

Daniel Ali & Robert Spencer

Inside Islam:

A Guide for Catholics

100 Questions and Answers

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Foreword by Fr. Mitch Pacwa, S.J.

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Questions and Answers

1. What is Islam?

Islam is the religion of more than a billion people on earth — a far cry from its humble and obscure beginnings in seventh-century Arabia. Islam is the dominant faith in over fifty countries stretching from Morocco to Indonesia. It is generally classified as one of the three great monotheistic religions along with Judaism and Christianity, and it contains numerous ties to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Muslims worship one God, *Allah*, and they revere the man they consider to have been His last and greatest prophet, Muhammad, a seventh-century Arabian.

2. I have heard that the number of Muslims is rapidly increasing each year throughout the world. Is this true?

Yes, it is. Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the world.

The main reason for this trend is population growth, though adult converts make up a significant portion of Islam's expansion as well. The number of Muslims in the world is increasing faster than the world population as a whole. In addition, those who proselytize for Islam are aggressive, well-prepared, and successful.

Islam is sweeping through Africa and gaining ground in former Catholic bastions such as the Philippines. In the West, a few high-profile converts — such as Muhammad Ali, Cat Stevens, Mike Tyson, Ahmad Rashad, and NBA stars

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Johnson, Mahmood Abdul-Rauf, Tariq Abdul-Wahad, and Shareef Abdur-Rahim — have given Islam an aura of *cool*. In the United States there are now about as many Muslims as there are Jews — and more Muslims than Presbyterians. Over the past forty years, Islam has also made significant inroads among African Americans, as witnessed by the rise of the Nation of Islam and other black Muslim groups (although traditional Sunni and Shiite Muslims consider the Nation of Islam and similar sects to be heretical).

Far from suffering a drop-off after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Muslim groups have claimed a large influx of converts in the United States and Europe. Meanwhile, huge numbers of immigrants have given Islam the foothold in Europe that the warriors of *jihad* could never gain for it. In the Netherlands, France, and Germany, Muslims are becoming a political and religious force that cannot be ignored.

Even if population trends change, immigration stops, and Muslim missionary efforts cease, Islam looks to be significantly stronger worldwide in the new century than it has been in ages. While millions of Catholics have bought into the one- or two-child mentality of secular Europe and North America, Islamic societies are rapidly increasing in numbers. If current trends continue — and there is no reason to think that they will not — Europe will make up just 7.5 percent of the world's people by 2050, compared to 22 percent in 1950. At the same time, the countries with the most youthful populations will all be Muslim: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iraq. Worldwide trends indicate that by 2050, Muslims will comprise 30 percent of the world's population, with Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) making up 25 percent. In 1900, by comparison, only

12.4 percent of the world's population was Muslim, with Christians comprising nearly 27 percent.¹

In summary, Islam is growing more quickly in the Western world today than at any other time in history for three main reasons: 1) Muslims are simply having more children than both Christian and non-Christian Westerners; 2) liberal immigration laws have allowed for rapidly-growing Muslim populations throughout the West (particularly in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, countries where the Muslim community is already a significant voice in public affairs); and 3) Muslim proselytism results in many conversions.

As much as the simplicity of Islam is attractive to people, one of the main reasons for conversions among Westerners from Christianity to Islam is dissatisfaction with Christian religious figures and what seems to be an endless wave of scandals. Moreover, the decay of Western culture is seen from the Muslim perspective as a failure of Christianity to provide adequate grounding for society. The human heart hungers for truth, and it is left unsatisfied by the prevailing relativism and lack of moral standards of Western secular culture. All too many Christian denominations, meanwhile, seem more concerned about preaching the latest politically-correct notions rather than the unchanging truths of Christian tradition. While this might attract people in the short run, ultimately it is a hollow exercise that eviscerates a Christian institution's very reason for being — namely, preaching the truths of the Gospel. This sad reality gives proselytizing Muslims a chance to fill the vacuum.

Also, in an information age such as ours, a religion that confidently teaches simple and clear beliefs (such as Islam) is going to have the competitive edge over religions that timidly present vague or “relevant” assertions with little substance.

3. But why does this recent growth of Islam really matter? Why should Catholics care about this?

It is important to keep in mind the radically different kind of world that the rapid rise of Islam portends for our children and grandchildren, a world where the dominance of Islam may erode many of the civil and human rights we now take for granted. Remember — Islam is not merely a religion; it is a social and political ideology that makes sharp distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly regarding rights and status. Islam needs to be taken seriously by all, especially by those who profess the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” Faith.

