

## ISLAM: A Christian Perspective

Elder R. Keith Hamilton

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Islam is a major, worldwide religion with a very large following estimated to be more than 1.2 billion people. To outsiders, the particulars of Islam are elusive and their context difficult to understand. Islam is far more philosophical and mystical than Christianity, and apart from a few generalizations, it is not prone to defining its beliefs and behaviors in specifics and absolutes. In the opinion of this writer, much confusion is perpetuated by Muslim scholars and clerics appearing evasive and being non-specific, unwilling to explain Islamic principles and beliefs in absolute terms. Nevertheless, there are general teachings in Islam that contrast markedly with Christian doctrine and will permit a clearer understanding of the Islamic religion and Muslim way of life.

The text that follows is the attempt of this writer to quantify and refine the most defining principles of Islam into a succinct statement that will assist with understanding for both the layman and theologian alike. This text includes gross generalizations about Islam that are necessary for discussion of some of the subjects presented. To exhaustively explain and identify Islam would be much like a similar endeavor with Christianity; It would take volumes of text and still be incomplete.

The name Islam is from the Arabic verb “slm” or “salama” meaning to surrender or submit. Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning that it worships only one God, to whom the name Allah is given, and adheres to the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah. These will be discussed later. The name Muslim (Moslem) is given to those who follow Islam. The name is the noun form of the Arabic verb “slm” and means one who surrenders or is submissive, as in submissive to the Word of Allah.

The title Allah is also Arabic and means simply “Creator and Sustainer of All that Exists”. It is the equivalent Arabic expression to the English comprehension “I Am”. Theologically, Allah is exalted as “the Divine Unity”. He reigns alone, unchallenged in the heavens and in the earth. He is unlimited, the only true independent existence, and self-sufficient. All creation has origin in the spoken word of Allah and is sustained simply by his will. The principle of Allah as Divine Unity alludes to his character as the embodiment of absolute harmony and peace. It is the appointed duty of all creation, including man, to master a harmonious, peaceful existence on earth that approaches the perfect unity of Allah’s own purpose and will.

Islam originated and developed into a cultural force in the Arabian cities of Medina and Mecca early in the 7<sup>th</sup> century as the prophet Muhammad established influence and consolidated power to which the nomadic tribes of the time were drawn. It matured into a distinctive structure that unified people of very broad traditions and heritage and for the first time established a common identity for large expanses of population in Arabia and nearby regions. From its beginning into its present modern identity, Islam has not been confined to issues of spiritual significance only; It has cultivated as much political and cultural identity for its faithful, as spiritual significance and encompasses the full social, civil, and religious identity of its followers.

Islam has always been a religion that has put a premium on devotion and commitment to community and the cohesion of its followers for unified purposes, whether spiritual, political, financial, or territorial. The urgent sense of “belonging” and being a useful, contributing member of Muslim society is thoroughly ingrained in the religious teachings and practices of Islam. The Ummah, or Muslim community, is a complex association of Muslim culture, but is best understood as the whole community and brotherhood of Muslims. The Ummah is both the local fellowship of Muslims associated through the mosque, and the worldwide brotherhood of Islamic religion. Muslim life centers wholly around the mosque, and one’s identity with the mosque connects them with the Ummah. Each local mosque is then a building block in the large community of Muslims worldwide.

In defense of its communities, and in pursuit of its own interests, Islam has woven a complex course of development and adaptation that has a very belligerent history with violent traditions of conquest, martyrdom, and purging.

In a nutshell, Muslims believe that Islam is the religion of God. They believe that Muhammad is the chosen and final prophet of Allah (God), and that the Quran was sent down directly from Allah by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad. Muslims believe that through the power of God, Muhammad was able to memorize the entire Quran by heart, and that the Quran is the exact, unchanged words of God. The Quran cannot be corrupted by means of any changes. It is divinely protected and guarded by Allah himself.

The prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia in 570 A.D. He was a descendant of Ishmael, Abraham’s first son, through the lineage of Ishmael’s second son, Kedar. Muhammad was orphaned at an early age and raised by his paternal grandfather in Medinah until he was 8 years old. From that point, Muhammad returned to Mecca where he was raised by a paternal uncle from whom he obtained

introduction into the business circles of that city. Muhammad became a prominent businessman in the trading economy of the region and was known to be quite charismatic and persuasive in making friends and business transactions. Even at an early age he became known as “al-Ameen” which means reliable, trustworthy, and honest. However, his revelations and preaching that laid the foundation of Islam were quite unpopular and gave rise to his exile from Mecca to Medina.

Muhammad had the first of his acclaimed encounters with Gabriel, the messenger angel of God in 610 A.D. Reportedly, Muhammad was startled and frightened by this experience but received urging from his family and close friends to obey the commands he had received to become God’s prophet to the people. Over a period of 23 years, dating from 610 to 632 A.D., Muhammad had multiple meetings with Gabriel. In these repeated encounters, he received revelations and commands that he committed to memory, since he was reportedly illiterate and unable to read and write. Eventually, Muhammad instructed learned men of his family and close friends to record these revelations that he recited from memory.

The Quran (Koran) is the written collection of those revelations. The Quran has 114 surahs (chapters) and is divided into two folds very similar to the Bible. During each encounter with Gabriel, Muhammad received a few verses or even a complete chapter. Over time, Muhammed received all of the pieces of the revelation, and the messages of Gabriel were complete. Muhammed’s experiences with Gabriel ceased when he was capable of reciting the entire text of the Quran, revealed to him over the 23-year period, completely from memory. The Quran is said to contain revelations about the mysteries of nature and science, as well as explaining and illustrating man’s responsibilities towards nature, his fellow man, and before Allah.

