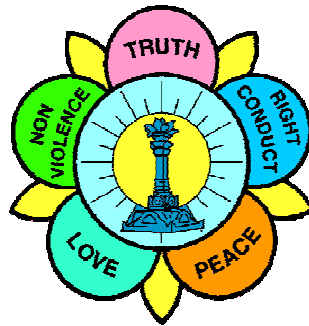


Unity of Faiths

Islam



This is a brief report on the teachings and practices of Islam. It compares the teachings of Islam with the Universal teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. It is meant as an introduction to be used at study circles and SSE classes.

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1. History of Islam

The word 'Islam' (surrender), is derived from the same Semitic root as Hebrew *shalom* (peace), it means 'entering into a condition of peace and security with God, through allegiance or surrender to Him. Islam is the third of the three great Semitic religions, after Judaism and Christianity. It is deeply rooted in the two earlier religions; on the most fundamental level all three share the same truth – that of belief in the one God. The meeting points between them are quite considerable. In one sense the history of Islam predates the birth and revelations of the Prophet Muhammad and goes back to the creation of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. There is a direct correlation between the Bible and the *Qur'an* on the lives of the prophets. "In the beginning God....." the book of Genesis tells us. The *Qur'an* agrees. It differs only in using the word "*Allah*," meaning God.

God created the world and after it human beings. The name of the first man was Adam. The descendants of Adam led to Noah, who had a son named Shem. This is where the word 'Semite' comes from: literally a Semite is a descendant of Shem. Like the Jews, the Arabs consider themselves a Semitic people. The descendants of Shem led to Abraham. So far the tradition agrees with Judaism and Christianity. Indeed it was the submission of Abraham in his supreme test that appears to have provided Islam with its name. Abraham married Sarah. Sarah had no son. So Abraham wanting to continue his line took Hagar for his second wife. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael, whereupon Sarah conceived and likewise had a son named Isaac. Sarah then demanded that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. According to the *Qur'an*, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise. His descendants, flourishing in Arabia, became Muslims; where as those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, were Hebrews and became Jews. *Muslim* means 'one who is devoted or faithful to God'.

Following Ishmael's line in Arabia, we come to the latter half of the sixth century A.D. to Muhammad, the prophet through whom Islam reached its definitive form. There had been authentic prophets of God before him, but he was their culmination. No valid prophets will follow him.

When Muhammad died in 632 A.D., Abu Bakr, (first non-family member to convert to Islam), was elected leader (caliph). Islam continued to spread under the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar (634-44). The Arabs now controlled Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia. During 'Umar's reign the essentials of the *Shari'a* (the path to be followed in Muslim life) law and the systems of Muslim government were laid down. Then 'Umar was assassinated and the pious 'Uthman was chosen, mostly because he was so malleable. Islamic expansion continued into Cyprus, Rhodes, the Anatolian coast and many Mediterranean ports. 'Uthman's best achievement was the 'recension' of the *Qur'an* – accurate copies made from the original text. 'Uthman was murdered in 656 and Ali (Muhammad's son-in-law, who was also raised by Muhammad from age six), was elected as successor. The party (*shi'a*) of Ali broke away from those who claimed to be following the custom (*Sunna*) of the prophet, thereby creating the divide between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Muslims which persists to this day. Ali was murdered by the *Kharijis* (Arabic, *kharaja*, 'go out').

The spread of Islam was very rapid. Within a hundred years of the death of Muhammad, it had reached the Atlantic in one direction and the borders of China in the other. It now amounts to a billion adherents, and is found in most countries of the world. It is also found in many different styles although always expressing the same basic characteristics.

As Islam spread and diverged, the need for a standard law (*Shari'a*) became apparent. To a great extent this law has defined and shaped Islam's empires, and interpreters of the *Shari'a* had and still have great social and political influence. The *Sunni* scrutinized the sayings of Muhammad and his companions (*Hadith*) for help in interpreting uncertain points in the *Qur'an*. Thus the *Shari'a* as used by the majority of *Sunni* was based on the *Qur'an*, the *Sunna* (practice), consensus of the community (*ijma*) and the *Hadith*, with if necessary analogical reasoning. Five principal Schools of *Shari'a* law (one of which is *Shi'a*) were accepted by the tenth century, and are still in force today. Each school places a slightly different emphasis on certain matters of doctrine and theology.

The *Shi'a* believed that Ali was their first rightful caliph (*imam*), and over the centuries have developed their own legal framework and theology. Importance is given to the *Qur'an*, the *Sunna*, the *Hadith* (Wisdom) and the consensus of the community (*Ijma*) in that order. They believe in the authority of their scholars and the infallibility of the *imams*, who as *ayatollahs* are filling the office of the *imam* until such time as *al-mahdi* (the guided one) should return.

There are other sects such as the *Isma'ilis*, who follow much the same path as the *Shi'a*; the difference lies in believing that *Isma'il*, in the eighth century, should have become the seventh imam. Most of the *Isma'ilis* are now divided into two branches, the *Musta'lis* in Bombay and the *Nizaris*, led by the Aga Khan. Smaller off shoots are the *Nusayris* and *Druzes*.

There is one particular path of Islam that has shone throughout the centuries, in spite of persecution, and this is *Sufism*. The *Sufis* follow the esoteric path of Islam, but not necessarily by withdrawing from the world. There were always ascetics and mystics, but the *Sufis* rose as a potent force at the time of the *Sunni/Shi'a* split. Their spirituality was a reaction to the greedy acquisitiveness of the caliphs, who were paying only lip service to the Islamic ideal.

The *Sufis* have produced some of the world's most remarkable scholars, philosophers and writers, who were often at odds with the pious main stream: such as al-Hallaj, whose utterance 'I am al-Haqq' ("I am the real"), caused his execution. The theologian-philosopher Al-Ghazali was perhaps most instrumental in drawing together some of the disparate threads of *Sufism* and orthodox Islam. He expressed the importance of the inner life without denying the necessity of the law and worth of philosophy. Essentially it was to put God at the center of all things: this is the central tenet of Islam, but the orthodox suspected *Sufi* methods – instead of using the main stream schools, Sufis passed the teachings on from master (*shaykh*) to pupil in communities or schools of their own. *Sufism* originated and grew from Iran (Persia). These separate schools grew into the many different *Sufi* orders, several of which are still practicing in many parts of the world.

For centuries, Islam was in the vanguard of scientific discovery, cultural ideas and philosophical thought. But from the time of European Renaissance, Islam's primacy in all these areas began to be eroded. The decline started when the colonial rule displaced Islamic empires in most places. By twentieth century, the empire of Islam was completely subsumed by the West. Attempts made to counteract the perceived threat of materialism have not produced cohesiveness.

Islam has never been a static religion. Its philosophers, thinkers and intellectuals throughout the centuries have applied its ethics to their own and changing times. But the dilemma of Islamic countries of how to deal with the encroachment of Western technology and values and influence still has not been entirely resolved. The assimilation of technology is not a problem, given that science was always a part of Islamic culture. It is the values and influences that come with it which threaten the fabric of Islam –

many Muslims feel that their way of life, their Islamic center is being deeply eroded by Western modernization.

Sources:

1. The World's Religions, Our great wisdom traditions – Islam – Huston Smith, HarperSanFrancisco
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2. Prophet Muhammad

Muhammad is said to have been born A.D. 570 in Mecca into the leading tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh. His name derives from the Arabic verb "*Hamada*" meaning "to praise, to glorify."

Muhammad's father died before Muhammad was born. He was sent to live with a Bedouin family for 4 to 5 years. His mother died when he was six. He was then taken in by his paternal grandfather, Abdul Al-Muttalib, a respected elder in Mecca. He was later adopted into his uncle's home. Though the latter's declining fortunes forced the young orphan to work hard, he was warmly received by his new family.

