

Islam Versus Muslims



A brief guidebook
on the differences between both

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***For my Lord, God, the One, the Enduring, the Eternal, the Everpresent.
Intended only in the hopes of pleasing him and receiving more of his already
bountiful blessings in this life and the hereafter. May the sincerity of this, my
intention, never waver.***

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Introduction

Islam is a growing religion, professed, practiced, or both, by a significant portion of the world's population. Over 1.8 Billion people, at least. With such growth, there comes a natural curiosity and more than a few misunderstandings. Some of these misunderstandings are more troubling than others and may cause animosity. Yet these misunderstandings are not exclusively present in non-Muslims. Many of us Muslims carry some misunderstandings of our own faith. However, the most common of these misunderstandings, or rather, the underlying reason for most of these misunderstandings is the same in both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is a failure to consistently discern the dividing line between the basics of the faith; beliefs which, without believing all without exception, one cannot be a Muslim, and the traditions and interpretations and conventional applications most Muslims accept as part and parcel.

This guidebook aims to, in the simplest of terms, dispel this failure to discern the difference. This guidebook aims to draw, within the mind of the modern human of our era, a clear dividing line between faith, and culture. Muslims and non-Muslims alike can benefit from this guidebook. If you're a Muslim who grew up his whole life with faith misconceptions, and no clear separation of faith and culture, this could be enlightening. If you're a non-Muslim who wants to know the bare basics rather than listen to confusing rhetoric, reading on might help you. If you're thinking of converting to Islam and you want to know how to distinguish your true obligations, prohibitions, and optional good deeds, from the opinions and instructions of others, this may be a good first step.

I write this guidebook seeking only the pleasure of God and His blessings in this life and the hereafter. Because of that, this paperback version of the guidebook shall be priced as cheaply as Amazon will let me price it. If you haven't already bought this book or know someone else

who wants it, I will also offer a free PDF version to anyone who messages me at <https://www.facebook.com/AlAlfyOfficial/> while I can keep up. If I'm so fortunate that your demand exceeds my ability to keep up, I'll put the PDF version up on a file sharing web site. It is my hope to maintain this pure intention forever.

Disclaimer: Beyond professing myself a Muslim, humbly struggling and often failing to perfect the practice of my faith, I make no claim to any religious certifications or credentials relating to any institution of specialised or exclusive religious study. I am neither certified as a cleric, or a theologian, or a historian. All my information comes from many years of practicing my faith, questioning other adherents and non-adherents, and extensive private reading all my life (some of said reading having no obvious bearing on history or religion).

To Be Muslim

This is the first chapter because a lot of people are just looking for this information. What it is to be a Muslim. How to separate a Muslim from a non-Muslim. Being a Muslim, just a Muslim, regardless of how good or bad a Muslim you are, is not a matter of practice, nor a matter of ritual. It is a matter of core belief. To be a Muslim is to Sallim (Pronounced: Sallim) yourself to God, which is to say, to submit yourself, to surrender to Him. To surrender yourself to God you must believe in Him, alone, as the sole deity to ever exist, infinitely and forever, you must believe in His prophets, you must believe in His angels, and you must believe in His scriptures. You must also believe in the inevitability of Judgement Day and God's ability to hold all souls and selves accountable, and in the afterlife. A Muslim, holding to those core beliefs, may take actions which are against the teachings of Islam, and yet remain a Muslim. It is a matter of professing and holding to personal beliefs and whatever a Muslim's sins, a Muslim's crimes, and a Muslim's well-deserved legal punishment, no one has the power to excommunicate or declare an infidel a Muslim holding and professing the above mentioned beliefs.

Some may, and have argued that by this definition, Muslims can come from other monotheistic faiths that believe in one God, and believe He has angels and prophets and scriptures (even if they don't agree on all their names). The argument has merit, considering that a verse in the Holy Qur'an refers to the disciples of our lord The Christ, upon him prayer and peace, coming to him as "Muslims". As in, having submitted themselves. Indeed, even the opposite has also been argued, albeit, in a less conciliatory fashion. In an age of surprising religious tolerance and free religious debate, a Christian priest known as "John of Damascus", who served as a high ranking court official in the Umayyad Caliphate's court, once openly expressed the opinion that Islam, the religion his overlords followed, is a

heretical sect of Christianity. However, for the purposes of this guidebook, we shall mostly be referring to “Muslims” as those who profess to submitting themselves to God upon the path of our lord Muhammad son of Abd Allah, God’s Prophet and Messenger, as revealed to us by what we can grasp from God’s revelation to him. The Holy Qur’an.

To be a Muslim on the path of Prophet Muhammad, upon him prayer and peace, as revealed to us by the Holy Qur’an, is outwardly a simple matter. One must, knowingly and understandingly, with the intention of becoming a Muslim, utter “the testimony”. The Muslim “profession of faith”. What we call, the “Shahadah” in Arabic. “Ash-hadu an la ilaha il-la Allah, w an-na Muhammadan Rasoolo Allah” which is to say “I bear witness/testify that there is no god/deity but God/Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of God/Allah”.

The testimony is also sometimes said with a slightly different ending. “Ash-hadu an la ilaha il-la Allah, w ana Muhammadan abduhu wa rasooloh”, which is to say “I bear witness/testify that there is no god/deity but God/Allah and that Muhammad is His servant/slave and messenger.” Both forms are valid as far as I was told. The testimony is valid in any language and does not require a cleric or a mosque to be professed, however, many people choose to undertake it with assistance from a cleric, or another Muslim in a mosque. Usually in such cases, the assisting Muslim will slowly pronounce each word in Arabic for the new Muslim to repeat, and will then assist him to pronounce it in the new Muslim’s first language.

In this context, Allah is the Arabic name for God, not exclusively the Muslim name for Him. Arab Christians and Jews, as well as Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews have used the word “Allah” before Prophet Mohamed was ever born. In many contexts, the two words are used interchangeably. Often, it is possible to refer to the One Sole Deity in English as God, without needing to use His Arabic name; “Allah”, but some Muslim religious English text writers choose to do so in honour of God’s choice to reveal the message to Prophet Muhammad in Arabic.

Before undertaking the Shahadah however, it is recommended that you research a few basics, such as Islam's divine concept (God's Oneness, omniscience, omnipotence, absolute sovereignty and more), the finality of Muhammad's role as the "Seal of the Prophets", the concepts of fate, the pillars of Islam, and a general basic grasp of the faith. I am not brave enough to suggest this guidebook would be enough, but I daresay it would be an excellent first step.

The Source of The Message

The only source for the core message of Islam is one I have mentioned before. The Holy Qur'an. This is the holy scripture for Muslims on the path of our lord Muhammad, upon him prayer and peace, the prophet of God and His messenger. The word Qur'an is literally the noun form for "recitation", in that it refers to a specific recitation, not the act of recitation in general (which would refer to a verb). The Qur'an is a series of verbal divine revelations, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, by God through an angel, over a period of approximately 20 years. The literal word of God, revealed in the Arabic tongue. The angel who brought the revelations is traditionally narrated outside the Qur'an to be Gabriel. The Qur'an itself does not specify which angel revealed it to Prophet Muhammad, however, Gabriel is one of the angels named in the Qur'an, and was named at least twice.

This series of revelations was transcribed, written down and copied during the life of Prophet Muhammad, and compiled into a standardised book with chapter (Sura) names and numbers along with verse (Aya) numbers, not very long after his death. Chapters and verses existed before compilation, but compiling them made the relevant verses numerically easier to navigate and access for much more people, including many who did not memorise the Qur'an by heart. The one who commanded this standardised compilation is Uthman son of Affan, the third "Khalifah" (meaning successor) to Prophet Muhammad in governing the affairs of the Muslims and leading them.