The entirety of the Quran is attributed to Muhammad, as prophet. There are no other prophets or writers to whom the teachings and exhortations of the Quran may be credited. Muhammad claimed to be the only one, the “special one” to whom God chose to reveal these secrets, and this was done to eliminate the tendency of man to alter God’s word. Muhammad and his followers claim that the Quran is the true Word of God, and that God elected to reveal it to him because Judaism and Christianity had forsaken the truth of God’s Word.

Muslims regard Muhammad as the perfect man, and are exhorted to pattern their lives after his example. He is revered as the chosen one, elected by Allah for the revelation of the Quran, and esteemed as one of the main prophets of God. Muhammad is highly regarded and venerated due to the pattern of his life,

demeanor, speech, and devotion to community and family. He is regarded as the ideal Islamic norm due to the manner in which he perfectly surrendered his life to the teachings of the Quran and the will of Allah. In the whole pattern of his life, he is looked upon as exemplary and most worthy of any man for emulation.

Muslims do not claim Muhammad was sinless. The concept of sin does not apply in Islam as it does in Christianity. The evil a person may commit is defined in terms identifying the harm or jeopardy one may bring upon his community or social structure. In Islam, sin is not a violation in terms of the righteousness of Allah, but only in terms of action and motive for or against a Muslim's fellow man. It is in this regard, that Muhammad, more than any other man, most closely fulfilled the exhortations of the Quran and succeeded in surrendering the whole of his life to the Will of Allah.

The Quran forms the principle basis for Islamic living. However, there are also companion writings called the Sunnah, Ahadith, and Shariah which are not regarded as divine revelations, but do contain extensive instructions and societal law for instructing Muslims in their personal conduct and community relationships.

The Sunnah is the biography of the prophet's life and contains details of how Muhammad perfectly applied the exhortations of the Quran to situations of his daily life. It contains stories and accounts of daily circumstances in Muhammad's life and presents examples of how a faithful Muslim is to resolve everyday conflicts and decisions in surrender to Allah's will. The term Sunnah originally meant "well-trodden path", and in the religious context has come to mean "the example set by the Prophet".

The Ahadith is a collection of commentaries about what Muhammad taught. Written by Muhammad's followers and contemporaries, the Ahadith speaks to practices and pragmatisms that Muhammad approved of as consistent with Quranic ideals. More philosophical than the concrete examples of the Sunnah, the Ahadith is intended to give Muslims a greater understanding of what is intended by the Quran, and a clear, progressive path to map the progress of surrender in their lives. The requirement for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj, comes from the Ahadith and will be discussed later. The term hadith means a report or testimony as in an eyewitness account of an event. The "A" insertion in Arabic grammar assertively declares the article to be truth, similar to the "verily" construction in English. Hence, the name Ahadith is taken to mean the true report or true testimony of the Prophet.

The Shariah is a body of civil code drafted upon strict interpretation of the Quran. Islam has historically been a theocratic form of government as well as religion, and the Shariah is the legislative and judicial laws that govern Islamic people. This is the “law of the land” and prescribes punishments for crimes, taxation in the form of the Zakat, and provides for judicious resolution of conflicts within the Muslim community. It is from the Shariah that common images and understandings about Islam arise such as cutting off the hands of thieves, blinding the eyes of liars, and forcing women to wear Burqas (veiled garments).

In Islamic tradition, the community, the Ummah, is of the utmost importance. But the community is not defined by western standards. Indeed, Muslims have an identity and sense of belonging that is not determined by geographic or political boundaries. The Islamic sense of community, or Ummah, is defined by religious practice. It is the body of believers, and in the most pragmatic sense those with whom one interacts daily in a mosque or shrine. The traditional western convention of community as a broad spectrum or people identified by proximity and location does not apply.

It is entirely possible, with historical precedence, for a group of Muslims to exist within a geopolitical jurisdiction and be completely disconnected from the society at large, even to the point of having a separate civil and judicial code based entirely upon the Shariah. It is as if there is a parallel existence of the two cultures, Muslim and non-Muslim, within the same town or province. But the Shariah does not always have the appearance of a stricter, more disciplined code of conduct. In western experience, there have been occasions in which actions contrary to contemporary law and society appear fully justified by provisions of the Shariah.

Because of the extent to which Islam enforces the idea of brotherhood and common allegiance, a person who unites as part of the Ummah must give up all sense of individuality, independence and personal identity. The community, Ummah, becomes the identity for each individual. This surrender of one’s self is an important part of surrender to the Will of Allah, and one of the most tangible measures of a person’s devotion and commitment.

In Islamic tradition, the Ummah is greater than the sum of its parts and far more important. To participate in the Ummah, a true Muslim has an obligation first to the welfare and equity of his community and village. It demands a magnanimous disposition on behalf of the believer. Willingly, a Muslim is to cast aside personal and selfish interests and sacrifice on behalf of himself and family to alleviate and correct

injustices within his society and community. Rather than accumulating worldly goods, or even achieving a measure of comfort, the individual truly surrendered to Allah will first elect to use all of his resources and abilities to alleviate the need and discomfort present in the Ummah.

Total commitment and service to the interests of the Ummah is equated with commitment and devotion to Allah; The more one is aware of the condition and status of his community, and the more resolved and committed one is to relieving the need and suffering of his fellow man, the greater he is in spirit and more fully surrendered to Allah's will. But this commitment goes far beyond simple acts of benevolence. It requires a true loss of individual identity and selfish awareness.

There is a priority, an obligation, placed upon Muslims that the Ummah, not a governmental or political authority, is to look after the needs of those widowed, orphaned, or otherwise stricken with catastrophe or misfortune. It is very important among the Ummah, that Muslims take care of their own and willfully avoid outside assistance, particularly that associated with infidels and their canceratic influence.

Infidels are defined simply as those who do not take Muhammad at face value and do not unquestionably believe the Quran to be the words of God.