At an early age, he experienced a visitation by two figures (later identified as angels) who, 'opened his chest and stirred their hands inside'. The angels of God opened Muhammad's heart and filled it with light. It was the first of several unusual experiences which led him to increasingly search for the truth of God and religion on his own. Pure hearted and beloved in his circle, he was of sweet and gentle disposition. His bereavements made him sensitive to human suffering in every form and he was always ready to help others, especially the poor and the weak. His sense of honor, duty and fidelity won him the titles of "The True", "The Upright" and "The Trustworthy one."

The part of the world where Islam was born was an area of great trading activity, a meeting place of cultures. It was also rife with stone worshipping, polytheistic warmongering Arabic and nomadic tribes with very strong interfamilial loyalties and little notion of a cohesive society. There was only one place that commanded any semblance of unity and was recognized universally as being holy, and that was the *Ka'bah*, the sacred house of Mecca, built by Abraham (Ibrahim) for the worship of the One God. But over the centuries people had strayed from this essential truth, and worship of the One God scarcely existed.

As he grew from childhood to youth and youth to manhood, the lawless strife of his contemporaries, the repeated outbursts of pointless quarrels among tribes frequenting the Meccan fairs and the general immorality and cynicism of his day combined to produce in the prophet-to-be a reaction of horror and disgust. Silently, broodingly his thoughts were turning inward.

Upon reaching maturity he took up the caravan business, and earned a reputation as an honest and reliable worker. During his travels with trading caravans he met Christians and Jews. Arabia was an important refuge for Jews and orthodox Christians when they came under persecution. Muhammad increasingly came under the influence of *Hanifs*, who were seeking to preserve a monotheism which they traced back to Abraham; Mecca was polytheistic with revered idols, and Muhammad recognized the contrast as extreme.

At age twenty five he married a woman by the name of Khadijah. They had six children; two sons who died and four daughters. During a long, desolate period that lay ahead, in which no one would believe in

him, Khadija remained steadfast by his side. Following his marriage were fifteen years of preparation before his ministry was to begin. A mountain on the outskirts of Mecca, known as Mount Hira, contained a cave, and Muhammad, needing solitude, began to frequent it.

He struggled with the truth of God lying behind the bewildering conflict of idols and religions. On one occasion, he had the strong sense of a presence (later identified as Gabriel/*Jibril*) pressing on him and insisting three times, '*Iqra*', read (or recite). He resisted but then felt words being impelled through him, the first words of what became many revelations, collected eventually in the *Qur'an*:

*'Recite, in the name of your Lord who creates
who creates man from a clot of blood,
Recite, for your Lord is the highest,
Who teaches by the pen,
teaches man what he knows not'* ----- the opening words of *sura 96*.

There followed further revelations. From his initiating vision he saw with absolute clarity that if God is God, there can only be what God is: there cannot be a God of the Christians, a God of the Jews, still less can there be the many deities of Mecca. It followed that the idolatry of Mecca was deeply wrong about God and must be abolished. He began preaching, but met with great hostility by those to whom he preached. It was his piety and unassuming modesty, coupled with his insistence and perseverance, which eventually gave power to his teachings.

During his first ten years of preaching in Mecca, he converted many but also made enemies particularly among his own tribe, the Quraysh. His message about the one God and the true path hit at the heart of their traditions and he was regarded as a dangerous subversive. After Khadijah, Ali, (Muhammad's cousin) and his adopted son Zayd were the first to believe, followed by the first non-family member Abu Bakr. They were called *al-muslimun*, i.e. Muslims, those who enter into a condition of safety because of their commitment to God. The leaders of Mecca, attacked Muhammad and his followers with ridicule and insults. When these proved ineffective, they turned to abuse and threats. When these too failed, they resorted to open persecution. In 622 he left for Yathrib, now known as Medina (The City), with his companions (including Abu Bakr and 'Umar, who were highly instrumental in the spread of Islam after the prophet's death). The city's elders invited him to come and make his way of unity a practical reconciliation between the two contesting ruling families.

This migration is known as Hijra and the year 622 is taken as the start of the Islamic calendar. The significance of hijra was largely the severing of Muhammad's ties with his own city and the tribe of Quraysh, and the setting up of the new community (*'umma*), with religious affiliations. The hijra marks a stage in Muhammad's own development, from a persecuted preacher to the leader of a socio-religious community with political and military power. Those who accompanied him on this move, or who joined him shortly thereafter, were known as emigrants (*Muhajirun*), and the people of Yathrib, who gave refuge to Muhammad and his followers, were called *Ansar* (helpers).

At Medina, the prophet continued the revelations as they were given. The revelations were clearly distinguished from the words which Muhammad spoke as a man, both through his changed appearance and through the entirely different style of the utterance – rhythmic and tied loosely by rhyme, without exact precedent in the Arabian context. The revelations included the stories of other prophets, creation of earth, circulation of water in nature and other scientific concepts and facts that were not a part of the knowledge of that time. From the moment of his arrival at Medina, Muhammad assumed several new roles. From prophecy he was pressed into administration. He became the master of not merely a handful of followers but of the collective life of a city, its judge and general as well as teacher. As

supreme magistrate, he continued to lead an unpretentious life as he had in the days of his obscurity. He lived in an ordinary clay house, milked his own goats, and was accessible day and night to the humblest in his community.

Tradition depicts his administration as an ideal blend of justice and mercy. As chief of state and trustee of the life and liberty of his people, he exercised the justice necessary for order, meting out punishment to those who were guilty. When the injury was toward himself, on the other hand, he was gentle and merciful even to his enemies. In all, the people of Medina found it difficult not to love and obey him. With superb statecraft, he welded the five heterogeneous and conflicting tribes of the city, three of which were Jewish, into an orderly confederation. The task was not an easy one, but in the end he succeeded in awakening in the citizens a spirit of cooperation unknown in the city's history. His reputation spread and people began to flock from every part of Arabia to see the man who had wrought this miracle.

In the second year of the hijra the Medina army won a spectacular victory over a Meccan army that was many times larger. This victory was interpreted as a clear sign that the angels of heaven were on the side of Muhammad. The following year, however, a reversal occurred and Muhammad himself was wounded. Two years later the Meccan army laid a siege to Medina and lost. This turned the tide permanently in Muhammad's favor; and eight years after his migration from Mecca, he returned as the conqueror. He forgave his former persecutors. He made his way to the Ka'bah and rededicated it to Allah. He accepted the virtual mass conversion of the city. He himself, returned to Medina. Two years later in 632 A.D. Muhammad died with virtually all of Arabia under his control.

People of Islamic faith know him as the last prophet of God. The blend of admiration, respect and affection that the Muslim feels for Muhammad is an impressive fact of history. They see him as a man who experienced life in exceptional range. Not only was he a shepherd, merchant, hermit, exile, soldier, lawmaker, prophet-priest-king and mystic; he was also an orphan, for many years the husband of a wife much older than himself, a many times bereaved father, and a widower. In all of these roles he was exemplary. The Muslims add to the mention of his name the benediction "blessings and peace be upon him." Even so they never mistake him for the earthly center of their faith. That place is reserved for the Bible of Islam, the *Qur'an*.

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1. The World's Religions, Our great wisdom traditions – Islam – Huston Smith, HarperSanFrancisco
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3. Saints in Islam

Islam does recognize saints in the tradition of the Christian faith. However, the Qur'an states that they are "friends of God" who have an especially close relationship with the Almighty and enjoy "the good tidings in the present life and thereafter." However, they are not to be worshipped.

A story from Muhammad's life tells of his ever-present state of peace and equanimity. Many people around Mecca tried to test his beliefs and were jealous of his popularity. One of these was an aged Arab woman who decided she would annoy Muhammad on his daily walk to the temple. Whenever he passed by, the old woman opened the window and threw the content of her household trash onto his head as he passed by below.

The ever-loving Muhammad did not even look up. He continued on his way undisturbed, brushing away the rubbish that had fallen on his head and shoulders. This made the woman even more irritated.

One day while passing by the woman's house, Muhammad realized that no trash had been dumped on him for the past three days. Instead of feeling happy he became worried. He walked the steps up to the woman's door, and knocked. A weak voice answered, "Come in."