The most common compilation of the Qur'an is thus known today to most Muslims as "The Codex of Uthman." The compilation process was attended by many of Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries, companions, friends, and even relatives. This includes the Prophet's paternal first cousin and son-in-law, Ali son of Abu Talib, Who would later be hailed the fourth

successor to Prophet Muhammad, and the final successor from the “four rightly guided successors”.

The most orthodox way of reciting the Qur’an today is commonly believed to be the most correct way, but there are other recitations with differences in intonation and pronunciation of largely the same words, and some minor differences in letters which sometimes amount to minor word alterations. These other recitations are also transcribed and memorised by those who make it their work to memorise the Qur’an. These apparently small differences may sometimes amount to no obvious change in meaning at all, or they may amount to a change in the meaning of a verse. This is because the complexities of Arabic language are such that words of the same letters may mean different things. For example, in some contexts, the command to “fight” and the noun for “murderer” can be pronounced in the exact same way with virtually no difference.

There are 14 recitations which scholars accept can be reasonably claimed to be correctly itinerant from Prophet Muhammad. That is, recitation forms of the same verses which have been at least once recited or taught by Prophet Muhammad, or at least accepted by him when someone else recited them in his presence. Seven of those 14 recitations were originally regarded as having more than a reasonable claim to be correctly itinerant. They were regarded as at the very least, “likely” to be correctly itinerant. Three more recitations were added to the aforementioned seven by the majority of scholars at some point in history, giving us what we now know as “The Ten Recitations”. These three added recitations, despite some being less commonly used than others, are regarded as orthodox.

The four remaining recitations, having in scholarly regard a “reasonable” claim to correct iteration, but not a likely one, are named “The Four Deviant Recitations”. This is not a pejorative term, but refers to their literal deviation from the orthodox recitations, since some

of their verses, while in agreement with the divine concepts on which Islam is based, deviate, with their minor pronunciation differences, from the overall meanings of the same numbered verses in the orthodox recitations. The deviations in verse meanings are typically regarded as not contradicting each other. For example, a verse relates that God visits His suffering upon whomsoever He wills, and the same verse in a different recitation relates that God visits His suffering upon whomsoever ill (does ill), because of a miniscule difference in pronunciation. Those two recitations do not contradict the core tenets of Islam or each other. It is Islamically sound that God's absolute sovereignty entitles him to visit suffering upon whomsoever He wills. It is Islamically sound that God visits suffering upon whomsoever ill, should they not be forgiven. It is Islamically sound that whomsoever God wills suffering upon (specifically as a punishment, not say, a test) should also be one who has done ill. Thus, the meanings change but the verses don't contradict each other, or the core principles of Islam.

Based on this view of non-conflict between deviations, the fourteen above mentioned recitations are considered by most specialised scholars as genuine, divinely permitted aspects of the same book, as opposed to being merely a highly detailed documentation of how people recite the Qur'an.

Any recitations outside of the 14 recitations are considered to have a significantly weaker claim to being correctly itinerant. Some of those recitations outside the 14 raise issues of theological contention, with regards to the unalterable principles on which Islam is based. They are not typically learned or recited by mainstream Muslims who are not specialised in religious study. The Qur'an is, by definition, a book of many aspects. Even reading the most commonly recited recitation, a true master of the Arabic language might find numerous interpretations. Some say endless, interpretations, in just the one recitation. So interpretation is an important issue even Muslim laymen and women rightly discuss when making religious decisions.

These are the broad stroke basics regarding the Holy Qur'an, the only holy book mainstream Muslims have, and, as stated at the start of this chapter, the only source for the core message of Islam.

However, the core message of Islam leaves us with a need for some guidance with regards to religious application. The main sources of guidance for applying the message of the Qur'an, and for the religious application of certain customs for Muslims, are the traditions handed down to Muslims by Prophet Muhammad. The traditions of his well-regarded companions are also significant sources of guidance. These traditions shall be discussed in more detail in their own chapter.

The Pillars

The Pillars of Islam, so named because they are perceived as the basis on which the correct practice of the faith stands, vary between religious sects. The Sunni sect, which your humble author belongs to, upholds 5 Pillars of Islam.

1. Al Shahada. The “testimony/profession of faith, mentioned above.” The wording in both Arabic and English is explained in the first chapter. A Muslim must testify that “there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”
2. Al Salah. The obligatory, relatively short ritual prayer. Most commonly done five times a day within specific times, for the dawn/morning period, the noon period, the afternoon period, the sundown period and the night time period. Each ritual prayer averages about 7 to 10 minutes, but can take up to 15 depending on how one prays alone or how the imam (any Muslim leading the prayer, almost always a male in mosques) prays.
3. Al Zakah. Alms. The amount of money that a Muslim is obligated before God to pay for the poor and the unable. This religious tithe and its importance are stressed upon in the Qur’an, but from what I can discover, the amount is not specified there. What I remember from what my Religious Studies teachers told me, is that this religious tithe primarily amounts to 2.5% of any money which remained in your possession for a full lunar year. The amount and the method of calculation is found in the aforementioned traditions, and its unbroken continuity makes a very reasonable case for its consistently correct itinerancy.

Due to the modern banking lifestyle where some of us hardly ever keep more than a week’s worth of spending currency static for more than a few months, many Muslims choose to go the extra mile and pay 2.5% of some or all their bank accounts’ values,

so as to avoid the suspicion of not giving their due. Some Muslims will go further and pay 2.5% on the value of certain assets (such as gold accessories), considering it to be currency. There are other religiously obligatory payments. For example, it is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an that one who owns the right to the crops of a certain land must yield a portion of what is harvested on the very same day, the common interpretation being that said harvest portion should be yielded to the needy locals (or if there are none, to any other religiously deserving who will accept). Not owning the rights to any crop harvests myself, I am unsure of the percentage.

4. Al Sawm/Seyam. The Fasting. Those physically able are meant to observe the fast of the lunar month of Ramadan, abstaining, from dawn till sun down, from any food or drink, as well most forms of sexual activity. There are exceptions to the requirement, for example, due to health or travel reasons. During Ramadan, after sun down, eating, drinking, and sexual activity with a spouse are permitted. Being physically able to fast here is at one with being mentally able to fast. Those with debilitating mental challenges are not required to fast. Those who are normally in possession of their faculties but become significantly mentally debilitated during fasting (not minorly inconvenienced) may often fall under the category of being physically unable to fast. Those permanently unable to fast, if they are wealthy enough, must feed a certain number of poor people for all the days they miss fasting. Those temporarily unable to fast due to illness or travel may make up the days they missed by fasting outside of Ramadan. Most of the above is detailed in The Holy Qur'an.

There is a rule often applied to all religious requirements, not just fasting, almsgiving or feeding the poor. The rule is that "ability is the origin of requirement". Meaning that if a task falls outside one's ability, one cannot be religiously required to carry it out. This rule has a basis in a verse from the Holy Qur'an stating, along with other

things that “God does not require [from] a self, save what it is able”. It is also a rule to beware since self-deceiving oneself that one is not able may count against one in God’s accounting of one’s deeds.

5. Al Hajj. The Major Pilgrimage. Due to a direct statement in the Holy Qur’an stating that people owe to God “Pilgrimage of The House” if they are able to, this is also considered a religious requirement. The House here is interpreted as the Kaaba in Mecca.

Other sects agree that the above mentioned practices named by Sunnis “The Five Pillars of Islam”, are core practices in Islam in general for every sect, but they do not necessarily have the same name for them, nor are they always limited to those five. Given that much of this guidebook is based on what I learned during my own years as a practicing Muslim, lucky enough to be born to generations of practicing Muslims, I will refrain from adding information that I am unfamiliar with to this chapter. In a later chapter, I will name and compare, the sects of Islam and with that information, it will be relatively easy for you, dear reader, to research how the practices in “The Five Pillars” relate to the other sects, if you have further interest in discovering such.