The Arabic word "jihad" means a struggle. Although construed of late to implicate a "holy war", its original intent was to call attention to a struggle or challenge, such as social injustice or a community crisis, which was to be overcome in the name of Islam. It could even be understood to include a personal challenge to self-restraint or more virtuous living. A jihad could be declared for an inward personal struggle, a challenge within a community, or an outward confrontation against a common adversary or circumstance. Whatever the circumstances, a jihad is always accompanied by a renewed call to strict Quranic living and redress of conditions or behaviors that gave rise to the inequity or crisis.

The key in the jihad is to do whatever is necessary "in the name of Islam." Provided all effort and intentions are for the common good of the Ummah and void of any selfish or personal ambition, the means of triumph, all means, are justifiable and good. Victory, in and of itself, is evidence of truth and sanction by Allah. It is a philosophy that on the surface appears to hold that "might makes right", and has on occasion given the appearance that Muslims disregard conventional societies and laws in favor of their own self determination. It is this passion and fervor for Islam itself among devout Muslims that gives rise to the perception in the West that Islamdom is a lawless, aggressive society.

Spiritualism in Islamic theology is best understood in context of the devotion and commitment to the Ummah. It is quite different than the spirituality expressed in Christianity, and it is mystical in nature with a very heavy humanistic content. The pursuit of true Islam is a personal struggle (jihad) to give up one's self or ego in favor of the Will of Allah, gaining a more harmonious existence with Allah's creation and beneficial fellowship with Allah's true believers, the Ummah. The individual, or self, is destructive and tends towards disharmony with creation, whereas the Ummah is all important, and necessary for a person to achieve their full potential of harmony and total surrender to Allah.

The mystical nature of Islamic theology becomes apparent in the doctrine that prayer and meditation are the true pathways to discover hidden powers in the psyche to master and control selfish urges. Faithful practice of Islam is said to give the follower transcendence, a condition in which the practitioner is said to go beyond normal human experiences and limitations to an awareness that is separate from and independent of the material universe. In this condition the follower is able to attain superior control over the physiological and psychological attributes of their mind and body to exercise self-control and unselfish discipline not otherwise possible. In short, true Islamic surrender may come only with deep introspection and meditation enabling one to truly master the attributes and weaknesses of his character and personality to shape the kind of person he is to be, given to either good or evil.

Islam does not teach original sin and does not have any allocation of doctrine similar to the Christian doctrines of atonement and redemption. Indeed, Islam teaches that at birth, all people are born sinless and must willfully choose to become sinful. All people are equally evil and virtuous, created in this manner by Allah to have god-like wisdom, and it is this wisdom, or opportunity of choice that separates man from the balance of creation. It is by the choice of free will that a Muslim will determine to be an evil and wicked person (selfish, independent, and egocentric), or a virtuous and benevolent person (submissive, self-less, and altruistic). Virtue comes only from within the individual and no outside source, including Allah, may impute uprightness. Under this doctrine, each individual is wholly responsible for his or her actions, and must answer unto Allah for depraved (against the unity of the Ummah) behavior and habits. There is no intercessor or savior to plead a case on behalf of the individual and by benefit of his god-like wisdom, man does not require such assistance before Allah's judgement.

Concepts of good and evil are weighed in light of the contribution or detracting from the Ummah. Righteousness is not an applicable concept, and good and evil are not relevant to any external absolute truth. Allah is a grandfatherly figure, capable of severe retribution and grand munificence, desiring for

the human element of his creation to achieve an enlightened, cooperative existence between each other and in balance and harmony with the rest of his creation. That which contributes to the unity of the Ummah and strengthens the bonds of commitment for one to another is virtuous and good. That which endangers the harmony and cohesiveness of the Ummah, whether from within or without, is evil and wicked.

True Islam requires the Muslim to strive to consistently and willingly deny his selfish desires and temptations to the glory of the Ummah. This contrasts to the Christian's inward struggle between good and evil and the exhortation to lead an obedient life resistant to temptation to the glory of God. To the Muslim, virtuous living is manifested as self-less devotion and commitment to the Ummah, and to the Christian righteous living is an obligation out of gratitude to God.

In Christian theology, all individuals are devoid of virtue and any capacity to perform righteousness. The capacity to do righteous acts and live virtuously comes only from God, and must be imputed by God upon the individual. This occurs at regeneration, and for the Christian there is an independent, personal devotion and commitment directly to God, even to the estrangement of community and society if necessary. The Christian admonition that each individual must "get right" (be obedient and submissive) with God, and then each home, church, neighborhood, community, and society will "be right" with God is in stark contrast to the Islamic sense of urgency and priority for a harmonious community first in order to be in harmony and obedience to the Will of Allah.

To understand Muslim virtue, it must clearly be understood that this is defined in terms of the Ummah, the community and brotherhood of believers. Virtuous are those actions and behaviors that strengthen the bonds of unity and contribute to the overall well-being of all Muslim believers. Evil are those actions and behaviors that jeopardize or endanger the unity and peace of the Ummah. For instance, benevolent acts of kindness and compassion that relieve suffering and need, such as feeding the poor and providing for the infirmed, are conducive to a peaceful, harmonious community to which all affected individuals may develop a sense of belonging, security, and identity. Therefore, this would be regarded as virtuous. There is not a direct obligation to Allah to do these things, but rather an obligation to the Muslim community and Allah is pleased because it promotes the harmony and peace within his creation. Wicked and criminal actions jeopardize the peace and undermine the unity of the Ummah. For instance, one does not commit theft or adultery because they are ungodly, but because they betray the trust of fellow Muslims

and cause members of the Ummah to be uncooperative with each other. This disrupts Allah's plan for man and detracts from the unity and harmony of his creation.

Theologically, the Christian understanding of salvation and redemption is alien to Islam. The concept of salvation (being delivered from a judgement or punishment) is not relevant in Islamic theology. The Quran teaches of Heaven and Hell, the one a reward for a good and virtuous life on Earth serving one's fellow man and contributing constructively to the Ummah, and the other an eternal punishment for evil and wickedness. But there is no necessity in Islam for a redeemer or requirement for atonement.