Upon entering Muhammad saw that the woman was in great pain and was quite ill. "Do you have any medicine? Is anyone here to help you?" "No" she answered. He then left the house and returned with a bottle of medicine. He told her to take the medicine three times a day and assured her that all would be well with her soon. The woman was moved to tears by the purity of Muhammad's heart.

Rabi'a al- 'Adawiyya

One of the most famous Islamic mystics was a woman by name of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (c.717-801). She was a follower of the Sufi Islamic tradition and is believed to have had a strong influence on later Sufis. Rabi'a lived in Basra, a seaport town in southern Iraq. She was born around 717 and died in 801. Her biographer, the great medieval poet Attar, relates that she was "on fire with love and longing" for God.

Rabi'a was born into poverty. After her father's death, there was a famine in Basra, and during that time, she was parted from her family. She was taken by some robbers and sold into slavery. Her master worked her very hard, but at night after finishing her chores Rabi'a would turn to meditation and prayers and praising the Lord. Foregoing rest and sleep she spent her nights in prayers and she often fasted during the day.

There is a story that once, while in the market, she was pursued by a vagabond and in running to save herself she fell and broke her arm. She prayed to the Lord.

"I am a poor orphan and a slave. Now my hand too is broken. But I do not mind these things if Thou be pleased with me."

A voice replied: "Never mind all these sufferings. On the Day of Judgment you shall be accorded a status that shall be the envy of the angels even."

One day the master of the house espied her at her devotions. There was a divine light enveloping her as she prayed. Shocked that he kept such a pious soul as a slave, he set her free. Rabi'a went into the desert to pray and became an ascetic. Unlike many Sufi saints she did not learn from a teacher or master but turned to God Himself.

Throughout her life, her Love of God, her worldly poverty and self-denial were unwavering and her constant companions. She did not possess much more than a broken jug, a rush mat and a brick, which she used as a pillow. She spent all night in prayer and contemplation, chiding herself if she slept, for it took her away from her active Love of God.

More interesting than her absolute asceticism, however, is the actual concept of Divine Love that Rabia introduced. She was the first to introduce the idea that God should be loved for God's own sake, not out of fear--as earlier Sufis had done.

She prayed:

"O Allah! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell,
And if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise.

4. Core Values and beliefs of Islam

The Qur'an:

The heart of Islam is the Qur'an, which means a recitation of clearness. It was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in a series of visions over a period of time in a voice that identified itself as Gabriel (*Jibril*). The words that Muhammad exclaimed in these often trance-like states were memorized by his followers and recorded on bones, leaves and scraps of parchment with God preserving their accuracy throughout. So great was Muhammad's regard for its contents that he called it God's standing miracle.

The Qur'an is regarded as the ultimate guide to the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error; and how the faithful may discern the difference. One of the names of the Qur'an is *El-Furqan*, the discernment. In the Qur'an are found not only the essentials of the Islamic faith, but also exactly how the faithful should behave in all possible situations in everyday life.

Written in Arabic, it is poetry of the most illuminating and inspiring kind. It contains all of the Prophet's divinely inspired revelations set out in 114 surahs or chapters, which are arranged in the order of length – the longer ones first, the shortest last - rather than in chronological sequence.

The surahs from his earlier days at Mecca are more metaphysical in tone, and thematically they stress the oneness of God and His merciful nature as well as his creative power in the universe, His judgment at the end of time and the origin, nature and destiny of man

"He is God, besides whom there is no other deity. He knows the unknown and the manifest. He is the compassionate, the merciful" ____ Qur'an (59:22)

The creation of man and the final day of reckoning are frequently mentioned together in the Qur'an as being inseparable parts of the whole of God's plan. The Qur'an expresses the necessity to do good in this life, with the promise of the joys of the life hereafter in the Garden of Paradise. Doing evil will land you in Hell-fire – but man has a choice.

"By the soul and Him that moulded it and inspired it with knowledge of sin and piety: blessed shall be the man who has kept it pure, and ruined he that has corrupted it!" ____ Qur'an (91:7-10)

Later the teachings in the surahs from Medina begin to stress the application of the word of God in everyday life, with virtually no aspect of day-to-day practicalities overlooked.

The Qur'an also includes the stories of the Prophets, as they are in the Bible and the Torah.

The pillars of Faith:

Muslims throughout the world share a common set of fundamental beliefs that fall into six categories or pillars of faith:

Faith in God (the key article), belief in angels, belief in the prophets, belief in the revealed books of God, belief in the Day of judgment and belief in destiny and the divine decree.

Faith in God: The core and fundamental concept of Islam is the oneness of God. The strict monotheism of Islam, called *Tawhid* is the corner stone of the faith. According to Islam, God is the creator and sustainer of this universe and for those who believe it, His supremacy provides a rational explanation for the existence of this complex universe.

Allah is the personal name of the one Almighty God, a name that is not subject to plurality or gender. Due to limitations in human language Allah may be referred to as “He” or “We”. Muslims reject all attempts to personalize the Almighty or place intermediaries between humans and God – all idols and attempts to “reach” God through others are strictly forbidden. Islam also rejects the notion that God came to Earth in the form of any man or creature.

Throughout the Qur’an Allah is described with ninety nine attributes or “names”. These attributes describe for human beings the nature of God – that He is the Most Merciful, the Most Gracious, the Beneficent, the All-Knowing, the Loving, the All-wise and so on.

The biggest sin in Islam, which is called *shirk*, is to associate other deities with God. In fact Muhammad described this as the one and only sin that God will not forgive. Due to this strict prohibition against any form of idolatry, or anything that might lead to it, one will never find pictures or statues at a Muslim place of worship.

According to Islam, God expects total and unconditional acceptance of His commandments and laws from man of his own free will. Man is the only creation to whom He has given: a mind that can think and freedom of choice.

In Islam, there is no room for legislating laws that, in anyway, conflict with or supercede God’s laws. He has not given anyone the right to suspend, cancel or change His laws. Anyone who attempts to do that is in conflict with the basic concept of God’s supremacy.

Belief in angels: Angels are God’s creations who simply follow God’s commands in a very precise way. The angels surround us at all times and they have a multitude of duties and tasks. There are angels who record our words and deeds, and angels who offer us protection. A few angels who have special responsibilities are known to us by name. The most famous angel is Gabriel (*Jibril*), who is also known as the angel of revelation. He was responsible for carrying God’s commandments and messages to the various prophets and messengers. His last such duty was in revealing the Qur’an to Muhammad. Gabriel also announced to Mary, the mother of Jesus, that she would be expecting a child - the Messiah being awaited by the Israelis. The angel Michael (*Mikail*) is in charge of rain supply. The angel Raphael (*Israfil*) is in charge of blowing the trumpet that will sound to mark the Day of Judgment. The angel of death is responsible for taking the souls of the dying. While Muslims are expected to respect them, angels are not to be worshipped.

Belief in Prophets: The prophets were the chosen people of God, who received revelations from Him. They in turn, convey His message to their people. The prophets were sent to every Nation throughout the

world. Their common message was monotheism, how to live righteously in accordance with God's commandments and laws and how to attain salvation.

Muslims are required to believe in every prophet sent by God. The most important ones who have been identified in the Qur'an are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad. A messenger is a special type of prophet, one to whom a book of God has been revealed. Some of the messengers called *rasool* in Arabic include Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. A *nabi* is a prophet to whom scripture was not revealed.

According to Islam, prophets are human and do not have divine attributes and qualities. They cannot be worshipped. Muslims are advised to respect all of Allah's messengers, and not to distinguish or elevate one above another. The Qur'an also acknowledges that there were many more prophets, sent to all peoples through time, whose stories have not been told.

As Allah continued to send prophets to guide His people, each prophet was rejected and his message either distorted or lost. Then Allah would send another prophet to renew and repeat the message of guidance. Muslims believe that after Muhammad, there was no need for Allah to send another prophet, because he left behind the protected scripture of the Qur'an to remain as a guide for mankind. According to the Qur'an, "Muhammad is the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets" (33:40).

