

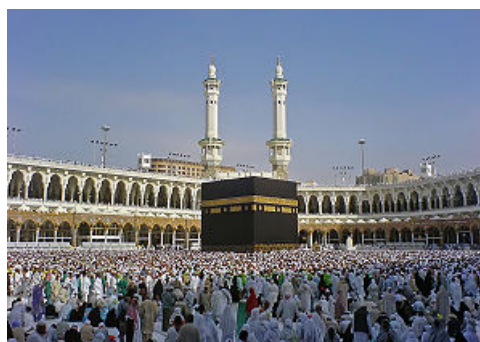


This is about a journey that began 1400 years ago, from continent to continent, from generation to generation. It has inspired the creation of some of the most extraordinary buildings in the world, buildings that tell a story through times of conflict and confrontation, of harmony and achievement. A journey made through the centuries that now brings millions of people every year to a single building in a single city, a journey into an entire way of life.

Five times a day all over the world hundreds of millions of people punctuate their daily lives with prayer. They start at dawn, they are timed to follow the sun across the sky until it sets, after dark the final prayer is said and it's through prayer that every Muslim in the world is connected, all praying in the direction of the city where their religion began, the first and most important wonder of the Muslim world, Mecca.



Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the religion he began teaching in the early seventh century. In the Grand Mosque or Al-Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca stands the building known as the Kaaba.



Muslims believe the origins of Mecca as a holy place predates Muhammad and goes back to the birth of humanity, they believe the original Kaaba was built under divine instruction by Abraham a figure common to Islam, Christianity and Judaism. He built the Kaaba as a symbol of the unity of God, the centre of monotheistic religion, to personify that there is only one God. This is the single most important site in Islam, millions of Muslims visit the city every year on a pilgrimage centred on the Kaaba.

Outside Saudi Arabia, Jerusalem is the holiest city in the Islamic faith, before Muslims prayed to Mecca it was to Jerusalem that they directed their prayers, it is a city steeped in Islamic history. In almost every view

of Jerusalem you can see the slate grey dome of the Al Aqsa Mosque and alongside it the striking Golden Dome Of The Rock, built within a few decades of the Prophet's death it contains the stone from which Muslims believe Muhammad set off on his miraculous journey to the seven heavens.



The survival of the great Muslim buildings of Jerusalem has to do with the veneration the Jews and Christians as well as Muslims have for the site. They still stand after 1400 years in spite of all the wars; it's a protected and sacred place that all three religions regard with deep respect. Jerusalem is a divided city that has been destroyed twice, besieged twenty two times and been captured and re-captured forty four times. The Al Aqsa Mosque, on the left above, is one of the oldest in the world, the architecture is not unlike a church with a central nave and two aisles except it has five aisles each side, but the symbolism differs in important ways. The five aisles reflect the significance of the number five in Islam; there are five pillars of belief and many Mosques have five minarets (tall spires) and the call to prayer is traditionally given from the top of the minaret.

The Alhambra Palace in Grenada, Spain, built in the thirteenth century, is a celebration of Islamic design and beauty inspired by the Qur'anic visions of paradise recreated on Earth.



A thousand miles East is another building reflecting how the beliefs of Islam underpinned an entire empire, the Ottoman Empire that spanned three continents controlling much of South Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa from its seat of power in Istanbul. Four hundred years ago work started on one of the most celebrated buildings in Europe, The Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque). The interior is lined with



twenty thousand blue tiles that give the Mosque its name, two hundred and sixty stained glass windows show the influence of Byzantine church building and like many other mosques, it also comprises a tomb of the founder, a madrasah (school) and a hospice.

In the ancient city of Djenne stands an amazing mud built Mosque built in the thirteenth century and typical of Sudano-Sahelian architecture, albeit with definite Islamic influences, it is one of the most famous landmarks in West Africa and was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988.



The Shah Mosque (Masjed-e Shah) in Esfahan was built during the Safavids period, it is one of the masterpieces of architecture in Iran and is also registered as a World Heritage Site. Its construction began in 1611, and its splendor is mainly due to the beauty of its seven color mosaic tiles and calligraphic inscriptions. The port of the mosque measures 27m high, crowned with two minarets 42m tall, four vaulted halls (iwans) and arcades, behind is a space roofed with the largest dome in the city at 52m high.