Islam does not teach an absolute righteousness, so the salvific concept of a blood sacrifice (propitiation) to atone for transgressions and to appease the righteousness of Allah is not required. Allah created the universe, and all that therein is, and he serves as judge over the actions of man, but these are weighed in relation to the plight of all creation and not in comparison or regard to Allah's own attributes and character.

Furthermore, the Islamic concept of redemption (i.e. going to heaven and being with God) is one determined by a person's own actions and devotion to community and family. The final resting, either Heaven or Hell, is wholly determined by the balance of an individual's deeds, good and evil, through the course of their life. The magnitude of reward in Heaven or the severity of punishment in Hell is determined by the magnitude and severity of actions on Earth. Such a concept of redemption is enabled given that there is not a standard of righteousness that must be addressed.

However, Islamic doctrine does set forth a concept of forgiveness from Allah. This forgiveness somewhat appropriates the Christian doctrine of repentance in that true forgiveness may be sought only with a pledge not to repeat the same offensive behavior or action. However, it must again be understood that Allah is not required to justify this forgiveness on any basis of redemption or perfection of sacrifice. This makes Allah's forgiveness somewhat arbitrary, but Islamic law teaches the need for forgiveness and the requisite piety (strict Quranic living) necessary to seek forgiveness is very important. Somewhat mystical in its application, Allah's forgiveness means that an evil or wicked action will not be held against an individual if they are truly regretful, and demonstrate such by speech and behavior for the remainder of their life, and do not again commit the same violation.

Islam and Christianity are not entirely consistent on duality of the soul and body. In Islam, the soul is one part of a unified existence of body and consciousness. This consciousness is a person's awareness and perception of the world around them, and their own particular desires. Hence, as this consciousness matures (i.e. a muslim becomes more spiritual) the believer is better suited and capable of harmonizing with his surroundings and suppressing those personal desires and motivations that are counter-productive or destructive to his place in Allah's creation. This is why it is so important in Islam to attain transcendancy so as to objectively evaluate these elements and not bias one's spirituality with personal or selfish priorities.

Islam also teaches the immortality of the physical body itself. Upon death it is immediately ascendant to be with Allah or to suffer condemnation. After death, it carries with it the consciousness developed upon the Earth. Islam teaches the body will undergo change and exist throughout eternity without ailments or infirmities known upon the Earth. This is somewhat consistent with the Christian understanding of a glorified body. The great contrast is the Islamic concept of Heaven is defined as ultimate peaceful existence without distress, injury or ailment to the body, but with the same worldly conscience now fully attuned to fullness and sensitivity Allah appointed for men to achieve on Earth.

On the subject of Satan, Islam teaches that he is a fallen creature, subjugated because of his pride, and roams about Earth endeavoring to subvert man's commitment and devotion to Allah. Satan once occupied a high station but was cast down when he refused to honor Adam as commanded by Allah. It is in Satan's interest therefore, revenge primarily, to cause as much unrest and discontent on the Earth as possible, driving the creation further from the shadow of Divine Unity, and prove that Adam was indeed unworthy of his praise. Satan's actions therefore promote discord and difficulty among the Ummah and prevents man from achieving a true harmony with Allah's creation and true unity with fellow believers. Satan interferes repeatedly in the matters of men and must be forcefully repelled by prayer and virtuous living. His influence and opportunity to cause misery and destruction among men will cease at the day of Judgement.

Islamic theology deals with the Day of Judgement as a time when all of creation, Satan in particular, is accounted before Allah. The entirety of creation is judged in the measure of harmony and unity. According to the Quran, the one most affected by this judgement is Satan. It will be his lot to have contributed the most disruption to creation's appointed duty, and Allah will eternally punish him for his rebellion and pride. Men will largely be unaffected, their course already determined, although it will be

made clear, painfully to some, how their efforts and actions contributed or detracted from the harmony of creation and will of Allah. It will become apparent to all why some individuals will receive eternal reward in Heaven and why some will receive eternal damnation in Hell, with Satan.

The most important distinction for the Christian to make regarding Islam is that Islamic teaching denies the profession of Christ as the Son of God. Indeed, Islam rejects the doctrine of the Trinity of God; In its appropriation of Allah as the Divine Unity, Islam also attributes that Allah must be a singular godhead and vigorously repudiates the doctrine of the Triune Godhead. Otherwise, Allah most closely assimilates the attributes of God the Father. He is not attributed any of the work or character that Christians associate with God the Son or God the Holy Spirit.

As already discussed, Islam does not appropriate a doctrine of atonement or intercession and does not teach a theological place for a savior. The denial of Christ is not merely a rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as Immanuel, the Son of God; Islamic theology holds that there is no Son of God, and there is no Messiah, past or promised. Jesus is looked upon by Muslims as a very worthy example and regarded as one of the five great prophets of God; Moses, Abraham, Ishmael, Jesus, and Muhammad. According to the Ahadith, Jesus taught worthy principles and virtuous living consistent with Islam, and the pattern of his life is to be emulated. However, Muslims vehemently reject any claim that Christ suffered for the wrongdoing of any other person and that his death has any redemptive or salvific purpose. Indeed, Muslims hold the worship of Christ on the Cross to be idolatrous.

Muslims also do not have a place in their theology for the Holy Spirit. There is a Quranic teaching that Allah is closer than a man's jugular vein and will respond to a Muslim's cries of distress and assistance. However, there is not a place in Islamic theology for personal interaction and intervention like the providence and leadership Christians hope for from the Spirit of God. All of the direction and leadership of Allah is manifested in outward signs and circumstances. Allah does not speak to the inward heart in a still, small voice. Allah has spoken, and his instructions and directions are contained in the Quranic revelations.