Belief in the revealed books of God: A revealed scripture is a book or collection of writings, revealed by God. Many scriptures were revealed over time to various prophets, with the objective of communicating God's commands and guidance to a particular nation, tribe or a group of people. The angel Gabriel was used by God to communicate with all the prophets and reveal various scriptures. The only exception was in the case of Moses with whom God communicated directly. Muslims believe in the scriptures as the actual word of God. The scriptures mentioned in the Qur'an include:

The Scrolls revealed to Abraham

Torah (*Taurat*) revealed to Moses

Psalms (*Zaboor*) revealed to David

The Gospel (*Injeel*) revealed to Jesus

The Qur'an revealed to Muhammad.

While Muslims believe in the original scriptures that were revealed to the various messengers before the Qur'an, they do not believe that their currently available versions are authentic. They believe that over time, the original scriptures were subject to additions, deletions, changes, and distortions. Many of them were carried out intentionally by those seeking to benefit from those changes. Consequently, Muslims believe that the scriptures currently available consist of the original divine revelations as well as new materials that were authored by men. Hence due to unavailability of any copies of the original scriptures, it is impossible to identify the genuine and doctored parts of a particular scripture. Therefore, they cannot be used with any confidence.

The Qur'an is the last scripture that was revealed in Arabic, by God. It reaffirms the fundamental principles contained in the previous scriptures. The Qur'an is still available in the exact version in which it was revealed to Muhammad without even a single punctuation change. Since the older scriptures are not considered authentic, Muslims only follow the Qur'an.

Belief in the Day of Judgment: Muslims believe that the life of this world, and all that is in it, will come to an end on one appointed day. This day is called the Day of Reckoning (*Youm al-Qiyama*). At this time every person will be raised for judgment by Allah individually by his or her faith and the balance of his or her good and bad actions. The Day of Judgment is described throughout the Qur'an as a day of peace for the righteous and a day of despair for the evildoers.

The teachings of Islam emphasize that on the Day of Judgment, Allah will show mercy and justice in His judgment:

“On the day of judgment, We shall set up scales of justice, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly in the least. And if there be the weight of even a mustard seed, We will bring it to account” (21:47).

On the Day of Judgment, each person will be responsible only for his or her own faith and actions. In Islam, there is no concept of original sin or any sort of ‘fall from grace’ of mankind. Islam rejects the notion of atonement, that someone (even God Himself) could sacrifice himself to save others. According to the Qur'an: “who receives guidance, receives it for his own benefit; who goes astray does so to his own loss. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another, nor would We punish until We had sent a message to give warning” (17:15).

Above all, Allah is quick to forgive and show mercy to those who repent. “If anyone wrongs his own soul but afterwards seeks Allah’s forgiveness, he will find Allah Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” (4:110). Nearly all the chapters of the Qur'an begin with the phrase, “In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, and Most Merciful.”

Belief in Destiny and Divine decree: The sixth article of faith is belief in God’s decree (*al-Qadar*), or pre-ordainment. It means that nothing can happen anywhere in the universe without the will of God. Although man may think according to his human capabilities that events occur due to some immediate causes, their occurrence is actually due the wish of God. However, He has granted man the ability to make the appropriate choices and exercise judgment.

In Islam, a person who believes in God from the depth of his heart is called a *Mumin*, a person who has faith (*Iman*). Every Muslim is expected to strive to become a Mumin, whose attitude is reflected in his actions. A Mumin will not permit difficulties to weigh him down and cause depression; instead, he will try his best to change the adverse situation and then be patient if he does not succeed despite his best efforts- realizing that it was divine decree. Also, a Mumin will not ask God for something specific; rather he will ask God for whatever is best for him in both the worlds because God, and not man, knows what really is best for him.

According to Islam, man has been given the ability to choose between good and evil or right and wrong. Therefore whatever man chooses to do is his responsibility alone. A sinner cannot use preordainment as an excuse. A sinner has no knowledge of what God has decreed for him, therefore, he cannot justify his actions by saying that God decreed it. God makes His own master plan. However that must not make one fatalistic or prevent one from making one’s own plans. If the plans do not work out despite one’s best efforts, one must not lose faith. In case of failure, one must accept that the results are the will of God.

The al-Qadar brings humility and modesty. It makes a Muslim realize that success is only achieved because God willed it.

When discussing any future event, Muslims always add the phrase, '*Insha'Allah*', or "God willing." This is done in accordance with Qur'anic teachings (18:23-24), that we cannot be sure of what will happen in the future.

Faith in the Creator naturally leads to worship of and obedience to Him. In Islam, worship encompasses everything that one says, believes or does for God's pleasure. In Arabic, the word "*Ibadah*" means worship as well as service. It derives from obedience and slavery to God. An important aspect of worship is the intention behind it. It is the one factor that determines how a deed is judged. Through intentions, one's daily routine can be turned into worship or *Ibadah*.

Muslims observe five formal acts of worship, which they refer to as the five pillars of Islam. Based on the foundation of the six articles of faith, the pillars help build and structure a Muslim's daily life.

The five pillars of Worship:

These are the five religious observances that every Muslim adheres to:

Testimony of Faith in Allah (The *Shahadah*)

Prayer (*Salat*)

Almsgiving (*Zakat*)

Fasting (*Sawm*)

Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*)

The first of the five pillars is the *Shahadah*. It professes faith in Allah and is the essence of being a Muslim. It is brief and simple and explicit, consisting of a single sentence.

"There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger" _ "*La Ilaha Illa'llah Muhammad rasul Allah*"

The first half of the proclamation announces the cardinal principle of monotheism. There is no God but the God of all (Allah). The second half registers the Muslim's faith in the authenticity of Muhammad and in the validity of the book he transmitted. At least once during his or her lifetime a Muslim must say the *Shahadah* correctly, slowly, thoughtfully, aloud, with full understanding and heartfelt conviction. In actuality Muslims pronounce it often, especially the first half.

The second pillar is the *salat* or prayer ritual to be performed five times a day. The times are stipulated: on arising, when the Sun reaches the zenith, It's mid-decline, sunset and before retiring. The schedule is not absolutely binding. Under normal conditions, however, the fivefold pattern should be maintained by oneself or in congregation. It is expected however, that once a week at least, praying should be done in company at the Friday noon assembly – *al-juma* – in the Mosque. This is the public confirmation of a Muslim's membership in the community. All prayer is preceded by ritual ablutions, symbolizing purity. The ritual of the *salat* has three particular movements – standing, bowing and prostrating, each with it's specific meaning and prayer, and is done facing the *Ka'bah* in Mecca. The *salat* is an act of inner cleansing, of reaffirmation, of submission to God, a request to be ever 'rightly guided'.

The third pillar is the *zakat* or 'almsgiving'. Those who have much should help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate. It is not only the giving of material goods but also that of time, skills and effort.

Today in some countries the *zakat* is administered by agencies, in others it has been replaced by a western system of taxation and welfare, with almsgiving reduced to local level only.

The fourth pillar of Islam is *Sawm* or fasting. To fast is to purify the body, heart and mind. During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year, all Muslims must fast for thirty days between the hours of sunrise and sunset. They must not eat, drink or smoke. Fasting makes one think. It also teaches self-discipline. Fasting underscores the dependence on God. Fasting sensitizes compassion. Only those who have gone hungry can know what hunger means. The rules of fasting are relaxed for those who are ill and those who are traveling, for pregnant women and for others unable to comply – but they must make it up as soon as they are able.