Today, Iran is a theocratic Shi'a state run by a clergy with strict controls on the media, civil rights and women. There are various Shi'a theological beliefs, schools of jurisprudence, philosophical beliefs, and spiritual movements. Shi'a Islam embodies a completely independent system of religious interpretation and political authority in the Muslim world. Though a minority in the Muslim world, they constitute the absolute majority of the populations in Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq, as well as a plurality in Lebanon. They also constitute over 45% of the population in Yemen, over 35% of the population in Kuwait, 10-15% of the population of Saudi Arabia, 30% of the population in Turkey, 20% of population of Syria, 25% of the population in Albania, and 20% of the population in Pakistan. It has been estimated that there are approximately 10-15 million Shias in India, around 10-15% of the total Muslim population of India.

In Pakistan, as in many Muslim countries throughout the world, Islam has a mystical dimension. Worshippers who go to the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore can see this reflected in the architecture. This was one of the centres of the great Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century; today most Pakistanis follow the Sufi inflection of Islam but some extremists are pushing for a harsher regime. In the Badshahi Mosque, as in some Mosques all over the world, men and women pray in separate areas, social interaction between them is discouraged.



Islam consists of a number of religious denominations that are essentially similar in belief but which have significant theological and legal differences. The primary division is between the Sunni and the Shi'a, with according to most sources, approximately 85% of the world's Muslims being Sunni and approximately 15% Shi'a, with a small minority who are members of other Islamic sects. There are a total of between 1 billion and 1.8 billion Muslims, making Islam the second-largest religion in the world, after Christianity.

The basic unit of Islamic society is the family, and Islam defines the obligations and legal rights of family members. The father is seen as financially responsible for his family, and is obliged to cater for their well being. The division of inheritance is specified in the Qur'an, which states that most of it is to pass to the immediate family, while a portion is set aside for the payment of debts and the making of bequests. The woman's share of inheritance is generally half of that of a man with the same rights of succession. Marriage is a civil contract which consists of an offer and acceptance between two qualified parties in the presence of two witnesses, the groom is required to pay a bridal gift (mahr) to the bride, as stipulated in the contract. A man may have up to four wives if he believes he can treat them equally, while a woman may have only one husband. In most Muslim countries, the process of divorce in Islam is known as talaq, which the husband initiates by pronouncing the word "divorce". Scholars disagree whether Islamic holy texts justify traditional Islamic practices such as veiling and seclusion (purdah). Starting in the 20th century, Muslim social reformers argued against these and other practices such as polygamy, with varying success. At the same time, many Muslim women have attempted to reconcile tradition with modernity by combining an active life with outward modesty.

The Five Pillars of Islam is the term given to the five duties incumbent on every Muslim. These duties are Shahadah (profession of faith), Salah (ritual prayer), Zakah (alms tax), Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). These five practices are essential to Sunni Islam. Shi'a Muslims subscribe to eight ritual practices which substantially overlap with the Five Pillars. The concept of five pillars is taken from the Hadith collections, the Qur'an does not speak of five pillars, although one can find in it scattered references to their associated practices. According to Muslims tradition, the collection of ahadith (plural of hadith) or sayings by or about the Prophet Muhammad was a meticulous and thorough process that began right at the time of Muhammad. The original manuscripts are present even to this day in the Libraries of Berlin, Beirut and Damascus. Needless to say ahadith collection (even in the written form) began very early on, from the time of Muhammad and right through the centuries that followed. Thus Muslims reject "collections" that are not robust in withstanding the tests of authenticity.