Background History

The Holy Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad, upon him prayer and peace, approximately fourteen centuries ago in the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula. This revelation caused great religious, and consequently social, legal, and political upheaval, that would eventually go on to change the world far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Before that time however, and for centuries past, the Arabian Peninsula, was dominated by Arab clans and tribes with primarily four broad types of political allegiance.

At the edge of the peninsula, towards Mesopotamia, (modern day Iraq and Iran) there were Arab tribes and clans who were vassals of the Persian Empire. At another edge, towards Egypt and Syria, there were Arab tribes who served as vassals to the Byzantines, The Eastern Roman Empire. The south of the peninsula was divided between sovereign Arab clans, and clans who at various points in time owed some form of fluctuating allegiance between Abyssinia/Ethiopia, and the Persians.

The Persians and the Romans were both content to support their Arab vassals to conduct proxy wars against each other as a buffer between their borders at Mesopotamia and Syria, while they pursued their conflict elsewhere in earnest. On the scale of the Persian and Roman armies, these proxy wars rarely amounted to more than armed squabbles, unless the overlords became directly involved. Between these edges of the Arabian Peninsula, was a vast, mostly arid region which largely held no interest for the Persian and Roman empires to the Northeast and Northwest of the Peninsula, or the Abyssinians across the strait of Bab El-Mandab (The Gate of Tears) at the South of the Peninsula. This vast region was inhabited by tribes who were largely independent and nomadic, with few scattered fully sedentary settlements. Few of these tribes formed any successful polities during the period in question (Since the presence of the Christian Eastern Romans in Syria). Their neighbours to the North, despite support

from their Roman and Persian overlords, were barely petty kingdoms. Statelets. To the south, Central Power in the modern day regions of Yemen and Oman had significantly weakened long ago. The nomadic tribes of the Arabian heartland largely warred, truced, and grazed their herds with how their fortunes shaped from year to year. Of the few sedentary settlements they relied on, two relatively large ones were in the Hijaz. Mecca, and Yathreb, the city now known as Al-Madinah. These settlements were large by that area's standards, but considerably small as far as cities went, even then. These two cities were loosely governed by confederations composed of the strongest of the clans settled within them, and the customs they somewhat selectively enforced. Occasionally, they would agree on a central leader, but not necessarily on his succession. For example, Prophet Muhammad's grandfather, known as "Abd Al-Muttalib" son of Hashem, named "Shaybah" at birth, was acknowledged as the "Lord of Mecca" but his children were not acknowledged as such, nor were we ever taught that they pressed such a claim (or even had such a claim to press). Which is to say that while it was politically significant that the one ruler Mecca could agree on came from the House of Hashem, and while the Hashemites were certainly noble before, and after Abd Al-Muttalib ruled, their house was never formally and fully considered the "ruling house". And before Islam took root in Yathreb, the city was reportedly in the process of selecting a prince. Occasionally, to the North, the vassal tribes and client statelets rebelled against their overlords.

This is the historical climate Prophet Muhammad, was born during, in the City of Mecca. The climate he grew up during, and began preaching his message during. Reportedly, he received his first revelation in a cave just outside Mecca, and Mecca was where he first preached his message. It is a climate worthy of note because it offers an oft-ignored perspective with regards to the later wars of the Muslims after The Prophet's passing.

By the time Prophet Muhammad, had passed away, the vast majority of Muslims lived in a unique polity he had personally been leading. A state which was not a traditional hereditary kingdom, but larger and more powerful than any hereditary “statelets” the Arabs had known in the region. And yet it was still not as powerful as its neighbours, the two empires to the North. Nor as established. A fledgling state, which still conducted more affairs through individual assigned responsibility than through institutions. Some institutions did exist however, and were rapidly developing.

After The Prophet’s passing, the leadership of this state passed to a “Successor”. The literal translation for the word “Khalifah”. This would become the title accorded to every leader to govern this state, and its successor states for centuries to come. The state and its successor states would become known as “Al Khilafah”. What people call in English “The Caliphate”. This particular Caliphate would be distinguished from later Caliphates by the name “Al Khilafah Al Rashidah.” “The Wise Caliphate” or “The Rightly Guided Caliphate”. So named for the four companions of the prophet to immediately succeed him as leaders of the state. “The Rightly Guided” Caliphs. Four close companions of the prophet, none having openly defied the rule of the successor before him.

“The first of the “Rightly Guided” Successors was Abu Bakr Al Siddiq. It was during his “succession” that Muslims first went into open war with the Persian Empire. The traditional historical narrative is not expansive upon the origins of this conflict. It says only that after a period known as “The Apostasy Wars” and pacifying the state once again after the prophet’s passing, a Tribal Chieftain, and general of the Caliphal Army during The Apostasy Wars, took the initiative to raid into Persian-controlled Mesopotamia. Modern day Iraq. Abu Bakr supposedly praised the action when he got word of it, and reassembled more forces in preparation of a campaign against the Persian Empire.

It has always seemed obvious to me that much is missed from this story. To begin with, the Arabic sources mention that the chieftain in question is “Al Muthana Ibn Al Harith”, and name him as a previous vassal of the Persians, who was initially reluctant to embrace Islam so as to not offend the Persian Emperor (or Shahanshah). The leader of a fledgling state exhausted by a recent inner conflict, is unlikely to permit, let alone praise an unprovoked attack on a much larger and stronger and more established empire without a very strong reason. Even if the empire in question was going through its own share of internal turmoil at the time. The most obvious explanation for that is that the raid was more than just a raid, but a counter-raid, a necessary one. Despite the internal strife of the Persian Empire at the time, it would have offended the strongest amongst the Persian Satraps in Mesopotamia that a former Persian vassal who had rejected Islam for fear of Persia would overcome his reluctance and embrace it willingly. In the simplest of terms, it is likely that the Persians “drew first blood”.

The conflict with the Romans however, began during Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime, with the Romans definitely drawing first blood, and further proving themselves a serious threat to the fledgling Muslim state after initiating armed conflict. The first incident reported is of an Arab vassal of the Eastern Roman empire who had an emissary from Prophet Muhammad murdered. Taking it for the act of war it was, the Muslims prepared an army, and the Eastern Roman Empire sent its vassals Roman soldiers to aid in defending against the Muslim Arabs. There was a battle and a series of skirmishes. The second incident reported is of Romans amassing soldiers with their Arab vassals to begin an invasion of the heartland of the Arabian Peninsula. The Muslim Arabs, led by Prophet Muhammad, amassed their own forces quickly and marched to confront the threat, but for unknown reasons, the Romans and their Arab vassals had disbanded their forces by the time the Muslim Arabs arrived, so no further blood was shed during the prophet’s lifetime.

If you consider every conquest the “Rightly Guided Caliphate” ever made, you would see that every new land the state took control of in that time period, (The Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greater Persia, Transoxiana, etc) was either a former Persian province or a former Roman province. Which means, framing the conquests of that particular era, and a few later others, as unprovoked attacks by Arabs against the local, indigenous populations of these lands, lacks the aforementioned perspective mentioned earlier. These were not independent lands the “Rightly Guided Caliphate” was enslaving. These were lands controlled by the empires of its enemies.

Lands, resources and people the caliphate’s enemies dedicated to oppress the caliphate. These enemies had begun the aggression against the Arab Muslims long before the Arab Muslims fought back. The Arab Muslim state in question was taking from two of its bigger, economically and numerically stronger enemies; lands, financial resources, food, wealth and population, which the other two empires were actively using to attack it. There were often cases when the indigenous population, brutally treated under Roman or Persian rule, where the locals would cooperate with the Arab Muslim forces to unseat the imperial Roman and Persian forces.