Islamic doctrine then does not allow for the work of the Holy Spirit. There is not an Islamic revelatory experience like Christian regeneration. Even in the case of Muhammad, Muslims do not claim any particular or special inspiration. Muhammad was merely selected by God to receive his message, and these secrets and commands were revealed by natural senses in face to face meetings with Gabriel. The

manner of the other prophets is the same. Christianity holds that prophets and apostles were particularly inspired by God and given distinctive revelation to write the Biblical Scriptures. Muslims reject the understanding of this type of communication and interaction between Allah and man.

Instead, Allah has ordered the universe in particular fashion and is content to rely upon man's attentiveness to his surroundings and place in nature to recognize and identify the presence of Allah. Indeed, the Quran stresses that the design and order of the universe and all things in nature are themselves revelatory and direct praise toward Allah. Every creature of the universe bears witness to the Divine Unity and Lordship of Allah. Allah's presence is everywhere, but he does not inhere in anything created, for he is divinely superior, and there is nothing in existence besides Allah that has not been created. It is only by willful neglect that man can avoid or deny these indications and refrain from submitting to these realizations.

While Christianity harmonizes with the teaching that God's glory is revealed in His creation, it differs from Islam on the ability of man to recognize and identify that glory as belonging to God. Indeed, Christian doctrine teaches that creation reveals the glory and power of God so that no one may claim ignorance before God, but that man is unable to identify and attribute this glory to God without being born-again (regeneration). The Christian view is quite specific in demanding the awareness of this glory be appointed to God, Christ in particular, and not merely an acknowledgement or profession that a superior power exists. The work to bring a man to this knowledge and understanding is a work to be done only by the Holy Spirit.

According to the Islamic doctrine then, initial Muslim conversion is external. It comes about by material experience of the universe and intellectual perception and conviction. The Quran then becomes a fundamental link in assisting converts to put order to their natural observations. As the convert progresses, his consciousness becomes more attentive to Allah's order, and the Quran calls upon him to submit more fully to Allah's order and unity with the creation.

True Christian conversion is predicated first upon regeneration of the Holy Spirit followed by a public profession, "I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God", and believer's baptism. There is not an ordinance similar to baptism in Islam. It must be remembered that Christian baptism celebrates the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and this is anathema to Islam. The formal Islamic conversion is associated

with the public profession, “There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”, and there is no further formal ordinance or ceremony.

Even though Islam discounts the inward experience of revelation and rejects the concept of regeneration, it does lay claim to direct, divine guidance through experience external to the body. There are occasions within Christian experience, and alleged by Islam, where particular individuals have been blessed to receive messages by divine, angelic revelation. Christian history relies substantially upon angelic experiences, in addition to spiritual inspiration, for leadership in a number of events in the course of God’s revealed will. Many Biblical patriarchs received timely messages and announcements delivered by God’s angel messengers. Particularly around the advent of Christ, Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, the shepherds, and the wise men all received important instructions and leadership from God by angelic revelation. In the Old Testament, Christians are similarly familiar with messages and warnings sent by angels to Abraham, Lot, Jacob, and Daniel. Islam’s entire existence is predicated upon such experience, by Muhammad’s repeated encounters with Gabriel to receive the substance of the Quran. So, Islamic teaching in this regard is not far-removed from Christian experience.

However, a great contrast exists. Islam terminates angelic revelation with Muhammad to the exclusion of any further possible revelations. Although Christianity does not dwell upon angelic revelations after the writing of the gospels, there is not an equivalent Christian doctrine that abrogates all possibility of continued communication between God and His beloved in this manner. Furthermore, the Christian, unlike the Muslim, petitions and anticipates the inward leadership and burden of the Spirit of God.

Tradition of the Ahadith holds that there has not been godly revelation or instruction to any since Muhammad. Some Muslims however speak of receiving instructions or revelation of Allah in dreams. This has caused some division and controversy in the Islamic world. Those who claim revelations in dreams do so seeking legitimacy for their agenda and persuasive influence on Muslims in general. Others strongly resist these claims and see them as inconsistent with traditional teachings. It is their position that the dreamers have distorted the Quran and Ahadith to their own ends, and the revelatory claims of these groups are consistent with the shallow regard they have for other aspects of Islamic life, and the ideal of the Quranic objectives.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that these claims are consistent with mystical traditions that have been adopted in Islamic culture, and viewed by an increasingly larger portion of Muslims as a valid way of

Allah communicating his will, without material manifestation of Gabriel or another angel. This preserves the mystique of Muhammad's particular position as the "chosen one", while at the same time enforcing Islamic claims as the legitimate religion of God. It is a very militant spirit that embraces this view, and arises largely out of a desperation on the part of some Muslim factions for legitimacy on the world stage.

The fundamental practices of Islam are known as the Five Pillars. They are the Shahadah (Profession of Faith), the Prayers, the Zakat (annual purification tax), Ramadan (fasting), and the Hajj (pilgrimage).

The Shahadah is the first pillar of Islam. It is the Islamic profession of faith that "There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the prophet of God". Islam requires this profession to be recited aloud in public at least once in one's lifetime, purposefully with an understanding of its meaning. It is understood in this profession that one is claiming fundamental belief in (1) angels, (2) the Quran as a revealed book, (3) the series of prophets culminating with Muhammad, and (4) the Day of Judgment.

The second pillar consists of the five daily congregational prayers. Attendance at the mosque for each of the five is not compulsory although strongly encouraged. The first prayer is performed before sunrise, the second just after noon, the third in late afternoon, the fourth immediately after sunset, and the fifth before retiring to bed. Before each prayer, ablutions, which are ceremonial washings of the hands, face, and feet, are performed. The congregant is to face in the direction of Mecca. Each prayer consists of two to four genuflection units. Each unit consists of one standing posture and two prostrations. Normally, verses of the Quran are recited during the standing posture of each prayer.