It is true that many Catholics remain unconcerned by Islam’s rapid growth. There are two possible reasons for this lack of concern: 1) Some Catholics do not understand the theological, spiritual, and cultural ramifications of a world embracing Islam; and 2) Many Catholics suffer from a certain ecclesial complacency based on a misunderstanding of the words of Jesus. After all, Jesus promised that the “gates of hell” would not prevail against His Church (see Mt 16:18). In these words, He promised that the Church would be indestructible and that it would exist throughout the world until the end of time. But Jesus did not promise that Christianity would remain the dominant religion in any particular nation or region (including the United States). Nor did He promise that other religions or creeds — belief systems that do not express as much of the truth about God and man — would not supplant the true Faith in the hearts of many people, even those we love. Above all, He never told us that we would not have to work hard to make sure that the “gates of hell” would not prevail against the Church in our own society. He never promised that His protection of

the Church would be automatic or distinct from the sweat (and the blood) of His faithful.

4. What is the difference between the terms “Muslim” and “Islam”?

Islam is the name of the religion itself. It means, in Arabic, “submission to the will of Allah.” *Muslim* is a related word that can be roughly translated as “one who submits” to Allah and his will. A Muslim, then, is someone who believes in Islam.²

5. I have heard that “Islam” means peace. Is this true?

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, many people (including President George W. Bush) have asserted that Islam means “peace.” While it is true that *salaam* (peace) and *Islam* (submission) share the same Arabic root, the two words are by no means synonymous. The word *Muslim* means “one who submits [that is, surrenders himself] to the will of Allah.” But its broader meaning extends to any person of any faith who surrenders himself to God’s will. This use is similar to the Christian’s use of the term *believer*. However, Muslims most often use it to refer to someone who believes in the religion of Islam.

Muslims also use another word to refer to a believer in Islam: *Mu’men*, which literally means “believer.” Westerners may have heard this term in reference to Afghanistan’s Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban, who proclaimed himself *Emir al Mu’menin* (Prince [or Leader] of the Believers). The two terms *Muslim* and *Mu’men* are used interchangeably in Arabic, and there is no clear distinction between them.

Whatever terms are used, a Muslim is one who strives to bring his life into line with the will of the one Muslims recognize as the only true God: Allah.

6. What does the Islamic word for God, “Allah”, actually mean?

Muslims believe that the true meaning of the word *Allah* is beyond human comprehension and understanding. However, this claim is not supported either by the Koran or Muhammad’s Tradition (the *Hadith*). Literally, the word is Arabic for “the God.” Some Western scholars of Islamic theology believe this word is of Aramaic origin, while others say it is derived from the Hebrew word *Elohim* — the plural of *El*, the word for God used often in the Old Testament. In any case, Muslims claim that when they call upon Allah they are worshiping the same God that Jews and Christians worship.

From a Catholic perspective, though, Allah (as He is presented in the Koran) is significantly different from the God of Christianity. In the New Testament, Jesus reveals God as a loving Father, a concept utterly foreign (even blasphemous) to a Muslim. For Islam, Allah is only Master, not Father; He demands obedience, not a relationship.

Moreover, in the Old Testament, God reveals Himself as “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). The people of Israel saw God’s love for them as the reason He chose them from among all peoples and nations to reveal Himself. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God tells His people, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (Jer 31:3). God loves His people and asks for their love and faithfulness in return.

7. What is the Koran?

The Koran (sometimes spelled *Qur'an* in English) is the holy book of all Muslims. The word *Koran* means “recital” in Arabic. The Muslim holy book is also called *Al-Furqan* (“The Criterion” or “Standard”) and *Al-Mushaf Al-Shreef* (“The Glorious Book”) in Arabic.

The Koran as we have it today is comprised of 114 chapters, which are often referred to in English by their Arabic designation, *sura*. Each verse is called *ayat*, which means “sign” or “miracle.” This designation came about from Muhammad’s reply to those who challenged his claim to be a prophet and asked him to perform a miracle. He claimed that the Koran, and nothing else, was his miracle.

Muslims also often refer to the various suras of the Koran by their titles. These titles are generally derived not so much from the overall subject matter of the chapter, which can be quite wide-ranging, but to one element mentioned in the chapter. For example: Sura 2 is titled “The Cow”; Sura 8, “The Spoils of War”; and Sura 29, “The Spider.”