All things considered, during the life of Prophet Muhammad, Islam essentially brought law to the majority of the tribes and clans of the Arabian Peninsula, both sedentary and nomadic. A law which would enforce justice and accommodate custom. A common denominator to resolve the clash of different customs from different clans. From this law, a true Arabian state emerged. A state which was larger, stronger and more independent than the vassal petty kingdoms and statelets Arabs on the fringe of the peninsula had formed at the time.

In time, this state would come to be more multicultural than Arabian, its only claim to being called Arabian being the primary language of its sovereigns. The state would also become

Persian, North African, West & Central Asian, Turkic, Caucasian and more. And from this gigantic state, which would eventually decentralise to the point of division into other states, the core substance of much of pre-medieval Middle Eastern and North African civilisation would later come to emerge. Islam is now a common cultural denominator across all those cultures, rather being a common cultural denominator only to rival Arab clans. It is because of Islam that in days of stricter local customs, from before the middle ages up to the mid-20th century, an Arab who speaks no Turkish, may live amongst the Turks for an extended period without inadvertently causing great offence. Or a Turk amongst the Persians. Or a Kurd amongst the Arabs.

A similar effect may be attributed to the spread of Catholicism in Western Europe, in that religion is a great connector of cultures. But in truth, it is rarely that one hears of an English medieval merchant who speaks no Spanish, deciding to leave England and move to Aragon solely in the interest of better trade. Particularly if his trade was still surviving. In the lands mostly populated by Muslims however, a merchant moving from one Muslim country that spoke his language to another which did not, was not so uncommon. In many ways, till this day, Islam connects many of the aforementioned Eastern cultures to each other. This is a basic historical background for the initial revelation of Islam, the circumstances in which Islam was revealed, and of the armed conflicts involving Muslims outside of the Arabian Peninsula which followed.

Interpretations

Interpretation is a key determinant in how a Muslim practices Islam. This is especially true for The Holy Qur'an, both in cases where verses bear several meanings, and in verses that seem to bear only one meaning. For example, there are verses that describe the religious requirements for a marriage to be Islamically correct in no uncertain terms. But if one of those requirements are not met, does that make the marriage invalid, and thus, its consummation, fornication? Does the answer to that apply to all requirements equally? The rules for inheritance are very specifically identified as executable "after" a legal will, but does that make those rules "secondary" to a legal will? Can a legal will divide the entire estate and leave nothing for the rules specified in the Qur'an to apply to an estate "after" a will? These are just examples of the many issues to which different interpretations of the Qur'an have applied over the centuries.

Interpretation differs with several aspects. A grasp of the formal Arabic language, the original roots and literal meanings of the words along with an understanding of the historical and contemporary applications of these words. The methodology of confirming or denying answers to theological questions, as determined by religious schools of thought, and ultimately, by the religious sects those schools of thought come from. The traditions ascribed to the Prophet, upon him prayer and peace, and his close companions, and the veracity of said ascription to the satisfaction of various scholars from various religious schools of thoughts and sects, and so on, and so forth.

Traditions

The traditions aforementioned in the second chapter, the prophet's specifically, are referred to collectively as "The Sunnah". Significant, though admittedly smaller parts of "The Sunnah" are correctly itinerant with very minor differences between religious schools. Notably, action-based traditions such as the motions of prayer or the rituals of major pilgrimage (Hajj) or the minor pilgrimage (Umrah). Most Muslims will generally accept the core prayer motions and pilgrimage rituals of Muslims from other schools as permissible, or only minorly incorrect, as opposed to outright disqualifying them. These particular examples were witnessed by thousands of people many times over, some on a near daily basis for years.

Other parts of these traditions are thought by some schools to be "most likely" to be true of The Prophet's actions and sayings, but are not universally thought of as such by all religious schools. And this is where the dividing line between "faith" and "culture" begins. The dividing line I mentioned in my introduction. The main reason I wrote this guidebook. I refer to "religious schools" in a general sense because even the same sects have different ways of thinking with regards to the religious traditions and the guidance they seek from it, let alone different sects.

Each religious scholar/cleric, or aspiring scholar/cleric, influenced largely by the school of religious thought he belongs to, looks to the traditions to at least help guide in the details of religious life, as well as help them interpret the Holy Qur'an. Some scholars/clerics, look to the traditions to enforce the details of religious life. Over the course of history, from a purely secular perspective (finance, health, statehood etc), some of these enforcements, based on religious tradition, have been beneficial. Some of them, have been catastrophic. But in either case (and most clerics reading this might protest) they were based on invalid grounds. The far bigger portion of the compiled traditions, most of the text from which scholars derive "the

sunnah”, is ranked in orders denoting the least likely to be true up to the most likely to be true. These orders, up to the “most likely” generally lack full certainty. And one cannot declare a spiritual decree “obligatory” based on a lack of certainty alone. One cannot use a tradition regarded as “most likely” yet uncertain to interpret a complicated verse in the Qur’an as a certainty simply because it seems very fitting. And yet many clerics have done those two things and continue to do so. This is the source of many problems for us Muslims today.

That is not to say that many of these traditions, from most likely to least likely, are not sometimes an excellent source of wisdom and spirituality. Considered rationally, and optionally, many of those traditions carry tremendous benefit. But problems tend to arise when the traditions cease to be applied with optional rationality in favour of unthinking imposition.

The most famous of these traditions are compiled in a volume set named “Sahih Al Bukhari”. Al Bukhari was a religious scholar who attempted to compile the verbal and physical traditions of Prophet Mohammad, his sayings and doings. Al Bukhari was born after the prophet’s death by almost 178 years, so he began his journey compiling the prophet’s sayings “Hadeeth (singular)/Ahadeeth (plural)” and doings, roughly two centuries after the prophet’s death. Al Bukhari instituted a complex system for validating the likelihood of a tradition truly coming from the prophet. He established a line of transmission from the prophet to whomsoever told him the tradition, he then investigated all available information regarding everyone this line of transmission, such as the historic likelihood of one person in the line of transmission meeting the other and passing the tradition on, whether anyone in the line of transmission was known to be a liar, whether the tradition, or a similar one, coincides from another (or even several) line(s) of transmission, whether anyone in these lines of

transmission was known to be a liar, and many other criteria. Al Bukhari then used these criteria to grade these traditions' likelihoods, naming some more likely than others.

The proponents of using Al Bukhari's and other similar volumes as measures for "definite" religious guidance, argue that a high standard of criteria and verification methodology is sufficient to take the information provided by compilers as measures to make absolute, irrevocable religious decisions. The opponents argue that Al Bukhari's and others' volumes have inevitable gaps in their verification process, and that compiling previously unwritten traditions two centuries after the man they are accredited to has passed away will inevitably yield vast falsity in some of even the most well-verified traditions, because 200 years is too long a time. As you have guessed, there are other compilations of Hadith well regarded by some. But Al Bukhari is the most famous and most celebrated of those compilations.

However, it is important to note that this fame and celebrity is based on Al Bukhari's status amongst the Sunni sect's scholars, and this is the Muslim sect with the largest numbers. Other sects typically rely on Al Bukhari's volumes less than Sunni scholars, and may hold other traditional compilation volumes above it.

The Role of Religious Clerics and Scholars

Religious clerics and scholars amongst Muslims have many different specialties. Some are dedicated to the art of interpretation, some are dedicated to the art of memorising and reciting the Qur'an correctly out loud (no easy task, especially if you memorise the 14 recitations), while others still are dedicated to studying the "Hadeeth" part of the Sunnah, and many other specialties.

Religious clerics' spiritual significance to Muslims on an individual level varies from Muslim to Muslim, school of thought to school of thought, and sect to sect.