The Zakat is the third pillar. This is an obligatory tax derived from the Arabic "zakat" meaning to purify. The tax is levied annually and normally taken into the treasury of the Islamic governments. Payment of the tax renders the rest of one's wealth religiously and legally pure under the Shariah. It is payable in grains, cattle, and cash. The amount varies depending upon provisions of the Shariah but generally ranges from two-and a half to ten percent. Primarily this tax is intended for provisions of the poor, although the Quran does permit other purposes including ransom of Muslim war captives, jihad, and education and health purposes.

The fourth pillar is fasting in the month of Ramadan. The significance of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar, centers around the revelation of the Quran. Muslims generally observe the night of 26-27 Ramadan as the night of Muhammad's first encounter with Gabriel. The Quran itself

identifies Ramadan as the month of revelation, and Muslims observe the entire month with particular piety. It is regarded as the holy month for Muslims when they celebrate their selection as the true religion of Allah. Fasting begins at daybreak and ends at sunset for the entire month. Eating, drinking, and smoking are forbidden during the day, and this celebrates the spirit of surrender and self-denial.

The Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam. This is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca prescribed for every Muslim at least once in a lifetime. A special service is held at the sacred mosque in Mecca on the 7<sup>th</sup> of the month, Dhu al-Hajjah calling Muslims to the holy place. The pilgrimage, which is the journey to Mecca, lasts from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of the same month. Once in Mecca, the principal activities consist of walking around the Kabah seven times, kissing the Black Stone, and then running back and forth between Mt. Safa and Mt. Marwah seven times. In the final part of the pilgrimage, Muslims proceed to Mina then on to Mt. Arafat where a special worship service is observed and spend the night at Muzdalifah, between Arafat and Mina. On the last day pilgrims offer sacrifice, usually of monetary value although some animal sacrifice is observed, and return home to their families. The animal sacrifice is significant as a symbol of the sorrow and consequences of man's evil and guilt on the world and does not carry any significance of atonement.

There are three sacred, holy places in Islamic theology located in the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Each place holds a particular value in the ascendancy of Islam and represents an important element in the identity of Islam as the religion of Allah. Today, sacred mosques stand on each of the three sites and are regarded as the most holy places on Earth.

The most sacred place in Islam is the Kabah sanctuary in Mecca. Muslims travel here during the annual pilgrimage in what represents the most devout journey of their lives. After Muhammad was exiled from Mecca for his preaching, he went to Medina where he established Islam as a viable religion and cultural identity. Muhammad raised an army and in a series of battles savagely defeated his enemies and the major pagan tribes in Arabia. These victories further solidified his power as well as validating Islam as a legitimate religion in the minds of his converts. He then returned to Mecca, victoriously, and purged the sanctuary at Kabah of the pagan idols and sacrifices. He reclaimed Kabah for the worship of Allah and established Islam as the only religion in Mecca and the surrounding regions.

The initial significance of the Kabah is taken from Muhammad's insistence that it was an ancient altar built by Abraham for the worship of God. According to Islam, it is the first house of worship built on the

Earth for the worship of Allah. Later it was overrun and dominated by Arab pagans, and Muhammad saw it as his divine responsibility to reclaim and restore it to the worship of Allah. With his success, Muslims believe it to be the place where heavenly power touches earth directly, and it is the closest a Muslim on earth can get to Allah himself.

The annual pilgrimage to Mecca arises out of Muhammad's triumphal return to Mecca. Muhammad's military campaigns and stunning victories are validation to Muslims of the rightness of their cause and represents the continued resolve of Islam to set right the harmony of all the world and creation with Allah's will. The pilgrimage is the opportunity for Muslims to commemorate the symbolic significance of Muhammad's return as a testimony of their own devotion and conviction to Islam and Allah.

The place of second sanctity is the prophet's mosque in Medina. It gains priority from Muhammad himself and the tradition that Muhammad preached to the masses from this same place. This is where Islam gained its initial foothold and grew into a regional force, and ultimately a world religion. It is regarded in particular as the place where the Ummah was founded and manifested as a way of life. All that Muslims hope and strive for in harmony and unity was first put into practice, under the voice of Muhammad himself, at Medina.

Jerusalem holds a place of peculiar interest to Muslims. The Dome of the Rock is a mosque built upon the ancient ruins of Solomon's temple. Muslims regard a footprint in one of the temple's foundation stones as a tangible remnant of Muhammad's existence, and his peculiar station as an appointed prophet of Allah. Islamic legend holds that during one of their encounters, Gabriel swept Muhammad away to Jerusalem to show him all of Allah's revelation throughout human history that had still been ignored. During this, Muhammad was taken into Heaven to see the glory of Allah. The footprint is said to be Muhammad's last step before he ascended up into Heaven itself, and that he was returned to Earth at Medina.

As already touched upon, Islam is not a completely harmonious and unified religion itself. Like Christianity, there are a number of subdivisions in Islamic thought, and these separations exist over fundamental differences in a variety of interpretations affecting Islamic life. The two great bodies of Islamic followers are the Shiite Muslims (Iran, Iraq, Saudi) and the Sunni Muslims (Afghanistan, Pakistan, India). Other groups of Muslims include the Sufis, Rastafarians, Wahabi, Ahmadiyah, Twelvers, and Nation of Islam.

The primary disagreement of the Shiite and Sunni groups is an ancient disagreement over the legitimate “Imam” or successor to the prophet Muhammed. It is purely a political division without doctrinal significance. The Imam, or “learned one”, is looked upon as the leader of the Ummah and has the final word on Quranic interpretation and Shariah judgments. The disagreement over the legitimate Imam arose principally over a political power struggle between these two groups of Muslims in the middle centuries. The separation has remained with us today. The Shiite Muslims use the term Imam to denote direct descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah whom they consider to be the true rulers of the Muslim community. The vast majority of Muslims however are Sunnis. They seek a legitimate Imam through a process of selection according to qualifications and knowledge rather than lineage, and desire to appoint an Imam by consensus, Itjamah (popular consent), of the Ummah. In practical terms, this very closely approximates a democratically elected official with a life term for service.