Unlike the Bible, the Koran is not arranged chronologically or by subject matter. Instead, it is arranged according to the length of its chapters. The longest chapter appears first and the shortest chapter last. This organization was completed long after Muhammad’s death.

8. Is it true that only the Arabic version of the Koran is considered authentic?

Yes. The Koran is an Arabic book; its Arabic character is part of its essence. Translations of the Koran occupy a curious position in the Islamic world — Muslims do not consider the Koran in any language other than Arabic to be the Koran, since the Arabic version is said to be the word-for-

word revelation of Allah. They claim that Allah spoke to Muhammad in Arabic. This notion comes from the book itself: “We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue so that you may grow in understanding” (Sura 12:1).

Translating the Koran into other languages is, however, tolerated for the sake of evangelizing the non-Arab world. Yet in dialogue with non-Arabic speakers, Muslim scholars and apologists often dodge tough questions by dismissing all translations of the Koran and claiming that the book cannot be truly understood in any language other than Arabic. If you do not know Arabic, they maintain, you cannot truly understand the Koran (or, for that matter, Muhammad’s Tradition — *the Hadith*).

This entangles Muslims in an inconsistency, since Muslim groups worldwide have undertaken strenuous efforts to convert non-Muslims. These efforts involve translations of the Koran and other Muslim material — translations made by Muslims themselves, despite the alleged impossibility of understanding Islam except in Arabic.³

All Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike, are obligated to pray in Arabic even if they do not understand a single word of what they are reciting or saying. Since today most Muslims are not Arabs, this means that the majority of the world’s Muslims recite their Koranic prayers from rote memory. Furthermore, if a Muslim wants to read the Koran, he must read it in Arabic in order to obtain any graces from Allah, even if he does not understand what he is reading.

Although most of the major Islamic commentators on the Koran were not themselves Arabs, nearly all agreed that learning Arabic is mandatory for any Muslim who takes his faith seriously. Ibn Taymiyyah, one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic history and an enduring paragon of Islamic orthodoxy, says:

The Arabic language itself is part of Islam, and knowing Arabic is an obligatory duty. If it is a duty to understand the Qur'an and Sunnah [Muhammad's Tradition], and they cannot be understood without knowing Arabic, then the means that is needed to fulfill the duty is also obligatory.⁴

The religious superiority of Arabic in Islam has led to an Arabic cultural hegemony in the non-Arabic Muslim world. Great non-Arab civilizations in lands that are now Muslim — the most notable example is Iran — are not valued as part of the heritage of the Muslims in those lands, but are generally dismissed as products of the worthless “pre-Islamic time of ignorance.”

This is in sharp contrast to the Catholic faith, which is not tied to any particular language or culture and spans the globe without exalting one people at the expense of all others. Truly, the Church of Christ is *catholic* (that is, universal) — it exists everywhere and imposes no particular “culture” of its own. A Catholic believes that the Church's openness to various cultures is the most efficacious (even logical) approach to preaching the Gospel. This is primarily because cultures are temporal creations (that is, they are human in origin and develop over time), while divine truth is eternal — it is not and cannot be bound by any particular culture, race, or language.

9. What are the basic beliefs or tenets of Islam?

In sharp contrast to the multifaceted complexity of Christian theology, Islam is a religion of simplicity. Its primary beliefs are summed up in the *Shahada*, or Confession of Faith: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

When trying to win converts among Christians, Muslims frequently make use of this simplicity as a key selling point.

They compare the length of the Nicene Creed to the brevity of the Shahada and point to the Trinity as a sign that Christianity is not only hopelessly complicated, but illogical — a sharp contrast to Islam’s noble simplicity. Former pop singer Cat Stevens, a convert to Islam who now uses the Muslim name Yusuf Islam, recounts his childhood understanding of Christianity this way: “And when they said that God is three, I was puzzled even more but could not argue. I more or less believed it, because I had to have respect for the faith of my parents.”⁵

Of course, there is no compelling reason why the truth should be simpler than error. In fact, it is often the other way around, as men unwisely try to tame divine truths by simplifying them.⁶ We need to remember that God is radically transcendent and omniscient — that is, He exists eternally distinct from His creation and knows everything as eternally present. He remains, then, an inexhaustible mystery to man, His finite creature. Indeed, He is *the* Mystery. Thus, it should not be surprising if His revelation to us is full of profound mysteries. In any case, Islam’s simple faith is summed up in the Shahada, which is the first of the famous Five Pillars of Islam.

10. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

The Pillars of Islam sum up these central practices of Islam; they are the five most important elements of the Islamic faith. They are: the Confession of Faith (*Shahada*); Prayer (*Salat*); Fasting (*Sawm*); Pilgrimage (*Hajj*); and Almsgiving (*Zakat*).

In contrast to Christianity, Islam is characterized more by practices than by beliefs. In this regard, Islam more closely resembles Judaism than it does Christianity. Christians have historically placed great emphasis on *orthodoxy*, or right be-

lief, whereas Muslims are generally more concerned with *orthopraxis*, the unity of religious practice.

11. What does the first pillar, the Confession of Faith, entail?

The first pillar, as we have seen, is the confession of faith in the unity of Allah and the prophetic status of Muhammad. It is a statement of belief that is also a practice: one becomes a Muslim by making this confession in a public assembly of Muslims. In Arabic this confession is known as the *Shahada*. Every Muslim must confess verbally and believe that “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet.”

To confess this is to become a Muslim, just as baptism makes one a Christian. In form, however, it involves only words, not actions, and it therefore resembles baptism less than it does the confession of Jesus Christ as personal Savior that makes one a Christian according to many in the evangelical Protestant tradition.

According to Islamic theology, the first part of this testimony, “There is no god but Allah,” consists of three elements:

1. *The oneness of Allah*: although He refers to Himself in the Koran using the first-person plural reserved to kings (“We”), He is an absolute unity.

2. *The confession that Allah is the only One that human beings should worship*. This was formulated as a rejection of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

3. *The confession of His Holy Names (of which there are 99) and Essence*, here subsumed under the name Allah.

The second part of the Shahada contains the assertion that Muhammad is Allah's prophet. Implied is the assertion that all humans are obligated to follow Him as the final prophet of Allah and the perfect example for all humanity to imitate.

12. Muslims seem to be very dedicated to prayer.

Yes, they are. The second pillar of Islam is prayer (*Salat*). Prayers are mandatory five times a day for all Muslims. Muslims generally regard this as the greatest pillar of the faith, the unbendable pillar. Muslims may be excused from observing the other pillars — fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage to Mecca — when their health, age, finances, or some other impediment do not permit them to perform these duties. But never is anyone formally excused from praying five times a day.

Part of the Muslim's prayer obligation is attendance at community prayers in the local mosque on Fridays. Most Muslims regard attending these community prayers as essential to their practice of the faith, because there is strength in unity and praying together.

The daily call to prayer is called *Athan*. In Muslim countries nowadays it is announced through loudspeakers. The person who calls the faithful to prayer by chanting the Athan is called a *Mu'athin* (or *Muezzin*). A *Mu'athin* calls the Athan five times a day, just before the times when Muslims are required to perform their daily prayers. The Athan is composed of specific words and phrases that the *Mu'athin* must recite loudly, beginning with *Allahu Akbar* ("Allah is great").

Before a Muslim can pray, he ordinarily must perform a series of ritual ablutions (*Wudu*). He must wash each fist, his hands to the elbow, his face, ears, nose, and feet three times, as well as his sexual organs. There are also a number of bowings and prostrations (*Rukha*) that are part of each

prayer. They consist of many movements, each of which is accompanied by a recitation of certain prayers.

The daily prayers are said in the early morning, at noon, at mid-afternoon, at sunset, and at night.⁷ Muslims often criticize Christians for failing to pray as faithfully as Muslims do. Indeed, with some notable exceptions (particularly the *hesychasts* of Eastern Christianity), Muslims could well be correct in this criticism. Too few Christians have embodied St. Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17).⁸

The Koran mentions three times daily when prayers should be said (see Sura 11:114). According to Muhammad's Tradition, the Prophet received the command to pray five times a day from Allah himself, during the Prophet's mystical Night Journey to Heaven. Muhammad says that he was originally told by Allah to command his followers to pray *fifty* times daily, but Allah later revealed this to be too much of a burden.⁹

13. Why do Muslims worship on Friday? Isn't Sunday the Lord's Day?

Christians gather to observe the Sabbath on Sunday because that is the day the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. Muslims, however, deny the resurrection of Christ. They gather on Friday according to the command of the Koran, which seems to have been laid down in order to distinguish Muslims from Jews (who gather on Saturdays) and Christians: "O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew!" (Sura 62:9)

14. Are mosques considered churches? Do Muslims have to go to a mosque to pray?

The answer to both questions is no. Mosques have traditionally been the center of the Muslim community, and accordingly have been focal points of artistic expression in the Islamic world. Muslims are encouraged to pray in mosques because graces are multiplied in community prayer. Mosque attendance is mandatory, however, on Fridays and Feast Days, as well as for funerals.