That being said, in the core message of the majority of the world's Sunni Muslims, religious clerics are not particularly considered "holy" in the traditional sense. A religious cleric's opinion that you are religiously permitted to do something will not ensure you are spared from God's judgement if the cleric was wrong. The cleric cannot bear your blame and leave you blameless. A cleric cannot forgive you on behalf of God. A cleric does not know how you will be held to account for your sins, what you will be forgiven, who will go to hell and who will go to heaven. A cleric is not even necessary for a marriage to be Islamically correct.

There have of course, over the centuries, been attempts by members of the clerical class to elevate the perception of their spiritual importance. This is universal across all Muslim sects and schools of thought. This is however, a cultural perception which alternately strengthens and weakens under certain socioeconomic circumstances. Historically, the secular roles of Muslim clerics and religious scholars have played a more consistently important part than their occasional perception as a class of spiritually superior beings.

Judges in predominantly Muslim societies were almost always drawn from the ranks of those who received an advanced degree of religious education. While the laws judges governed by

were typically a combination of religious laws and local laws, customs and codes, it was always necessary for a judge to ensure that enforcing a sentence does not blatantly violate the socially accepted level of commitment to religious rules. This meant that a pre-requisite to learning the law, was learning the faith upon which the law stands. For example, while eunuchs had very prominent roles in predominantly Muslim societies, it was religiously unacceptable to compel a slave who was recognised as legally Muslim, to undergo a process of castration. Using a local law or custom to violate this prohibition could result in a judge's removal from his post.

Thus, a secular judge, for much of Muslim history, needs must also have been a Muslim cleric. This role is less widespread today but still extant. In my home country of Egypt, while judges lean far more heavily on secular codes nowadays, and need not be trained as clerics, there are still certain courts which are administered by clerical judges, remnants of over 14 centuries of legal customs. Sentences involving the administration of capital punishment by a secular judge still require the final approval of a high ranking religious cleric. There are also countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and Iran, where justice is mainly dispensed by a judiciary appointed from the clerical class.

In certain rural, nomadic and semi-nomadic, predominantly Muslim communities across the Middle East and North Africa, locals defer their conflicts to the arbitration of traditional judges rather than the state-run courts of law. These traditional judges' stations in life may vary, from a magnate being appointed recently by local notables, to being the descendants of ancient aristocratic families who held secular power in the region. One of these variations comes in the form of the traditional judge being a fully-trained cleric from a notable family of clerics. In certain cases, such a cleric may serve as an official judge in a particular state-run court, and serve as the traditional judge of his ancestral village.

Muslim clerics were also an important source of literacy and education. Up until the mid 20th century, the overwhelming majority of literates first learnt to read and write in a preliminary religious school for children, taught by their local mosque cleric who also led the regular prayers. These schools still exist today, but they are becoming increasingly rare.

Another role particular clerics traditionally fulfil, is the role of spiritual guides within religious orders. Sufism, a spiritual approach towards life through Islam, aims to promote a deeper understanding of God and divinity during the mortal phase of life, rather than waiting for the hereafter. In service to that objective, many Sufis adhere to the practices of certain religious orders, known as Sufi Orders. The vast majority of these orders are headed by a fully trained Muslim cleric, who has undergone both the traditional training a cleric from his general sect would normally receive, and additional training in the Sufi practices of his order. Descent from a particular family line, may also play a role in the succession to the head of a Sufi order. For example, the spiritual head of the Teejaneya Sufi order in Nigeria, is also Simultaneously the traditional “Emir (Prince) of Kano”, and the tradition goes back to a time when the title of “Prince of Kano” was an official monarchical title attached to legally secular gubernatorial rights and powers over a state. The familial aspect of “succession”, or lack thereof, however, differs from order to order.

Overall, in the core of the faith, the role of a cleric in Islam, at least pertaining to the Sunni sect, is less integral to salvation than the role of a priest in Christianity, or the role of a Rabbi in Judaism. However, the veneration a Sufi adherent accords to the head of his or her order will typically exceed the veneration an unaffiliated Muslim from any sect, will afford clerics in general. This is ultimately a matter based on cultures defined by religious traditions and interpretations, rather than speaking to the core of the faith.

Sects

The two biggest sects amongst the Muslims are broadly defined as

1. **The Sunni Sect.** This one is the largest of all the sects, with over 80-85% of Muslims purporting to be Sunni.
2. **The Shia Sect,** the second largest of the Muslim sects.

These two sects bear many subgroups within their numbers but there are roughly three much smaller sects which claim or have claimed at one time to lie outside the umbrellas of these two sects and yet within Islam. The three smaller sects are:

3. **The Druze Community**
4. **The Ahmaddiya Muslim Community**
5. **The Qur'aniya (Qur'anists) Group**

This chapter will deal with the defining features of the Sunni and Shia sects and their collective relationship to other Muslims in some detail, and then briefly outline the same for the other three sects. Beginning with the largest of the sects, The Sunnis:

“Sunni” is the endonym for the sect denoting that they follow Islam through the “Sunnah”, the traditions established and accepted by our lord the messenger of God, Muhammad, upon him prayer and peace. This is largely a self-description which does not speak for every other sect’s descriptions of themselves. For example, I’m sure many Shia would consider themselves following the “Sunnah” as they interpret it and believe it. The point being that just because Shiism is the second largest sect of Islam, with significant differences in religious practices, the actual meaning of the word “Sunnah” is not a meaning Shia Muslims reject. It is true, that being the two largest sects of Islam, their names being mentioned together almost always invites comparison, but they are not polar opposites.

The Sunnis generally take primary guidance from the Holy Qur'an, and secondary guidance from the Sunnah, the traditions ascribed to the prophet Muhammad. The degree to which they rely on some traditions more than others, varies across Sunnis, who are a vast sect. Their main source for the traditions ascribed to The Prophet is the compilation of "Al Bukhari" but also other volumes, such as the compilations of "Muslim" (A religious scholar's name), "The Traditions of Abu Dawood", and a few others.

Their interpretation of these traditions, and of the Holy Qur'an, is broadly divided between four schools of Islamic thought, each relying on a fairly structured method of religious jurisprudence. The four schools of thought are the "Maliki", the "Shafei'i", the "Hanafi" and the "Hanbali". Each of these four schools are based on the methodologies established by four celebrated Sunni religious scholars, known as "Malek", "Al Shafei'i", "Abu Hanifa" and "Ibn Hanbal."

These methodologies have been further developed by prominent religious scholars who identify themselves as "followers" of these four schools of thought, or "students" of the four aforementioned scholars. To be acknowledged as a fully trained religious follower of a school, you must establish an educational lineage, a succession of masters from one of the four founders of the religious schools of thought. It is possible for a scholar to establish a lineage from more than one school of thought, for educational purposes. But such a scholar will typically identify as a follower as only one of the schools, despite holding a certificate from more than one.

The four schools agree on many points and do not necessarily invalidate their points of difference. For example, Al Shafei'i was reportedly a direct student of Malek, and, when visiting "Al Madina" in the Hijaz" was asked to issue a "fatwa", a religious opinion on a particular issue. Al Shafei'i reportedly replied with something that translates to the effect of

“One does not issue a fatwa while Malek is in Al Madina”. Which is to say he was inviting those asking the edict of him to go ask his teacher instead.

Sunni relations with other sects vary depending on the sect in question, the regional and international politics, as well as the general demographics of an area, but as a tentative rule, merely belonging to another sect does not, in the eyes of most Sunni interpretation, challenge the core integrity of someone’s faith. For example, in areas with high sectarian sentiment and tensions, it may be rare for a Sunni and Shia to be wed, and religious scholars from both sides might discourage such unions, and even attempt to challenge the validity of the few instances that take place on case-specific technicalities.