But however they may distinguish among themselves in priorities of Islamic life, Muslims are largely unified against common enemies and outsiders. Muslims look at the necessity of dealing with infidels, non-believers, as a very unpleasant and distasteful business. In whatever ways they may be divided among themselves, there is a decided and definite line drawn between Muslims and non-Muslims. Islamic doctrine and tradition teach very clearly that whatever and whoever is not with Islam, or part of the Ummah, is against Islam and against Allah.

In the early days of Islam, Muslims took to heart the success Muhammad had demonstrated at Mecca and sought to root out all resistance to Islam which they perceived as a rejection of Allah and his revealed truth. They did this quite forcefully in most places and perpetuated the image of Islam as ruthless and savage. After Muhammad returned to Mecca and consolidated his seat of power among his old enemies and rival tribes, Islam became the public religion of the region. It then began to spread outward into Asia, Africa, and even Europe.

Islamic evangelism was forceful and even violent. It came about primarily through military conquest and occupation. To a lesser degree, Muslim merchants and traders contributed to the dispersion of Islamic doctrine, but in a somewhat peculiar manner.

The Quran does not enjoin violent and coercive conversion to Islam. A person is to come to terms with the teachings of the Quran and submission to Allah on his own. However, the Quran does advocate violent and savage brutality in defense of the Ummah, and against non-believers when necessary to

declare or reclaim glory for Allah. It is very important to remember that there is not a distinction between what is done for Allah and what is done for the benefit of the Ummah or the name of Islam. Military campaigns were enjoined either to gain territory and spread the influence and control of Islam or to forcefully open up markets and trade routes for Muslim merchants and traders to acquire those things deemed necessary and useful to the Ummah. All was done in the name of Islam.

Even so, large-scale conversion to Islam came about as Muslims conquerors occupied increasingly larger territories. These conversions are peculiar in the sense that non-believers were not compelled directly to convert to Islam. The conquerors at the time were satisfied to have gained additional territory, resources, and control over these populations. But the Quranic teachings of the importance and significance of the Ummah underscored the advantages of the conquered peoples to “belong to the community”. Although these conversions were not forced at the point of a sword, the violent and brutal introduction of Islam and the Muslim philosophy of life into these cultures had a very coercive effect upon the vanquished, and many converted to Islam out of a desperate struggle for survival under Muslim domination, rather than experiencing a true religious conversion.

Muslim traders and merchants were not compelled to do business with non-Muslims. The distasteful business of dealing with infidels was, and is, a one-way transaction; Do what is necessary, with whomever, in order to gain the interests and benefits of the Ummah, in the name of Islam. This quite simply expresses the oil-business relationship between Middle Eastern Muslims and businessmen in the West.

The trading and commerce doctrine of Islam is very self-serving to the interests of the Ummah. It is right and virtuous to do whatever is necessary, even conquest and domination, to obtain whatever is deemed necessary and useful to Islamdom, and to advance the power and influence of Islam. Benevolence and compassion are compelled towards fellow Muslims, but are utilitarian towards non-believers. Most of the conquered people had nothing left of value (i.e. valuable to the Ummah) to entice Muslim merchants to sell to them, since everything else of value and interest to the Muslims had already been forcefully taken. All that was left for the vanquished was to unite with the victors (i.e. If you can't beat them, join them).

Once rooted in this manner, Islam remained. Islamdom reached its zenith in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries stretching from Eastern Asia through the Indian subcontinent, throughout Africa, into the eastern regions of Europe, and even into Spain. It appeared that Islam was well on its way to true world domination and

an Ummah of all people on the face of the Earth. Muhammad's predictions and Allah's commands were on the cusp of being manifest.

But Islamic expansionism stalled early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was in rapid decline by the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of European colonialism and industrialization. The aspirations of Islam establishing itself as the one religion of the world, and harmoniously uniting all people to the glory of Allah were shattered. Many scholars believe this has given rise to the animosity of Islamdom towards the West and the simmering resentment and jealousy that has persisted for over 300 years.

In a simplified analysis, there are two specific historical developments in which the West affronted Islam and provoked this enduring resentment: the ascendancy of the West in cultural influence and political domination of the world scene at the expense of Islamic prowess beginning early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial and commercial exploitation of the strategic and natural resources of the Middle Eastern region. Cumulatively, this has developed into a world community in which the West now claims the influence, power, and cultural domination that Islam intended to achieve for itself.

Hence, the culture of violence and bloodshed that has always been a part of Islam manifests itself towards European and American dominance. While most Muslims are not blatantly aggressive towards the West, there is a uniform bitterness and resentment among the majority, and a particularly vocal and motivated group within Islam is relentless in a struggle (Jihad) to save face before the world and redeem the legitimacy of Islam as THE world religion. This group is fueled by motivation of what could have and should have been if not for the rise of Western power.

In American expansionism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, European settlers and Christian missionaries lived by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The doctrine claimed a divine sanction by God for western expansion and immigration because it advanced Christianization of the new world. In a similar regard, Muslims held a conviction of destiny from Allah to colonize the entire world in the name of Islam. But Muslims did not achieve the same level of success, and attribute the cause of that shortcoming to the interference of western culture.

This perception fosters resentment of the West by Islamdom and categorization of western culture, American culture in particular, as the embodiment of all that is evil and wicked. It becomes readily apparent by Islamic doctrine, that American and European culture, values, and liberties represent a

horrific peril to the harmony and unity of the Muslim Ummah, and jeopardizes Islam's imperative to achieve balance and harmony with all of Allah's creation. As already discussed, anything that endangers the harmony and the cohesiveness of the Ummah, whether from within or without, is regarded as evil and wicked.

The ascendancy of European and American power and influence threatens to de-legitimize the Islamic claim to destiny from Allah. Further, the prominence of western culture, with its personal freedoms and individual prosperity, not only constrains Islamic expansion and ascendancy on the world stage, but also jeopardizes the validity and cohesiveness of the established Ummah in the traditional Islamic homelands.