Islam's fifth pillar is *Hajj* or the great pilgrimage to Mecca. All adult Muslims, if they possibly can, must make the pilgrimage at least once during their lifetime. But, before they undertake this journey, they must take care of the faithful, who are in need in one's own community. The basic purpose of the pilgrimage is to heighten the pilgrim's devotion to God and his revealed will. It is also a reminder of human equality. Upon reaching Mecca, pilgrims remove their normal attire, which carries the marks of social status, and don two simple sheet-like garments. Thus everyone, on approaching Islam's earthly focus, the *Ka'bah* wears the same thing. Distinctions of rank and hierarchy are removed and prince and pauper alike stand before God in their undivided humanity.

There is another duty expressed in the Qur'an to which the Muslim should adhere, and that is the *Jihad*, or holy war. *Jihad* derives from an Arabic word meaning to struggle or to strive. It refers as much to the battle of overcoming one's personal demons as it does to waging war against an external enemy. A *Jihad* is only called for when Muslims perceive a threat to their existence. The inner *Jihad* is another step on the path of purification in order to seek unity with God.

Certain other injunctions towards right living are laid down in the Qur'an. The Muslim is forbidden to eat pork, to drink wine, to gamble, to charge interest on money that has been lent, to be unethical in thought or deed. There are clear guidelines for marriage, divorce, inheritance, the treatment of women and slaves, codes of dress and every aspect of social behavior. Rights for women (with laws of inheritance and property in their favor, and the right of women to divorce their husbands) were enshrined in Islam over 1300 years ago. There is no injunction in the Qur'an for the complete covering of the female form. It is simply expressed that both men and women should wear modest and unrevealing clothing.

The Qur'an, the Hadith, the Sunna, Wisdom and doctrine are the source of Islamic law, values and traditions. They offer timeless wisdom for lasting community. Thousands of sayings have been attributed to The Prophet. Some are accepted as authentic; some traced to The Prophet's companions; some are the subject of debate.

Sayings of Islam

Kindness and Compassion:

"To gladden the heart of the weary, to remove the suffering of the afflicted, hath its own reward. In the day of trouble, the memory of the action cometh like a rush of the torrent, and taketh our burden away."

"He who helpeth his fellow-creature in the hour of need, and he who helpeth the oppressed, him will God help in the Day of Travail."

“What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrongs of the injured.”

“All God's creatures are His children; and he is the most beloved of God who doeth most good to God's creatures.”

“Whoever is kind to His creatures, God is kind to him; therefore be kind to man on earth, whether good or bad; and being kind to the bad, is to withhold him from badness, thus in heaven you will be treated kindly.”

“Kindness is a mark of faith: and whoever hath not kindness hath not faith.”

Peacemaking:

“Shall I not inform you of a better act than fasting, alms, and prayers? Make peace between one another: enmity and malice tear up heavenly rewards by the roots.”

Truth:

“He is not of me who, when he speaketh, speaketh falsely; who, when he promiseth, breaketh his promises; and who, when trust is reposed in him, faileth in his trust.”

“No man is true in the truest sense of the word but he who is true in work, in deed, and in thought.”

“Strive always to excel in virtue and truth.”

“Appropriate to yourselves the truth. Avoid lying.”

Right Conduct:

“The faithful are brothers in religion and they must not oppress one another, nor abandon assisting each other, nor hold one another in contempt. The seat of righteousness is the heart; therefore that heart which is righteous, does not hold a Muslim in contempt; and all the things of one Muslim are unlawful to another: his blood, property, and reputation.”

“The creation is as God's children; for its sustenance is from Him: therefore the most beloved unto God is the person who doeth good to God's children.”

Helping the Sick:

“There is not any faithful who visiteth another in sickness, in the forenoon, but that seventy thousand angels send blessings upon him till the evening; and there is no one who visiteth the sick, in the afternoon, but that seventy thousand angels send blessings upon him till daybreak, and there will be a pardon for him in Paradise.”

“Feed the hungry and visit a sick person, and free the captive, if he be unjustly confined. Assist any person oppressed, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.”

"Whoever visiteth a sick person, an angel calleth from heaven, "Be happy in the world and happy be your walking, and take you a habitation in Paradise." Whoever visiteth a sick person always entereth into and swims in a sea of mercy until he sitteth down; and when he sitteth, he is drowned therein."

"When you go to visit the sick, comfort his grief and say, "You will get well and live long," because although this saying will not prevent what is predestined, it will solace his soul."

"Verily God will say on the Day of Judgment, O children of Adam! I was sick and ye did not visit me." And the sons of Adam will say, "O our defender, how could we visit Thee? For thou art the Lord of the Universe, and art free from sickness." And God will say, "O men! Such a one was sick and you did not visit him." And God will say, "O children of Adam, I asked you for food, and ye gave it me not." And the children of Adam will say, "O our patron, how could we give Thee food, seeing Thou art the cherisher of the Universe, and art free from hunger and eating?" And God will say, "Such a one asked you for bread and you did not give it to him."

Non-Violence:

"Abusing the faithful is disobedience to God; and it is infidelity to fight with one."

"It is unworthy of the faithful to injure people's reputation; it is unworthy to curse anyone; and it is unworthy to abuse anyone; and it is unworthy of the faithful to talk vainly."

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5. Similarities between Sathya Sai Baba's Teachings and Core Values of Islam

Faith in God implies recognition of the Omnipresence of the Divine in the Universe and seeking to experience that Divinity within one's self. The Divine is One, though it may be called by many names. It must be realized that God is all pervasive and nothing exists without the power of the Divine. One should not allow one's faith in God be affected by the ups and downs of life. All troubles should be treated as tests and challenges to be faced with courage and faith.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XIX, Chapter 11.

All religions teach one basic discipline: the removal from the mind, of the blemish of egoism, of running after little joy. Every religion teaches man to fill his being with the glory of God and evict the pettiness of conceit. It trains him in the methods of detachment and discrimination, so that he may aim high and attain liberation. Believe that all hearts are motivated by the One and Only God; that all faiths glorify the One and Only God; that all names in all languages and all forms man can conceive, denote the One and Only God; His adoration is best done by means of love. Cultivate the attitude of Oneness, between men of all creeds, all Countries and all Continents.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. VIII, Chapter 22.

Foster love, live in love and spread love- that is the spiritual exercise which will yield the maximum benefit. When you recite the name of God, remembering all the while His majesty, His compassion, His glory, His splendor, His presence- love will grow within you, its roots will go deeper and deeper, and its branches will spread wider and wider giving cool shelter to friend and foe, to fellow national and foreigner. God has a million names. Sages and saints have seen Him in a million forms; they have seen Him with eyes closed and eyes open. They extolled Him in all the languages and dialects of man; but yet His glory is not exhausted.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. VIII, Chapter 22.

“The followers of every religion, in their own way and style, call upon the One God who is Omnipresent. It is the same God who confers upon all mankind, health, prosperity, peace and happiness. No religion has a separate God showering Grace upon those who profess to abide by that faith alone! It is the destiny of man to journey from humanity to Divinity. In this pilgrimage he is bound to encounter various obstacles and trials. In order to illumine the path and help him overcome these troubles, sages, seers, realized souls, Divine personalities and Incarnations of God take birth in Human form”.

----- Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XIV, Chapter 16: Isa

There are many aspirants, who by their devotion, dedication and disciplined lives, attain the vision of the Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient One. They are content with the bliss they have won for themselves. There are others who go out to share this bliss with those beyond the pale; they guide and lead and are blessed thereby. They teach that multiplicity is a delusion and that Unity is the Reality.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XIV, Chapter 16: Isa

Compassion towards all creatures is the greatest virtue; willful injury to any creature is the worst vice. Have full faith in this; spread love and joy through compassion and be full of joy and peace yourself. You do not have joy and peace now mainly because your vision is warped and wobbling. The vision is now directed towards the faults and failings of others, never towards one's own faults and failings. The ears too delight when stories of failures and foibles of others are related. No attempt is made to examine the failures and foibles of one's own self. Really speaking, inquiry and investigation have to begin with oneself. For, what we see in others is the reflection of our own selves, our own prejudices and preferences.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XII, Chapter 51: Diamonds in the dust.