However if you were to sit those prejudiced scholars down and ask if there is any invalidity attached to such a marriage specifically because of a difference in sect, they would begrudgingly admit that sectarian difference alone cannot invalidate such a marriage. In other regions it is not unheard of for intersectarian marriages to occur, and in a few of those regions, it is barely even a consideration.

As mentioned above, being the two Muslim sects with the largest number of adherents, Sunni/Shia comparisons always seem to invite each other. With regards to what defines the Shia as a separate sect from others: A common and particular concept of “Imamate”.

Leadership. To be an “Imam” is to be “Amam” the others, that is, to be at the fore. At the front. In common Arabic parlance and usage, it denotes anyone fulfilling, or who regularly fulfils a spiritual leadership role, which may or may not be additional to a secular connotation. For example, one who leads prayer regularly at a mosque is the “imam” of that mosque. One who leads prayer at a regular gathering is the “imam” of that gathering. If a group of praying men rotate who serves as “imam” during regular meetings for ritual prayer,

whomsoever is chosen to serve as “imam” on a given day is the imam of that particular prayer, and so far, and so forth. But it has a deeper meaning than that.

Of all the titles which referred to Prophet Muhammad, the least used title in the modern day is the one which referred to the combination of his spiritual and secular leadership of the Muslims and their fledgling Arabian polity. Nowadays, we refer to him as “Prophet of God”, or “Messenger of God”, because his spiritual role in our lives is continuous. We address him with the title of lordship as a form of reverence, but this does not refer to his historic rulership of the Hijaz and beyond. After all, all prophets, are addressed thus. Even most of Prophet Muhammad’s companions are addressed thus. He was, most specifically, not a king. The Holy Qur’an said as much. So, by what description did Prophet Muhammad, rule and lead the Muslims in their new state? The epithet which generally describes and fits that role is “Imam”. And as I said, that role has both spiritual and secular usages.

When physically able and available, the prophet led at least all the mandatory ritual prayers for all the Muslims who could come pray behind him. He would stand before them, at their “fore”, with his back to them, and initiate the motions of prayer which those standing behind him followed. Sometimes, notably on Friday, he would preach a short sermon while facing the people, still at their fore, before turning his back on them to lead the prayer towards the “Qibla”. The direction towards which all Muslims pray. First, this was towards Jerusalem, until revelation came to change the direction towards Mecca.

But acting at the forefront of the new “state” was more than spiritual. In his capacity as Imam, Prophet Muhammad decreed permanent and temporary measures, enacted laws in general and specific legal actions in particular, advised people on a voluntary basis on primarily secular issues, conducted treaties with other polities, confirmed hereditary leaders who had converted to Islam in their positions, appointed non-hereditary leaders for Muslim

communities and Muslim military expeditions, directed Muslim finances and the treasury, and much more. Of course, there was delegation and assistance on many levels and he regularly received and welcomed counsel on almost every topic but, like many political societies, the final decisions, or the power to veto subordinate leaders' decisions, lay with one person. This person was Prophet Muhammad, upon him prayer and peace, in his capacity and description as "Imam". The one at the "forefront."

In this sense, anybody who is claimed by others or himself, truly or falsely, to be a "successor" of Prophet Muhammad, a "Khalifah/Caliph" is claimed to succeed to his "Imamate". Which is to say, to succeed to the Prophet's capacity as the ultimate and final decision maker for all Muslims in both spiritual and secular matters. It is **not** a claim of succession to Prophet Muhammad's prophethood. In that sense, a rightful "Caliph" is always "**The** Imam" for the nation, even if he is not "an imam" in the sense of having completed a classic religious education.

The Shia concept of Imamate relies on a succession of figures who are, according to the given Shia school of thought's principles, those who are rightfully entitled to such spiritual and secular authority, despite not always being widely acknowledged as such during their times. In this context, if a man considered "The Imam" by a Shia school of thought, did not wield widespread secular authority amongst the Muslims of his time, it is because his rightful power is usurped by someone with no right to it.

The word "Shia" in itself roughly translates to "the widespread/common of supporters", and is an endonym meaning that as a sect, they are defined by their popular support towards whomsoever they consider a rightful leader, even if other Muslims do not. They are properly referred to by themselves as "Shia'tu Ahl'I Al-Bayt", which can translate to "The widespread of supporters of 'The People of The House.'"

“The People of The House” here refers to the members of Prophet Muhammad’s household, and in Shia consideration, the sect is specifically based on supporting Ali the son of Abi Taleb (the prophet’s first cousin, son-in-law and one of his closest supporters, who was arguably partially raised by the prophet, having spent much of his boyhood in the company of his significantly older cousin), Fatimah (The Prophet’s first-born daughter, and Ali the son of Abi Taleb’s wife), along with their descendants.

As mentioned earlier, Ali was fourth of the “Rightly Guided Caliphs”, and as such, was widely acknowledged as “The Imam” of all Muslims. As the fourth sovereign Caliph of the Muslims, most Sunni-Muslims, despite not having a particularly faith based religious order of imam based successions, are happy to acknowledge that Ali, was also the fourth Imam of all Muslims after Prophet Mohammad.

It is not so with Shia however. The essence of Shia practice revolves on what they perceive as the rightful line of succession to the Prophet’s imamate, and almost all Shia consider Ali the first rightful imam and believe he should have wielded sovereign secular authority as the first rightful successor (Khalifah/Caliph) to the Prophet. Some Shia schools of thought speak more kindly of the first three Khalifahs than others, but all consider them to have occupied their positions as “Khalifahs” and received allegiance from other Muslims without just cause, given that Ali should have succeeded first and been pledged allegiance as leader of all the Muslims first. In accordance with that principle, it is never considered sinful in any Shia branch for someone to pledge allegiance to the rightful imam, even if the rightful imam does not wield the power or lay claim to being a “Khalifa”, more importantly, even if someone other than the rightful imam is widely acknowledged as the “Khalifa” and thus, the rightful imam to most (usually Sunni) Muslims.

Even if the Shia's supposed rightful imam does not dispute another's supposedly false claim to the imamate and caliphate (which is usually interpreted in Shia Islam as a common-sense and legitimate political move aimed at preventing unnecessary bloodshed). Conversely, It is often considered sinful to proffer such allegiance to such a candidate for imamate/caliphate amongst Sunni scholars since it may cause a "fitna" (discord/strife) which may lead to all-out war or even civil-war. This point is the source of significant confusion. Since many of those viewed as "rightful" imams by the Shia, specifically in the Abbasid era, themselves expressed similar opinions to most Sunni-Scholars, in the interest of preventing bloodshed, many figures the Shia traditionally consider rightful "imams" are considered by Sunnis to be Sunni religious authorities of very high standing.

To begin to unravel this, you must understand that though the Shias' differences from the Sunnis revolve around differing views on "imamate", these differences are, from a Sunni point of view, often based on the supporters of an unwilling imam, who is highly regarded by the Sunnis. From a Shia point of view, every imam in question was willing, but did not widely express such sentiment to prevent bloodshed. It is also, according to Shia theology, why the imam, who offered religious education to all Muslims, did not widely preach that he or his successor were the rightful leaders of all Muslims, but generally only spoke of such things amongst committed supporters who had voluntarily pledged allegiance. Sunni sources, of course, tend not to believe this. It is worth noting that descent from almost every imam in question from this period is claimed by some families from both sects.

