

# WHO SPEAKS *for* ISLAM?

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WHAT A BILLION MUSLIMS  
REALLY THINK

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*Based on Gallup's World Poll — the largest study of its kind*

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# Contents

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## Introduction

Islam's Silenced Majority.....	ix
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## Chapter 1

Who Are Muslims?.....	1
-----------------------	---

## Chapter 2

Democracy or Theocracy?.....	29
------------------------------	----

## Chapter 3

What Makes a Radical? .....	65
-----------------------------	----

## Chapter 4

What Do Women Want?.....	99
--------------------------	----

## Chapter 5

Clash or Coexistence? .....	135
-----------------------------	-----

Acknowledgements .....	167
------------------------	-----

## Appendix A

Methodological Design and Sampling.....	169
---	-----

## Appendix B

The Gallup Journey to Poll the World.....	175
---	-----

Notes .....	185
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## Introduction: Islam's Silenced Majority

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**W**HAT MANY SAW as an ongoing conflict between the United States and parts of the Muslim world intensified dramatically after the horrific events of 9/11. Violence has grown exponentially as Muslims and non-Muslims alike continue to be victims of global terrorism. Terrorist attacks have occurred from Morocco to Indonesia and from Madrid to London, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq rage on. As of this writing, war and terrorism have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives since 9/11; the vast majority of victims have been civilians.

As we cope with savage actions in a world that seems ever more dangerous and out of control, we are inundated with analysis from terrorism experts and pundits who blame the religion of Islam for global terrorism. At the same time, terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda beam messages throughout the world that demonize the West as the enemy of Islam and hold it responsible for all the ills of the Muslim world.

Amid the rhetoric of hate and growing violence, manifest in both anti-Americanism in the Muslim world and in Islamophobia in the West, discrimination against, or hostility toward, Islam or Muslims has massively increased. In the aftermath of 9/11, President George W. Bush emphasized that America was waging a war against terrorism, not against Islam.<sup>1</sup> However, the continued acts of a terrorist minority, statements by

preachers of hate (Muslim and Christian alike), anti-Muslim and anti-West talk show hosts,

and political commentators have inflamed emotions and distorted views.

*Nearly one-quarter of Americans say they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor; less than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States.*

The religion of Islam and the mainstream Muslim majority have been conflated with the beliefs and actions of an extremist minority. For example, a 2006 *USA Today*/Gallup poll found that substantial minorities of Americans admit to harboring at least some prejudice against Muslims and favoring heightened security measures for Muslims as a way to help prevent terrorism. The same poll found 44% of Americans saying that Muslims are too extreme in their religious beliefs. Nearly one-quarter of Americans, 22%, say they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor; less than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Are the negative perceptions and growing violence on all sides only a prelude to an inevitable all-out war between the West and 1.3 billion Muslims? The vital missing piece among the many voices weighing in on this question is the actual views of everyday Muslims. With all that is at stake for the West and Muslim societies — indeed for the world's future — it is time to democratize the debate.

*Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* is about this *silenced* majority. This book is the product of a mammoth, multiyear Gallup research study. Between 2001 and 2007, Gallup conducted tens of thousands of hour-long, face-to-face

*We surveyed a sample representing more than 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, making this the largest, most comprehensive study of contemporary Muslims ever done.*

interviews with residents of more than 35 nations that are predominantly Muslim or have substantial Muslim pop-

ulations. The sample represents residents young and old, educated and illiterate, female and male, and from urban and rural settings. With the random sampling method that Gallup used, results are statistically valid within a plus or minus 3-point margin of error. In totality, we surveyed a sample representing more than 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, making this the largest, most comprehensive study of contemporary Muslims ever done.

After collecting vast amounts of data representing the views of the world's Muslims, we pored through that data for answers to the questions everyone is asking: What is the root of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world? Who are the extremists? Do Muslims desire democracy, and if so, what might it look like? What do Muslim women really want? The concept of this book is simple: With these questions in hand, we let the statistical evidence — the voices of a billion Muslims, not individual “experts” or “extremists” — dictate the answers.