People offer prayers to God. Prayers should not mean petitioning to God for favors. The object of prayer should be to establish God firmly in one's heart. Aim at linking yourself to God and not seeking favors. Aspire for earning the love of God.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XXII, Chapter 5.

“By means of prayer you can win the Grace of God; prayer saves you from slavery to the senses; When you extol God and feel that you are activated by His Will, you will become free from anger, anxiety, prejudice and envy; these passions ruin physical and mental health. Whenever you feel greed or resentment, try to control the emotion. Treat it as you would treat an illness; find the cure and master it”.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XII, Chapter 13: Know the Knower, Paragraph 5

You have no reason to feel proud when you are able to help another, for your skill or wealth or courage or official position which gave you the chance to serve was the gift of God- whether you recognize it or not. You are only offering this God's gift to another God's gift, namely, the poor, the illiterate, the weak, the diseased, the grieving and the broken-hearted, who seek your help.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. X, Chapter 35.

(Dana), Charity is a meritorious act, if it is rendered to the needy, at the time of need, in a manner that fulfils the need; it must be made without pride or publicity; without the superior air of the giver, without rubbing into the mind of the receiver that he is being helped to stand on his own legs, with no contempt contaminating the mind of the giver. Give, as an act of worship to the Divine, that you wish to adore in the person, to whom you are offering, what God has given you for this very purpose.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. X, Chapter 19.

Your troubles are often self-created. If you develop firm faith in God and surrender to His Will, He will not fail you. This is the concept of (Sharanagati), submission to God's Will. The bliss that can be derived from this surrender to God cannot be got through any other means. Regard whatever happens as something intended for your good. Discover the bliss that can be derived from trials and tribulations.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XVII, Chapter 15.

There are three things that are immensely pleasing to the Lord: a tongue that never indulges in falsehood, a body that is not tainted by causing harm to others, and a mind that is free from attachment and hatred. These three constitute the Triple Purity (Trikarana Shuddhi). Refrain from uttering falsehood, inflicting pain on others and entertaining ill-will towards others. Practice silence as a means of preventing the tongue from straying away from the truth.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XXI, Chapter 9.

Men desire the fruit of good deeds, but do not perform good deeds. Men want to avoid the consequences of sinful actions, but are engaged in sinful deeds. How is this possible? It is not easy to escape from the consequences of one's actions. But there is no need for despair. If one earns even a grain of grace from the Divine, a mountain of sins can be reduced to ashes. If one feels genuinely penitent, seeks God's forgiveness and takes refuge in God, all one's actions will get transformed. But without heart-felt penitence, this will not happen.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XXIV, Chapter 22.

Man's joys and sorrows, happiness or misery are not dependent on time. They are based on man's actions. Time has no relations or friends. Time is not subordinate to anyone. All are subject to time. Hence if one is to realize the Divine, who is the Lord of Time, one has to carry out His injunctions. God looks with love only at such a person.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XXVI, Chapter 1.

The Lord created everything in the Universe, but kept nothing for Himself. Every creature has been given complete freedom. Everyone is free to enjoy anything he likes. But there is one limitation. For every action there is a corresponding reaction. You are free to do as you please subject to this rule. If you use the freedom given to you to indulge in wrongful acts, the consequences are bound to be bad. These results are not caused by God but are the fruits of your own actions. The Lord inflicts no harm on anybody. Everything that happens to you is the consequence of your own thoughts and actions.

-----Sathya Sai Speaks, Vol. XXV, Chapter 6.

More quotes from Sri Sathya Sai Baba:

Love All, Serve All

Hands that help are holier than lips that pray

Help ever, hurt never

“The earth is a huge enterprise, a busy factory, where the product is love. By means of spiritual practice (sadhana), it is possible to produce love and export it to millions and millions of people in need of it. The

more it is shared, the deeper it grows, the sweeter its taste, and the greater the joy. By means of love, one can approach God and stay in his presence, for God is love, and when one lives in love he is living in God.”

Peacemaking:

When there is peace in the heart, there will be peace in the home. When there is peace in the home, there will be peace in the nation. When there is peace in the nation there will be peace in the world.

“What exactly is peace? It is the stage in which the senses are mastered and held in balance.”

“To experience peace, we must overcome our excessive desires and unreasonable expectations. Agitation usually results from unfulfilled desires, not from external condition.”

“The essential attitude that one should cultivate is to engage in all activities that are a part of one's duty without getting attached to them. Just as the sky's clear blue is not affected by the clouds or rainstorms, lightning or thunder, but remains the same in spite of those temporary disturbances, the mind of man too must be clear and clean, in spite of all the storms and stress of life.”

Truth:

“Don't have hypocrisy or crookedness in your speech. Both unpleasant truth and pleasant untruth have to be avoided. Sathya (or Truth) is God Himself.”

“There is in everyone a spark of truth; no one can live without that spark. There is in everyone a flame of love; life becomes a dark void without it. That spark, that flame is God, for, He is the source of all truth and all love. Man seeks truth. He seeks to know the reality because his very nature is derived from God, who is truth. He seeks love, to give it and share it, for his nature is of God, and God is love.”

“Have faith that truth will save you in the long run. Stick to it regardless of what might befall.”

Right Conduct:

“See no evil - see what is good.
Hear no evil - hear what is good.
Speak no evil - speak what is good.
Think no evil - think what is good.
Do no evil - do what is good.
This is the way to God.”

Non-violence:

“(Ahimsa) non-violence does not mean merely not injuring a living being physically. You should not cause harm even by a word, a look or a gesture. Tolerance, fortitude, equanimity - these help you to practice (ahimsa) non-violence steadily.”

Help ever, hurt never.

6. Symbols of Islam

Islam is a religion of relatively few symbols. Where symbols do occur, their nature conforms with and confirms the nature of the faith.

The Symbolism & Related Rites of the Ka`bah:

The central and foremost symbol of Islam is the Ka`bah and the rituals associated with it. In the Qur'an, God calls the Ka`bah the Sacred House (*Al-Bayt al-Haram*) and House of God (*Bayt Allah*). This Sanctuary of God is a tangible point in space and time to assemble and "visit". It represents how the Muslim's world and life revolve around an exclusive and pure devotion to the One True God. The pilgrim who visits the Ka`bah must be motivated by a consuming faith and pure devotion, for there is little worldly enjoyment there in the midst of the burning desert.

The Ka`bah is the simple cube stone building in Mecca. Within a few hundred meters of it are other sites associated with the sanctification of the Mother of Cities, i.e., Mecca (*Umm Al-Quraa*). These sites are two little hills named *Marwa* and *Safa* and the Well of *Zamzam*. The water of this well originally sprang from under the feet of the infant *Ishmael* (Isma`il) and has flowed ever since then for the pilgrims. Indeed, this water made settlement in Mecca possible. These sites are integral to the rites of *Hajj* and are enclosed in the Noble Sanctuary.

The foundations of the Ka`bah were laid by Abraham (Ibrahim) and his son Ishmael (Isma`il), and it was consecrated to the worship of the One True God. However, over the millennia, human folly added to the Ka`bah so that by the half millennium preceding Prophet Muhammad, the worship conducted there had degenerated into paganism and idolatry. The Ka`bah was surrounded by more than three hundred idols. The Abrahamic origins of the faith and its heritage of pure monotheism were all but buried. Yet it retained its aura of sacredness, and one "heretic" sect refused the customs of the people to nurture a memory and conviction of the One True God. Another residue of the Abrahamic tradition was a cult of peace and asylum related to the Sanctuary.

By the time Prophet Muhammad was born, Mecca was submerged in polytheism and idolatry. Only vestiges of the pure faith remained in a symbol and a tradition. Thus, the mission of the Prophet Muhammad was the fulfillment of Revelation, of the Message of Guidance, not its beginning. It came to restore the faith to its original purity.