The two main branches of Shia are the Twelver Shia and the Ismaili Shia, including subdivisions for each. Twelver Shia are so named because of their belief in 12 rightful imams from the house of Prophet Muhammad, to succeed to the imamate after him. The 12 imams are generally listed for Twelvers as: 1. Ali the son of Abi Taleb, 2. Al Hassan the son of Ali, 3. Al Hussein the son of Ali, 4. Ali the son of Hussein (Also known as Ali Al-Sajjad, Ali Zain

Al Abedeen, Al-Sajjad meaning the prostrater, as a reference to how often he prayed because ritual prayer involves prostration. Zain Al Abedeen meaning “Splendour of the Worshippers” or “Most Resplendent of the Worshippers”), 5. Muhammad the son of Ali, 6. Ja’far the son of Muhammad (Also known as Ja’far Al Sadek [Ja’far The Honest]), 7. Musa the son of Ja’far, 8. Ali the son of Musa, 9. Muhamad the son of Ali, 10. Ali the son of Muhammad, 11. Hassan the son of Ali, 12. Al- Mahdy (The guided one).

You may have read about any of the imams mentioned in this list under another title, since they were all known by titles additional to their names, and not every title is mentioned above. In mainstream Twelver Shia Islam, the imams in the above list are all considered infallible, this is their supposed correct order of succession, and the final imam, “Al-Mahdy” is considered to be in occultation, having gone into hiding centuries ago. In mainstream Twelver Shia belief, he is blessed with great longevity, and will supposedly emerge from hiding to aid believers in the end-times immediately preceding judgement day. Most differences between mainstream Twelver Shia Islam and other Shia schools of thought, or even other sects entirely, such as Sunni Islam, revolve around differences in belief regarding the above list.

For example, the concept of an imam named Al-Mahdy who is descended from the prophet coming to aid Muslims before judgement day is not exclusive to Shia traditions, but in Sunni traditions he is supposedly yet to be born, and it is not an essential defining feature of Sunni faith. Another example of the differences in belief regarding the above list is that the majority of the imams mentioned in the above list are considered by Sunnis to be Sunni religious scholars of high standing, and of course, noble by virtue of their descent. While Sunni Islam does not mandate governance from Prophet Muhammad’s descendants, both Shia and Sunni Muslims honour descent from Prophet Muhammad.

Which is to say that in mainstream Sunni considerations, the general opinion is that most of the imams in the list above were Sunni and considered themselves Sunni despite any political persecution they may have been facing from the reigning Khalifas and their agents, mainstream Sunni consideration has no record of these worthy religious scholars considering themselves and their particular supporters a separate religious sect. The Shia mainstream tradition does not challenge this lack of records but rather holds that in order to avoid persecution and unnecessary bloodshed between Muslims, many things were arranged more secretly rather than openly. However, it makes dating for both sects rather different.

Shia clergy historians may date the Sunni-Shia split since the death of the Prophet, since Ali did not succeed him, and the more cautious of Shia clergy historians may date the split to the martyrdom of Al Hussein at Karbalaa, since Ali was eventually acknowledged as leader of all Muslims, at least until Muawiya's rebellion (but even still, leader of most Muslims). On the other hand, since most of the imams on the Twelver Shia list are considered by their Sunni contemporaries to also be Sunni religious scholars, most Sunni clergy historians could probably only formally date the Sunni-Shia split into actual religious sects, rather than just political groups, at the death of the Hassan the son of Ali (Also known as Hassan Al Askari), the 11th imam in Shia tradition, if not dating it even later.

Ismaili Shia schools have their own lists of imamate and deputy imamate, some of which continue till this day. For instance, representing Nizari Ismailis, is the Aga Khan IV (The fourth Aga Khan) who serves as the Nizari Ismaili community's 49th Imam. Dawoodi Bohra Ismailis on the other hand are represented by a deputy known as "Al Dai Al Mutlaq" which translates to "Absolute Missionary".

Then of course, there are religious groups which are mistaken for Shia schools but are not. For instance, there is a small minority of Sunni Bohras in India, and the Bektashi Sufis are

often classified with Shia Alevism because they have an imamate concept with striking similarities to the Twelver Shia's, based on holding 12 high ranking imams in very high regard, but Bektahsis often self-identify as Sunni Muslims, they hold the first 3 Khalifas before Ali in a very high regard as well, and frequently refer to the four main schools of Sunni Jurisprudence. Generally speaking, sect relations between mainstream Twelver Shias and mainstream Sunni groups with no major focus on imamate, are more relaxed than intra-sect relations between mainstream Twelver Shias and other Shia schools with radical differences in the imamate concept, from a theological point of view.

For example, mainstream Twelver Shias relationship with Nizari Ismaili Shias is generally more theologically tense than with mainstream Sunni Muslims. This is because the Sunni position on the imamate is explainable (from a Twelver point of view) as a lack of understanding due to the Shia belief that their imams did not always openly preach Shia imamate concepts. On the other hand, Shia groups are considered by their fellow Shia groups to be initiated in the Shia concept of imamate, so to hold a radically different imamate concept from another Shia group is to diverge more widely from what each group considers core Shia tenets.

Of course, while the theology diverges widely, most Shia groups loosely recognise each other as one sect, if not necessarily in total agreement. It is when theology diverges so widely that it splits, that all Shia groups become unwilling to recognise a particular school of thought. This is when a new sect emerges.

For example, this is what happened with the Druze. The first Druze evolved from the Ismaili Shia taking a particular spiritual stance with regards to the political succession of Fatimid Khalifas after a particular Khalifa disappeared or died mysteriously (depending on the historical accounts). The disappeared Khalifa was credited with increased spiritual graces by

some people (ironically, some of those spiritual graces were considered too extreme to be true, even by the Druze) and from those people, the Druze community evolved. However, their theological development and the radically different social restructuring of their communities, fuelled by many factors, eventually led to a mutual rift between them and other Shia groups. No Shia group considers the Druze as Shia, nor do the Druze consider themselves as Shia.

Indeed, there is dispute as to whether the Druze consider themselves Muslims at all. Many prominent Druze community members have publicly identified as Muslims before, while others have not, and there is speculation that those who identify as Muslim do so to avoid persecution. This is a rather simplistic approach that is difficult to prove however, because some Druze community members have insisted that they are Muslim despite the persecution that brought them. For instance, the Druze community living under Zionist rule in the Holy Land, is considered one of the groups which are not exempt from conscription for military service, as opposed to other Arab groups who are generally Christian or Muslim. However, I remember seeing an episode on television many years ago, about the two sons of a prominent Arab Druze writer who both refused to serve in the military, insisting that as Druze, they are Arab Muslims, and they both suffered incarceration for their refusal. This Arab Druze writer himself spoke of the Druze as Muslims during that televised appearance. He does not live under a government which compels Druze to appear Muslim. It is rather the opposite. Not identifying as Muslim under Zionist rule is not unheard of for some Druze, and may even be advantageous. And yet he insists on identifying as Muslim. These are not the actions of one misidentifying their faith to stave off persecution. Of course, there is a growing number of Druze refusing conscription, but those do not necessarily say they refuse because they are Muslim.

Somewhat inversely, the Ahmadis, or Qadianis always consider themselves Muslims, and are always open about that in conversing with other Muslim groups unless they are forbidden by law from doing so. For instance, in Pakistan, Ahmadis are legally prohibited from referring to themselves as Muslims or identifying Ahmadiyya as a Muslim sect. In the rest of the world however, Ahmadis publicly self-identify as Muslims. The rest of the Islamic community is divided as to whether they can be considered as such however, due to some contention regarding the spiritual status of the leader of their community, whom they refer to as a “Khalifa” in short and “Khalifatul Massih” in full. Literally meaning “The Successor of The Christ”. There is also some contention regarding the ascension of Jesus Christ and his life and death, since Ahmadis consider our lord Isa (Jesus), upon him prayer and peace, to have passed away on earth whereas most Muslim scholars interpret the Qur’anic verses about Jesus to mean he ascended in his living mortal form and body to heaven (widely believed to be the only human to do so).