Western culture and values stress individual effort and initiative, rather than family and community solidarity. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of European colonialism, most Muslims lived under western political and legal influence. This experience with the West and the secular nature of most western institutions undermined Muslim customs and religious law. In retaliation, Islam strikes out at American and European power on occasion in a perceived struggle to regain its destiny and to sustain its presence in world affairs.

Violence, even terrorism, is not new to the culture and history of Islam, and is not new in Islam's struggle against western power and culture. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, marauding bandits and pirates raided European ships in all the world's oceans in efforts to discourage European colonization and protect Muslim trade. In the intervening years, the methods and efforts of Muslims to discourage and wither western influences have progressed with the times. In present day events, the terrorism continues in efforts to intimidate American and European interests into withdrawing from various parts of the world and diminishing the effects of their influence.

It is of no small consequence that the West played a significant role in establishing national Israel and this exacerbated what Muslims perceived as callous exploitation. Zionism is innocuously defined as simply the quest for a Jewish homeland. But in the complexities of Middle Eastern politics and culture, the quest for a Jewish homeland is interpreted as systematic opposition to Muslims and Islamic history. It is again taken by Muslims as a bold affront and forceful exertion of western power in matters relating to the sanctity and security of Islam.

One of the toughest transitions for Islamdom has been the adaptation of Muslim society and culture to a secular style of government with its archetypical departments and segregation of powers. Although the concept of democratically elected leaders among the Ummah is consistent with Islamic tradition and history, the separation of issues and priorities into spiritual and secular categories, and addressing these as separate entities has presented quite a strain. Islam is very much a theocratic society and way of life and the Ummah, educated Islamic theologians, quite naturally assumed leadership of all things pertaining to the Ummah, both within and without.

The shift has met with considerable resistance and inflamed western resentment even more. Yet, it is necessitated for participation on the world stage. A world stage dominated by western political influence and patterned after western business styles. In one regard, this compartmentalization of Islamic culture insulated the Ummah from direct contact and interaction with infidel westerners, permitting the secularist aspects of national governments to handle this distasteful task, yet it still contributed to a resentment of Muslims towards the west and western culture for the disruption in the structure of their society and dilution of the strength of the Ummah.

Many Islamic political leaders and reformers have tried to assuage Muslim anxiety by affirming the strength and relevance of the Ummah and how well it can adapt to the changing political and cultural landscapes. They have tried to assimilate the merits and virtues of an industrialized economy with Muslim culture and history, retaining Islamic identity and doctrines. At best, their efforts have been met with ridicule and contempt. Most have paid with their lives, and still others have been forced into exile in the West.

To many in the West, the Islamic world (Islamdom) often appears disjointed and fragmented. This is due primarily to the Islamic concept of community that is inherent in Islamic teachings. The Western concept of nationalism and “belonging” as defined by geo-political boundaries does not fit Islamic doctrine. Muslims derive their identity from the body of teachings and community law they adhere to, not their geographical location. Hence, it is wholly within Islamic concepts for several “nations” or communities of people that observe drastically different leaders, laws, and commitments to inhabit the same geographical space. The overlapping of geo-political jurisdictions is not a valid concept to them at all.

But Islam, like Christianity, has those who are involved in name only. They do not seriously change or pattern their lives after the tenants of their professed faith, and do not represent the spirituality of the

religion in any meaningful example. It is very easy to see then that these types of individuals do not contribute substantially to the identity and life of the Ummah. And like Christianity, they do not contribute much to accurately defining and understanding the principles of the Islamic faith.

These concluding remarks may be regarded by some as inflammatory or biased. But they represent this writer's observant perceptions and careful assessments. They are offered here with a humble devotion to defend the truth of Christianity and ably represent the threats poised against the declaration of the Gospel of Christ and the liberties and privileges of American freedom:

Frequently, news reports and scholarly commentaries on Islam purport to represent the religion as a peace loving and tolerant discipline that is receptive and broad-minded to issues of religious and cultural diversity. These same individuals would have all believe that Islam responds vigorously only when pushed into a corner, or that radical, extremist individuals alone are responsible for the violence and terror against America and her allies. These reports are misguided.

What is largely regarded by some as a tolerant attitude of Islam towards other customs and religions, namely Judaism and Christianity, may be more accurately assessed in the context of indifference. It is true that Islam has peacefully coexisted with Jewish and Christian populations in many places around the world. It is equally true, that in the vast majority of these arrangements, the Muslims were the power structure in control.

Muslims have been content in history to leave conquered peoples and inhabitants of Muslim lands alone and minimize all interaction with them. Muslims encourage conversion, but are equally content to leave a non-Muslim people to their own destruction and struggles. They have historically been a peace loving culture so long as they are the ones in control, and this has virtually always come after bloodshed.

For some, indeed for many, conversion to Islam has been used to rebel against western, Christian values and jurisprudence. There is a perception, grounded in some validity, that Islam has appealed in particular to a disenfranchised and criminal element of American and European societies. It is hard to deny that it flourishes in the American prison systems and makes not so much a religious connection, as a common purpose and devotion to undermining American society and values which are viewed as oppressive and illegitimate.

The annual Muslim pilgrimage, Hajj, should also serve as a reminder of the bloody determination and willingness of Muslims to destroy all whom they perceive as enemies to Islam. However, sacred and holy this pilgrimage may appear, or be reported, it is born out of celebration of bloody conflict and military conquest. A conquest exercised to colonize and annex Muhammad's birthplace under Muslim rule.

At this point, a struggle to resist Islamic aggression and terrorism is purely a fight for survival. A peaceful mediation will not be possible without a willingness of all in the West, Christians in particular, to submit to Islamic domination and Muslim rule as it was ascendant in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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This essay authored and distributed by:

Elder R. Keith Hamilton  
[www.gilgalgospel.net](http://www.gilgalgospel.net)  
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