The Qur'an meaning literally "the recitation" also sometimes transliterated as Koran, Alcoran or Al-Qur'ān, is the central religious text of Islam. It expresses that it is the book of guidance therefore it rarely offers detailed accounts of historical events, the text instead typically placing emphasis on the moral significance of an event rather than its narrative sequence. It does not describe natural facts in a scientific manner but teaches that natural and supernatural events are signs of God. Orthodox Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God, his final revelation to humanity, dictated to the Prophet Muhammad and written down some 20 years after his death, it provides Muslims with religious, political and ethical guidelines. As well as mentioning many of the Prophets of the Old Testament, a whole chapter is named after Mary, and Jesus is mentioned by name more times in the Qur'an than Muhammad himself. Many Muslims describe the text in intimate terms saying that they feel as if God is talking to them, personally. Part of the Qur'an's attraction is based on its message, which gives dignity to the poorest and most oppressed people, who feel they have direct access to God. The Qur'an in its actual form is generally considered by academic scholars to record the words spoken by Muhammad because the search for variants in western academia has not yielded any differences of great significance and that historically controversy over the content of the Qur'an has never become a main point, therefore all Muslims, Sunni or Shia use the same Qur'an. In some Muslim societies, women's lives are restricted and segregated from the mainstream; in others women become political leaders. Some countries practise executions by stoning, hanging or beheading, in other countries these punishments have not been used for centuries. In some Mosques, men and women worship side by side, in others women are completely excluded. In some places, women go out in public without scarves or veils, in others they are covered from head to toe, with even their faces covered. The Qur'an is written in classical Arabic, which is hard even for Arabic speakers to understand. Because of this most Muslims rely on a preacher to convey the message of the text, which they interpret with the help of the Hadith, but this need for interpretation gives imams and other preachers the power to put their own spin on the words.

Muslims see Jews and Christians along with themselves as "People of the Book". Like branches of the same tree, they share historic roots, with Abraham as their common forefather, but at the same time as preaching tolerance, the Qur'an describes Jews and Christians as having errant views. How this is played out in the actions of its followers depends on the context. In the early days of Islam, Muslim peoples conquered huge areas and brought many more people into the faith. Even those enemies who fought back, and re-conquered territories that had fallen to the Muslims, in turn were drawn to Islam. In the period after the death of the

Prophet Muhammad, when Islam was in the ascendancy, the Qur'an acted as a springboard for an incredible leap in the development of Muslim art and architecture, science and medicine, mathematics and philosophy. Islam during that period was open, confident and tolerant. When it is under pressure though, as it is in many parts of the world today, it tends to narrow its view and look inwards. The Israel/Palestine conflict and the struggle for control of and access to the city of Jerusalem constitute a major source of distrust between Muslims, Jews and Christians today. Hard-line Islamic fundamentalists are capitalising on the sense of insecurity generated by Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestinian land, which is backed by the US and other western countries.

Islam has a long history of diversity and intellectual debate, which is manifested, in the huge variety of traditions. Today, though, they are in conflict with each other. Some Sufis express their relationship to God through music and dance; the Shi'a venerate the Imam Ali as an intermediary between the individual and God. For Sunni Muslims, though, God may not be described in human language, nor represented in any art form. Saudi Arabia has its own clerical hierarchy and the dominant religious message here is a belligerent and patriarchal Islam known as Wahhabism. Backed by immense oil wealth, the Saudis are attempting to impose their strict, rigid, narrow and, many would say, divisive interpretation of Islam on the whole Muslim world. At it's most basic, the Saudis are printing thousands of copies of their own translation of the Qur'an in 44 languages, and distributing them at low cost or free around the world. On the opposite side of the religious divide, the Shi'a priestly caste that rules Iran has imposed a rigid orthodoxy on its population which is enforced by state violence in the form of a massive increase in public executions, floggings and hangings. The imposition of such draconian and narrow rules on whole populations is at odds with the inclusive and evolving Islamic traditions that date right back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, some western scholars are arguing that forensic analysis of a very early version of the Qur'an indicates that the text itself can be reinterpreted, and was probably not passed down word for word. Today, new technology is able to bring the Qur'an to millions more people than ever before, but those who are trying to contort and narrow down its many meanings are using that technology to try to impose their own interpretation on Muslims everywhere. That is the paradox of the Qur'an, it speaks to Muhammad's 7th century tribal audience, and it speaks to a 21st century audience. It offers challenges and choices, not dictums, but if read carefully, one consistent message comes through: "Think and think again."