Hence the message of Islam was not new. What was new was the form of this message, its dimensions and scale. The message would henceforth be preserved in a Book (the Qur'an) that would be immune to the ravages of time and the folly of man but that would be accessible to all who sought the Guidance. The repository of the faith was in the Community at large. No group could claim the privilege of special knowledge or a mission not open to others. No group or individual could come between the human being and Creator. Clergies and theocracies would be obsolete. These are the chief implications of the new form of this Last Guidance. They underline the liberating essence of its core concept and foundation: *tawheed*.

This liberating essence constitutes the revolutionary component and the regenerative momentum of the faith. These elements continue to retain their force and relevance because of the uncontaminated purity of its sources and its core tenets. Here are some aspects of the enduring symbolism of the Ka`bah:

1. The Ka`bah is symbolic of an essence: the idea of the prime and the core. It has remained at the center of a continuous tradition of human worship and devotion. It symbolizes the integrating and unifying power of monotheism in human life.
2. The idea of the prime and the core reinforces and confirms the basic concepts of Islam as the religion of pure monotheism, and hence as the one true religion for all men and for all time. Abraham is upheld in the Qur'an not for his ancestry of the Arabs, but for being the model and the archetype of the Muslim. In its association with the Abrahamic tradition and its commemoration of it, the Ka`bah

symbolizes the unity of all true religion, celebrates the brotherhood of all prophets, and the essential unity of their message.

3. The Ka`bah is not just associated with the beginnings of the pure faith and of religion. It symbolizes the message that was addressed to the People of the Book — the Jews and Christians — in order to resolve the points of dispute among them.
4. The mission of the last messenger, Muhammad, was to inaugurate an era in which Divine Guidance was openly universal, wider and more comprehensive in scope, with its injunctions spelled out in detail. The responsibility for man's fate and moral well-being would come to rest squarely on his own free choice and on a willing initiative to respond to his Creator.
5. The Ka`bah also symbolizes the common orientation and common goal of mankind: its response to the One True God. Every mosque has a niche (*mihrab*) that points in the direction of the Ka`bah. Wherever a Muslim stands to pray, bow and prostrate, he faces in the direction of the Ka`bah, thus reminding him of the source of identity and common purpose and goal that binds him to his community in faith.
6. The Ka`bah is symbolic both of permanence and constancy and of renewal and renewability. Upon entering the precincts of the Holy Sanctuary, every Muslim makes a pledge as he approaches the Ka`bah. He faces its door and, before beginning circumambulation (*tawaf*), he renews his commitment by professing the *Shahadah*, the Testimony of Faith ("I bear witness that there is no god but Allah; I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"). Standing in solemn humility at this station, the Muslim identifies with a whole series of similar stations and situations in which the oath of allegiance was taken, whether during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad or at any time since Abraham and Ishmael pledged to God and laid the foundations of the Ka`bah. For this reason, the door of the Ka`bah is known as the door of the one who takes the oath or makes the pledge (*Bab Al-Multazim*).
7. *Bab Al-Multazim* is just one detail of the entire state of *ihram*, the state of sanctification and abstinence of the pilgrim. The pilgrim settles all his worldly debts, and then removes his worldly attire. He bathes and dresses in the fresh attire of the pilgrim and rededicates himself to the Way of his Creator.

The preservation of the Ka`bah as a living symbol down the generations to this day and age and its continuity as a haven of devotion, a shelter of refuge, and a site of grace is, in itself, a sign that invites serious reflection by all those who truly care to think.

**Summarized from Introducing Islam from Within by Mona Abul-Fadl (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1991).*

The Star and Crescent:



The star and the crescent as depicted in a few flags of Muslim countries do not have any significance in the Islamic faith. In other words, the reason for depicting these symbols on flags is not Islamic or religious. On the contrary, it is primarily a continuation of a tradition set by the vast Ottoman-empire (for a period of over half a millennium), which has prompted some of the modern Muslim states to depict these two symbols on their flags. One may, however, ask why did the Ottoman-empire opt for the star and the crescent on its flags? No specific answer can be given for this question. There could be a number of possible reasons.

There is a significant difference between 'symbols of the Islamic faith' and 'symbols adopted by Muslims'. The symbols of the Islamic faith are only those, which have been declared as symbols by the Qur'an or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. These may include the *Ka`bah*, the black stone of the *Ka`bah* etc. All these things symbolize one or the other major reality ascribed to by the Islamic faith.

History of the origin in the usage of the Crescent and Star:

During the Byzantine Empire, the city of Byzantium (a.k.a. Constantinople and Istanbul) was dedicated to *Diana*, goddess of the hunt. The crescent was the symbol of Diana. In 330 CE, Constantine rededicated the city to the Virgin *Mary*, whose star symbol was added to the previous crescent. When the Turks took possession of Byzantium, they found lots of crescent flags and adopted it as a symbol of good omen. In 339 BC, *Philip of Macedon* (the father of Alexander the Great) was thwarted from overtaking the city of Byzantium because his army was spotted due to a bright crescent moon.

"The star and crescent" was first hoisted on behalf of the Muslims by *Mahomet II* after the capture of Constantinople in 1453 CE. Prior to that, it was common on the arm of knight and esquires. A star within a crescent was a badge of *Richard I*, 250 years before Constantinople fell. They quit using it when it became the banner of Muslims. It has been used more and more ever since by Muslims as a way to identify themselves. *Sultan Othman*, founder of the Ottoman Empire, had a dream of crescent moon growing bigger and bigger until it reached East to West.

Banners or flags are what people customarily unite around or behind. It may or may not represent some characteristic about them. The twelve tribes of Israel, for example, each had its own banner or symbol, e.g. '*The Lion of Judah*,' etc. An insignia could represent one's cause, philosophy, belief or attitude; whether religious or secular. The color and the symbol's use on national flags are also most interesting. Red is the Ottoman (Turkish) color and thus, a star and crescent on a field of red. In Mauritania, green stands for prosperity and hope. The star represents the people. On the Pakistani flag, the crescent is for progress and the star for enlightenment.

The Prophet's Flag

As to what the actual Holy Prophet used, we find some very interesting information. It has been reported that the Holy Prophet's first standard or flag was a black flag to contradict the white flag of the Quraysh, who had a black eagle on it as well. The earliest such flag or banner used by the Prophet was a sable curtain which hung in the chamber of his wife, Ayesha (R.A.) In the center, the Prophet attached a white cloth which was a turban that he captured from the city of Boreide. On it was written the inscription, *Nasr um min Allah*, which meant "the help of Allah." Most appropriate. One can see how powerful a symbol this was to be used as a banner or flag.

In modern times, some governments, like Saudi Arabia, prefer not to use the star and crescent of the Turkish government, but instead use a plain green field with the *shaha'da* on it in white. There is also a white sword underneath. Several modern day Muslims use the *shaha'da* in white on a green field as their way of showing they are Muslim.

Moon sighting: The Hilaal:

There is no symbolic significance of the Crescent in Islam. No special event of Islamic history or faith is associated with it. People of Arabia been had associated with many superstitions concerning different forms of crescent. The answer of Qur'an to them is the same: "**They ask you concerning crescent. Say, they are but signs to mark fixed periods of time for men...**" (2:189).

