Islam is an Arabic word meaning submission, in this context to the will of God (Allah), and denotes the name of the religion that was initiated with Adam and finally revived with the last revelation to the Last Prophet, Muhammad (c.570-632 CE), through the Archangel Gabriel in the form of the Qur’an over twenty years. The followers of this religion are called Muslims, not Muhammadans as was in the past sometimes mistakenly assumed in the West (by extrapolation from the naming of Christians after Christ). Islam covers every aspect of life, social, political, economic, ethical and so on.

Lexically, the word islam is derived from the verb salima, yaslamu, salama or salam, probably from the same Semitic origin as the Hebrew term shalom. It means:

1. to be safe and sound, unharmed, unimpaired;
2. to be unobjectionable, blameless, faultless;
3. to be certain, established;
4. to preserve, keep from injury;
5. to keep the peace, make one’s peace;
6. to forsake, leave;
7. to get, obtain;
8. to become reconciled with one another, make peace with one another; and
9. to surrender, capitulate, submit, abandon.

With its different derivatives, such as aslama, salam, muslimun and muslimin, the term occurs 138 times in the Qur’an.

Islam itself is repeated eight times in the form of verbal noun. Of the eight, in three places (6.125; 39.22; 61.7) it is used as Islam alone and in two places with a pronoun as islamakum (your submission) (49.17) and as islamihim (their Islam, surrender) (9.74). The Islams in 6.125 and 39.22 are particularly
significant from a theological perspective, for they seem to imply that while Allah opens up some
people’s hearts and eases their way to Islam, others are led astray. Hence in 6.125 Allah declares that:

Whomever Allah wants to guide, He opens his heart up to Islam, and whomever He wants to lead
astray, He makes his heart extremely constricted, as though he were ascending to heaven. Thus Allah
inflicts His punishment upon those who do not believe.

In 39.22 Allah states that ‘He whose heart Allah has opened to Islam shall receive light from his Lord.
But woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah! Truly, they are in the
grossest error.’ Nevertheless, considered with other verses, the orthodox view maintains that these
verses are not indications of people being predestined to either heaven or hell, but rather human
beings have free will to choose whichever path they want to follow.

The connotation of the remaining three appearances (3.19, 85; 5.3) is very important, for they occur
concomitantly with the noun religion (din). The classical exegetes almost unanimously take these
references to be the definite proofs that the Qur’anic usage of religion always refers to Islam, without
which no human being can attain salvation. Sura 3.19 reads ‘The [true] religion with Allah is Islam’; 3.85
declares that ‘Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the
Herafter he will be one of the losers’; and, finally, 5.3 concludes the prophetic message in these words:
‘Today, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My grace on you and approved Islam as a
religion for you.’ The majority of Muslims believe that, according to these verses, for anyone to attain
salvation they must be a Muslim. This is, one can say, the Muslim equivalent of the Christian doctrine
extra ecclesiam nulla salus (outside the Church, there is no salvation).

However, there is currently a debate among Islamic scholars who differentiate between the wider,
literal meaning of islam as submission to the will of God (and its noun form muslim, a submitter) and the
colloquial use of it in a limited sense as the name of the institutionalized religion Islam (and its noun
form, as commonly known, Muslim). In its wider meaning, any of the world religions can be called islam
and their followers muslim, both without capitals, whereas the capitalised Islam and Muslim denote the
common understandings and usages.

Basic beliefs

It should be noted that Islam is closely connected with iman (faith). The common understanding is that
belief in Islam is undertaken first by accepting the basics of iman and then by performing the Five Pillars
of Islam. However, a contrasting view in 49.14 implies a reverse order:

The wandering Arabs say: ‘We believe.’ Say: ‘You believe not, but rather say “We submit”, for the faith
has not yet entered into your hearts.’

Nevertheless, by following the common understanding that faith precedes Islam, these are the
universally accepted basics of iman: First and foremost is belief in the unity of God (tawhid), which is
also emphasized as the First Pillar of Islam in the form of shahada. God is one and has no associates,
and all people should form a united body (umma) both in belief and practice. Second is the belief in
angels, who are heavenly bodies in the service of God. There are four archangels: Jibril (Gabriel), Mika’il
(Michael), Israfil and Azra’il. Shaytan (Satan) or Iblis was known to be an archangel before it was eternally
condemned due to its refusal to bow down in front of Adam. Third come the Holy Scriptures, which are
believed to have been initiated with the first revelation to Adam and ended with the last revelation to Muhammad. The Qurʾan is the last, definitive and true revelation that contains and affirms the eternal reality while amending the falsities that have been insinuated into previous scriptures. Fourth is the prophets, whose exact numbers cannot be known for certain; what is known is that the first was Adam and the last was Muhammad. All have been proclaiming the religion of God, which is generically called Islam. In this sense there has always been only one true religion and that is Islam. Fifth is belief in the Day of Judgement, which will be announced with a horn blast by the angel Israfil, bringing everything to an end and resurrecting the dead. Everybody will be questioned by God and, according to one’s deeds, either rewarded with heaven or punished with hell. The last component of faith are the *qada* (Divine Decree) and *qadar* (Predestination). These may seem fatalistic at first sight but tradition holds that they are consistent with free will and human responsibility, for God’s divine foreknowledge neither necessitates an event happening nor annuls our ability to act freely.

