is grateful to its member Prof. Edward Hulmes for this contribution.*

**+Kevin Mc Donald, Chairman.**

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