With a crescent, starts a new month of Islamic calendar and it is religiously important for the Muslims to keep track of moon cycles as fixed dates of the year are set for rituals like fasting and Hajj. Qur'an has recognized the importance of both solar and lunar systems of reckoning of time. "The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed (55:5) and "(God has created) the Sun and Moon for the reckoning (of time). Such is the ordinance of the Exalted in power, the Omniscient" (6:96). The length of a day is to be counted on the basis of earth's revolution around its axis. Each new date starts with the sunset. The months are to be reckoned on the basis of cycles of moon, so the Islamic rituals gradually rotate in all the seasons of the year for the people of northern and southern hemispheres. A lunar year is about 10 days shorter than the solar year. The length of the fasting time (from dawn to sunset) in a day in the fasting month of Ramadan, when drinking water is also prohibited during fasting, also gradually varies, with each year, for all the people of the earth. If the fasting was observed in a solar month, say January, then the length of fasting time in a day for the people of the northern hemisphere would always be shorter than for the people of the other half. The thirst of water will be no problem for northern people while their counterparts will always observe fasts in longer days of fierce summers. Keeping track of a crescent is more important for Muslims than any other religious community who follow the lunar calendar for their religious occasions. Fasting for consecutive 29 or 30 days is compulsory for all Muslims in the 9th month of Islamic Calendar. The first date of the month starts with the sunset and Taraweeh (Additional long prayers in the 9th month named Ramadan) have to be started a short while after the start of the date. It is important that the starting of the month is known precisely. The crescent is visible only for a short duration after the sunset on the first date of the new lunar month. On its first date, the moon sets only a little after the sunset. Sometimes because of its faint light and sometimes because of clouds or dust it cannot be seen. The occurrence of crescent may not necessarily be announced on the basis of news from other places, as for people on eastern longitudes it might not have occurred before the moonset time while those in west had witnessed it. By traditions the Muslims have been relying on actual sighting of the moon for starting their month of Ramadan. Similarly the first date of the 10th month is their festival of 'Eid'. It is obligatory that nobody keep fast on the day of Eid. The Muslims all over the world anxiously try to see the moon on the evening of the 29th day of fasting in Ramadan. Where it is not visible, the month of Ramadan is taken as of 30 days for that place.

The significance of tracking the crescent for observing the religious rituals and feasts in Islam has been explained above. It does not assume any symbolic significance of any kind whatsoever. There are no such symbols representing Islam like in almost all other religions. When the seat of power of the Islamic world shifted to Turks from Arabs, and Muslim dynasties spread in Central Asia and other parts of the world, many people under the cultural influence of other religions, felt the need of a distinct symbol. They started using crescent as their distinct mark. The use of crescent as a mark by some people is a gradual innovation instead of being associated with any tenet or historical event of Islam.

The Muslims never look to any person, nation, government or anything as a source of guidance or direction over Allah. To do so would be *shirk*. No one is worthy of that honor except Allah, the Almighty.

There are several Muslim countries that currently feature the crescent moon and star symbol on their national flag. Even more have used the symbol previously in history, but the color, size, orientation, and design features continue to vary widely from country to country. It is also interesting to note the diversity of the countries represented. The people of these countries are not Arabic-speaking, but rather are part of the greater Muslim World. Some Countries that use the crescent and the star are: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Comoros, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

7. Holy days of Islam

Muslim holy days generally celebrate the events of the life of Islam's main prophet, Muhammad, especially the events surrounding the first hearing of the Quran. The way that holidays are recognized can vary across cultures, as well as across sects of Islam, Sunni and Shia. Muslim holidays generally follow the lunar calendar, and thus move each year relative to the solar calendar.

1. Ramadan
2. Eid ul-Fitr:
3. Eid ul-Adha

the above three holy days are common to all Muslims.

4. Ashura
5. Laylat al-Qadr

The last two are observed by Shiites as days of remembrance for the martyrdom of Hussein (the son of Ali) and Ali.

Spiritual Significance and Practices:

Ramadan:

The fourth pillar of Islam, which is fasting, is practiced during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is derived from an Arabic word for intense heat and sun-scorched ground. (*Ramaḍān*) – or Ramzan in several countries – and it is the ninth month of the Islamic (*Hijri*) calendar, established in the year 638 CE. It is considered the most venerated, blessed and spiritually-beneficial month of the Islamic year. Prayers, fasting, charity, and self-accountability are especially stressed at this time; religious observances associated with Ramadan are kept throughout the month. God prescribes daily fasting for all able, adult Muslims during the whole month of Ramadan, beginning with the sighting of the new moon.

There are some variations regarding the time in which Ramadan's fasting takes place for different Muslims around the world. Since the festival is linked to the lunar calendar and the new moon is not in the same state at the same time globally, it would depend on which lunar sighting that individual recognizes. Everyday during the month of Ramadan, Muslims around the world break their fast when the fourth prayer of the day, *Maghrib*, is due.

During Ramadan, Muslims are also expected to put more effort into following the teachings of Islam as well as refraining from anger, envy, greed, lust, sarcasm and sarcastic retorts, backstabbing, and gossip. They are encouraged to read the Qur'an. Marital relations during fasting in the day are not allowed but permissible after the fast. Purity of both thought and action is important. The fast is intended to be an exacting act of deep personal worship in which Muslims seek a raised level of closeness to God. The act of fasting is said to redirect the heart away from worldly activities, its purpose being to cleanse the inner soul and free it from harm. Properly observing the fast is supposed to induce a comfortable feeling of

peace and calm. It also allows Muslims to practice self-discipline, sacrifice, as well as sympathy for those who are less fortunate, intending to make Muslims more generous and charitable.

In addition to fasting, Muslims are encouraged to read the entire Qur'an.

Sunni Muslims tend to perform the recitation of the entire Qur'an by means of special prayers, called *Talawih*, which are held in the mosques every night of the month, during which a whole section of the Qur'an ('*Juz*', which is 1/30 of the Qur'an) is recited, so that by the end of the month the entire Qur'an has been completed. *Talawih* is an Arabic language phrase referring to those extra prayers. This prayer is performed after *salah* of *Isha'a*. *Sunnis* believe it is customary to attempt a "*khatm*" (complete recitation) of the Qur'an in Ramadan by reciting at least one "*juz*" per night in *Talawih*. These are done in remembrance of the fact that the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad was begun during Ramadan.

Eid ul-Fitr:

Eid is the Arabic word for feast. *Eid ul-Fitr* is the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan and the month-long fast. During Ramadan, Muslims all over the world fast from dawn (before sun rise) to sun down, having their first daily meal at sun down prayer time. The purpose of fasting is to teach Muslims patience and humility, as well as to remind Muslims that they are fortunate and should help the needy and less fortunate. After sun down of the last day of Ramadan, *Eid ul-Fitr* starts. In the early morning of the first day of *Shawwal* (first day of the Eid), Muslims perform a ritual prayer called the Eid prayer. Sweets, food, and non-alcoholic drinks are distributed in mosques and houses. Celebrations extend up to three days in Islamic countries.

Eid ul-Adha or Eid-Ghorban:

Eid ul-Adha also called the big holiday, falls approximately 70 days after *Eid ul-Fitr* and is celebrated in honor of the prophet Abraham when he intended to sacrifice his son Ishmael as a proof of his loyalty to God. *Eid ul-Adha* is translated into English as "The Feast of Sacrifice", when Muslims all over the world present an animal (usually a cow or a sheep) sacrifice as a gratitude action for God saving the Prophet Ismail's life. The slaughtered animal meat is divided into thirds, one for the person who is presenting the beast, one to be distributed to his poor relatives, and the last third for the needy, regardless of their religion, race, or nationality. As with *Eid ul-Fitr*, there is an early morning prayer for the Eid, and celebrations are extended for Four days.

It falls two months and 10 days after the Little Feast. Those who are economically able to make a pilgrimage to Mecca do so just before this date, on the Hajj.

Ashura:

Ashura is the day on which Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, was killed in the Battle of Karbala. For *Shi'a* Muslims this is a day of mourning.

Laylat al-Qadr:

Laylat al-Qadr is Arabic for "The night of power". It falls on one of the last ten days of Ramadan on an odd numbered day. It is considered the holiest night in the entire month of Ramadan, since it is the night on which the Qur'an was first revealed. It is also considered *better than a thousand months* [Qur'an 97:1-3]. It is said that if one offers voluntary worships on that night, all the past sins are forgiven.

8. Prayers and Songs:

Bismillah Er Rahman Er Rahim

Meaning: Praise be to God, the Compassionate, and the Merciful.

All I ask of you is forever to remember me as loving you.

Ishq Allah Mahabud Lillah

Ishq Allah Mahabud Lillah

Ishq Allah Mahabud Lillah

Ishq Allah Mahabud Lillah

Meaning: *The Spirit is at once the Lover, the Beloved and Love Itself.*