The final sect I mentioned above, the Qur’anists, are the subject of similar debate to the Ahmadis with regards to scholars from larger Muslim sects considering them Muslims or not, but for different reasons. The name Qur’anist gives an immediate impression, for one somewhat versed in Islam and its groups and classifications. It gives the impression that as a sect, due to the difficulty of ascertaining certain veracities in religious tradition, they rely on the Holy Qur’an alone as the source of their religion, and interpret it solely using linguistic and historic knowledge. It gives the notion that they are purists of a sort. The name however, is misleading, since Qur’anists often challenge the traditional content and compilation method of the Qur’an which both Sunni and Shia sects agree upon, and hold their own views as to the elevated spiritual status of certain religious leaders who are also not mentioned in the Holy Qur’an as it is acknowledged and printed by Shia or Sunni groups. Qur’anists can contend that their challenges to “small details” is hardly a challenge to the Qur’an

acknowledged by other sects in general, but because the compilation of the Qur'an is based on certain principles, the religious principles from both major sects agree that there are no "great details" or "small details" in the Qur'anists' challenges, and that their challenges are addressed to the Qur'an Sunnis and Shias rely upon as a whole.

Dispelling Some Other Myths

-Jihad: Jihad doesn't refer exclusively to a holy war or war of any kind. Jihad is a word derived from the root pronounced "Jahd" or "Johd" which literally translates to effort. A Jihad is a continuous application of effort. So, yes to go to war is a "Jihad". But also, to earn a difficult degree or learn a difficult craft, one commits "Jihad". To withstand a temptation one very much desires is an act of Jihad. To attain the finish line of a marathon on time for most people is a stupendous Jihad. Not every Jihad is holy.

A holy Jihad must have an aspect that serves God, or God's will in some way. This becomes "A Jihad on the path of God" or "A Jihad for the sake of God". If you build a hospital seeking to please God, that is a Jihad on the path of God. If you constantly resist the temptation to have illicit sexual relations with someone when you believe you could, that is a Jihad on the path of God. If you make a difficult personal physical effort to bring the needy what food and medicine they need, that is also a Jihad on the path of God. And yes, if you fight in a justified war in which you are not the original transgressor or supporting the original transgressor, then you are committing a Jihad on the path of God.

-Sharia: Originally, sharia is one of the many words in the illustrious Arabic language that also mean "path" or "course". Due to the law giving nature of the original Islamic revelations in Mecca, as issues arose for the nascent Arabian state, the act of "making a path" for everything like commerce, inheritance, marriage, armed conflict, etc became necessary. Making a path in the sense of legislation. So legislating, making a path, came to be known as "tashree'" and the actual law, the actual path to be followed for the legitimate accomplishment of something by due process came to be known as "Sharia".

You have heard of “Sharia Law” in the west but that is a misnomer. There is no real thing called “Sharia Law”, that would be rather redundant unless you’re literally using old and unusually applied Arabic to speak of a law for roads/paths/courses. Sharia in legal usage is usually used to literally signify law. For example, older Arabic texts mentioning Roman Law might literally refer to it as “The Sharia of the Romans”.

What you’re thinking of when you think “Sharia Law” is Islamic law. But Islamic law is not in itself a very solid concept. From the earliest days of Islam, the sources of the law were myriad. Some of the laws were derived from Islam itself, from holy scripture or the rulings of the prophet, but some of the laws were also derived from local customs, laws of necessity, and pre-existing proto-legal principles. For example, if you examine the laws of each era you will find that the “Sharia” of the Rashidun Caliphate is different to the “Sharia” of the Abbasid Caliphate, and that the “Sharia” of Mameluke Egypt would have been different to the “Sharia” of the Sultanate of Delhi, and they would all be different to the 17th century Sharia of the Ottoman Empire. So yes, predominantly Muslim societies have some laws inspired by or directly derived from Islam of course, but that is not the sole source of legislation.

Then again, many legal concepts which came to be known through Muslims, even the earliest Muslims, have found their way into western legal systems. For example, the legal principle that “the burden of proof is on the accuser” is an early requirement of justice in the Muslim world, stated more literally as “the demonstration/revelation is upon the claimant”. While this concept makes no known appearance in Latin or English legal discourse till the 16th century, it is already spoken of in Arabic as an established legal principle by “Al Nawawi” and other Muslim jurists in the 13th century. Scholars originally credit knowledge of the principle amongst Muslims to a saying of Prophet Muhammad, but state its use to be much

older, going back as far as at least King David. So far as I can discover however, the earliest known written sources for this principle are in Arabic, written by Muslims.

-Islam's treatment of women: The misconception between what is required of women by Islam, and what is imposed upon women by the cultural misconceptions some (and by no means all) Muslims suffer from, is one of many reasons I felt the need to write a guide detailing the difference between the core message of Islam and the cultural applications attached to its appearance by various societies. The core message of Islam empowers women financially, empowers their physical sovereignty, encourages chastity outside of wedlock in both genders on the highest physical levels (up to averting the gaze) and codifies women's rights in cases of inheritance, divorce and other issues. Many if not all the things a Muslim society seemingly dominated by men (or even women) imposes on Muslims in general and women in particular are subjects of vast interpretation and misinterpretation.

After all, the leaders of the Judeo-Christian west have in the past used selective interpretation of religion to mistreat women quite regularly, and it is still the case in many Western communities, but there is no widespread impression that this mistreatment is a requirement of faith when an abundance of these cases emerge.

-Converts/Reverts: English speaking religious scholars and the English speaking Muslims for whom they are a religious source, often make a point of saying that someone who embraces Islam is not a convert, but a "*revert*". They base this on a tradition that all selves are supposedly born Muslims, and are then raised in the faiths of their respective communities. Based on this tradition, these scholars theorise that if such people accept Islam again as adults they have "reverted" to their original faith. They go so far as to correct people who talk about converting to Islam, as though they were wrong. The truth about this phenomenon is that the tradition they base this on is not a core concept of the faith. More importantly, even if the

tradition in question were a core concept of the faith, the terminology they build upon it is **incorrect**. In the Arabic language, the literal translation for “revert” is “mortad”, someone who reverted **away** from Islam. The common English language translation to relate to the culturally Judeo-Christian West is “Apostate”, but “Revert” is actually a more literal and fitting term. So yes, the term “convert” is much more correct.

These are just a few of many myths about Islam which are spawned by misunderstanding and misrepresentation, and they serve as prominent examples of what we should discern more choosily when considering the difference between Islam’s core message and the cultures of various Muslim societies around the world.

About The Author

The author of this guidebook, yours truly, is a graduate of pharmacy school, with professional experience as a writer and as a translator. The author of this guidebook has no Muslim theological or clerical certifications and does not claim to be anything other than an imperfectly practicing Muslim, born to long generations of Muslims before him on either side of his family. The author of this guidebook is going to stop calling himself “the author” now.

My name is Abdallah Al Alfy, born in and (primarily) raised in Cairo, Egypt and living for the last few years of my life in Mississauga, Canada. My original intention behind writing this guide was and remains to please God by presenting it to the world and hoping it promotes better understanding for people open to seeking it. In pursuit of that goal, this ebook is listed as cheaply as Amazon permits, and I will send you a free PDF version if you send a message asking me to at <https://www.facebook.com/AlAlfyOfficial/>, until demand exceeds my ability to reply to everyone. Then I’ll list the free PDF version on a file sharing web site or a drop box.

I did wonder if I should put my name on this guide, on the consideration that it should find many readers, wondering if any potential fame might detract from divine reward, but I came to the conclusion that it is better for this text’s integrity for the author to be known. I chose to write this more conversationally than academically to stress the promotion of dialogue, given that I am free of the obligations of religious academics. I wrote to you, my dearest readers, as a Muslim from my national and cultural background would speak.

You may read less wholesome content from me should you choose to peruse more of what I write in the future. I am but humble writer, not a paragon of virtue by any means. Please keep that in mind. May you find great use for this guidebook.