Some of the world's greatest architectural wonders are mosques, including the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Aya Sofya mosque in Istanbul. The two Jerusalem mosques were built according to the model of Byzantine churches. The Aya Sofya is itself a former Byzantine church: the Hagia Sophia, the jewel of Christendom for a thousand years prior to the Muslim conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock were constructed in the seventh century after Muslim armies took Jerusalem. Both, of course, have become symbols of the religious and cultural tensions of Jerusalem, and this is nothing new: the Dome of the Rock was purposely constructed on the site of the old Jewish Temple in the same spirit with which Muslims bricked up the Jerusalem gate through which the Messiah was expected to enter.

15. What are Islam's rules regarding fasting?

Fasting is the third pillar of Islam. Every Muslim is obligated to fast during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, *Ramadan*, which literally means "parched thirst." According to the prophet Muhammad, "Verily, the smell of the mouth of a fasting person is better to Allah than the smell of musk."¹⁰

Because Islam follows a lunar calendar, the month of Ramadan slowly travels through the year; in some years it falls in the hottest part of summer, and in other years in the most frigid times of winter. During Ramadan, Muslims must abstain from all eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual relations from just before sunrise until sunset.

Muslims consider the month of Ramadan holy because they believe it was during this month Muhammad received the initial revelation of the Koran. Also in this same month, Muhammad is believed to have ascended to the Seven Heavens upon his death. At first, the fast lasted only three days, but over time it became extended to an entire month.

16. Why are Muslims required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca?

At least once during their lifetimes, Muslims are obligated to make a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the holiest site in Islam: the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, where Muhammad was born and where he lived for a great part of his tumultuous life.¹¹ The hajj is the fourth pillar of Islam. If the Muslim is physically and financially able to undertake this pilgrimage, he must do so. If not, he is exempted from this obligation.

Muslims cannot make this pilgrimage any time they choose: the *hajj* takes place only during the twelfth month in the lunar calendar, Dhu al-Hijjah.

The Muslim pilgrim (*Hajji*) must fulfill two conditions; otherwise, his hajj is unacceptable. First, he must have a right intention to worship Allah alone, along with a desire for the Hereafter. Also, he must follow the example of Muhammad in words and deeds, performing the specific rituals as Muhammad did in his life. If the pilgrim performs these rituals improperly, or makes the journey because of a

desire to be seen by men, or for any other worldly reason, his pilgrimage is worthless.

The pilgrimage involves a number of ritual actions. The pilgrims visit several important sites, including the well of Zamzam, where the angel Gabriel is said to have slaked the thirst of Hagar and Ishmael. At a certain point the pilgrims throw rocks at Satan, just as Abraham is supposed to have done at the same site when the Evil One tempted him. At another place the pilgrims sacrifice an animal.

The focal point of the pilgrimage, however, is the small stone building known as the *Ka'aba* (cube). Many Muslims consider it to be the very house of Allah on earth. It is a bare room with stone walls, and can accommodate about fifty people. It contains the black stone, which Allah is said to have thrown down from Heaven. Hajjis kiss it reverently. The Ka'aba was a pagan shrine before the advent of Islam, although Islamic tradition holds that the angel Gabriel gave Abraham the black stone and that he constructed a shrine there. In pre-Islamic times, the room that contains the black stone was the place where the local pagans kept statues of their gods. According to some Muslim traditions, there were even images of Mary and Jesus there.

Although many Muslims believe that Abraham built the Ka'aba, the Koran states that it was built before Abraham. In Sura 2:127 Abraham seems to be the builder of the House — that is, the Ka'aba. Sura 14:37, however, speaks of Abraham placing Ishmael and Hagar by the sacred house, which means that it already existed. Adam himself is said to have built the first shrine on the spot. Ishmael and Muhammad are supposed to have built and rebuilt there, too.

It seems more likely that Muhammad was able to win over some converts to his new faith, and to avoid alienating others, by incorporating certain rituals from the pagan Ka'aba into Islam.