The Five Pillars

The Five Pillars of Islam are the five basic duties that every devout, sincere Muslim is expected to perform, as explained in an authentic saying of the Prophet. The first requirement for one to come under to the umbrella of Islam is to say *shahada*. This is actually a testimony to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, put forward in a traditional format as: ‘There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is the messenger of God (Allah)’ (*La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*). The Second Pillar is *salat*, the prescribed prayers carried out five times a day - at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night, all of which can be performed either in congregation or alone. One must face the Holy Ka‘ba while praying and be clean ritually. Ritual purity can be obtained either by a minor or a major ablution. There are other prayers for other occasions, such as feasts, funerals and on Friday. Of these, the last is the most important, not only religiously but also politically: involving a sermon, Friday prayers can only be performed congregationally. The Third Pillar, *zakat*, is usually described as the annual taxation of one’s excess wealth at certain rates for different valuables. It is considered a form of social welfare programme, by which wealth is redistributed and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small elite prevented. It is also seen as a ritual purification of one’s wealth. Although the allocation of the *zakat* is prescribed in the Qurʾan, the Companions of the Prophet showed that it was open to new interpretations. The Fourth Pillar is *sawm*, that is, fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan from dawn to dusk by abstaining from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse. A light meal is recommended just before dawn to provide people with some strength for the day. The Fifth Pillar is *hajj*, which brings both bodily efforts and material sources together, and is the culmination in a Muslim’s life, after which it became a custom to add to one’s name the title of *hajji*. It is the pilgrimage to the Holy Shrine Ka‘ba in the city of Mecca, to be performed once in a lifetime, provided one has the means to do so. Regardless of the circumstances, rich or poor, healthy or ill, Muslims usually perform it even if they end up borrowing money to do so. The social and psychological effects of *hajj* on a Muslim are highly significant for, despite the fact that they all come from separate nations, one perhaps for the first time enjoys the feeling of belonging to an *umma*.

Some consider *jihad* to be the Sixth Pillar, but this can hardly be verified. Originally it was taken to mean any holy struggle in the way of God, though, especially after the nineteenth century, *jihad* was portrayed as the holy war against the evil plans of the West towards the Islamic world. But this is a misconception: holy war is an insignificant part of the *jihad* concept, for Muhammad considers holy war to be the lesser *jihad*. The greater *jihad* takes place in a Muslim’s inner self and represents the struggle
to do good and abstain from evil in all circumstances.

**The past and the present**

Early on in his life Muhammad used to like seclusion in the cave of Hira, practising with what was known as the hanif tradition, which had been handed down from the prophet Abraham. There in Hira he is reported to have started receiving his first call as the Prophet with the first revelations as ‘recite’ in 610 CE. He was startled and came home shaking. His wife Khadija took him to her uncle Waraqa, who confirmed his true mission as the Prophet but did not live long enough to see it made public. Muhammad conveyed his message to the polytheistic people of Mecca, who vehemently opposed him. When the persecution there became unbearable in 622 CE, he permitted his followers to emigrate to Medina (previously Yathrib), to which city he had been invited by the leaders of the tribes of Aws and Khazraj. This event is called Hijra and marks the beginning of the Muslim lunar calendar. In Medina, Muhammad established a brotherhood between the newcomers from Mecca (Muhajirun) and the host people of Medina (Ansar) that transformed the umma into a well-organized community out of which came the first Muslim state. They conquered Mecca, without bloodshed, in 628 CE. After Muhammad’s passing away in 632 CE, Abu Bakr was chosen as the first khalifa (caliph). He was succeeded by ˁUmar, ˁUthman and then ˁAli, but the order of succession to Muhammad eventually led to sectarian division within Islam. The Sunnis, who form the majority, hold that Muhammad did not specifically leave any successor and consequently this was the order agreed upon by the umma. But the Shi’i, Islam’s biggest minority group, believe that Muhammad recommended ˁAli, who was the obvious successor as his son-in-law and the Prophet’s closest surviving blood relative, as khalifa. In their opinion, ˁAli was robbed of his right to lead the umma. The Shi’i have many different subsects, of which the Isma’ilis and the Imami, also known as the Twelvers and the largest Shi’ite community, are the best known. The expansion of Islam was exceptionally fast, considering there were believers everywhere from the Atlantic on one side to China on the other within a century of Muhammad’s death.

Today, at the start of the twenty-first century CE, the number of Muslims worldwide is estimated at about a billion. Despite the ending of the caliphate with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Islam is still a mighty force to be reckoned with and one of the biggest contenders for world power today. In the face of advancing European expansion through imperialism, there have been several revivalist thinkers and resistance movements. Famous among them are Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ˁAbdu, Rashid Rida, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman, the Jama’at-i Islami, the Muslim Brotherhood and Tablighi Jama’at. Despite their successful efforts in formulating original versions of orthodox Islam, an authentic Muslim life able to face the encounter with Western modernity without losing its identity remains to be established.

**Further reading**

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