Gallup's research produced a number of insights, but the most important was this: The conflict between the Muslim and Western communities is far from inevitable. It is more about policy than principles. *However*, until and unless decision makers listen directly to the people and gain an accurate understanding of this conflict, extremists on all sides will continue to gain ground.



The study revealed far more than what we could possibly cover in one book, so we chose the most significant, and at times, surprising conclusions to share with you. Here are just some of those counterintuitive discoveries:

- **Who speaks for the West?:** Muslims around the world do not see the West as monolithic. They criticize or celebrate countries based on their politics, not based on their culture or religion.
- **Dream jobs:** When asked to describe their dreams for the future, Muslims don't mention fighting in a *jihad*, but rather getting a better job.
- **Radical rejection:** Muslims and Americans are equally likely to reject attacks on civilians as morally unjustified.
- **Religious moderates:** Those who condone acts of terrorism are a minority and are no more likely to be religious than the rest of the population.
- **Admiration of the West:** What Muslims around the world say they most admire about the West is its technology and its democracy — the same two top responses given by Americans when asked the same question.
- **Critique of the West:** What Muslims around the world say they least admire about the West is its perceived moral decay and breakdown of traditional values — the same responses given by Americans when posed the same question.

- **Gender justice:** Muslim women want equal rights *and* religion in their societies.
- **R.E.S.P.E.C.T.:** Muslims around the world say that the one thing the West can do to improve relations with their societies is to moderate their views toward Muslims and respect Islam.
- **Clerics and constitutions:** The majority of those surveyed want religious leaders to have no direct role in crafting a constitution, yet favor religious law as a source of legislation.

Here is an overview of the main themes this book will cover:

### *Chapter 1: Who Are Muslims?*

In many Westerners' minds, the horrific acts of 9/11 have cast a pall over Islam and Muslims. Yet, since 2002, Gallup Poll surveys indicate that a majority of Americans still say they know virtually nothing about the views and beliefs of people in Muslim countries.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the messages many Westerners get from sensational headlines and violent images, what do Muslims believe? What do they value? How can understanding Islam's basic beliefs shed light on contemporary issues?

### *Chapter 2: Democracy or Theocracy?*

Is Islam incompatible with democracy? Why are there so few democracies in the Middle East? These decades-old questions continue to dominate foreign affairs. Do most Muslims want a theocracy or a democracy? George W. Bush's administration embraced the promotion of democracy as one of its rationales for the invasion of Iraq and for political transformation in the

Middle East. U.S. policy on democracy in the Middle East does dovetail with the sentiments of vast majorities of those surveyed who say they admire the West's political freedoms and they value and desire greater self-determination. But, if the desire for democracy is undisputed, then why hasn't the path toward democracy been smoother and faster? What do majorities of those in the Muslim world say about democracy and about the seriousness of United States' intent to promote it?

### *Chapter 3: What Makes a Radical?*

The war against global terrorism has prompted many questions about the nature of global terrorism and the strategies to combat it: How much public support is there for terrorism? What are the primary drivers of such support? Do terrorist sympathizers hate the West and its way of life? How do political radicals differ from the mainstream moderate majority? What is the relationship between Islam and terrorism? What about *jihad* and suicide bombing?

### *Chapter 4: What Do Women Want?*

For centuries, Muslim women have been the subject of intrigue as well as pity in the West. But Muslim women have seldom had the opportunity to speak for themselves, about themselves. What do Muslim women truly want? How do they view women's rights, religion, and the West? What is the most effective way to advocate for Muslim women's empowerment?

### *Chapter 5: Clash or Coexistence?*

Crucial to the fight against global terrorism is an ability to move beyond presuppositions and stereotypes to form partnerships that transcend an "us" and "them" view of the world. Muslim



partners, world governments, and all people are critical in this capacity. And yet, while Muslims and non-Muslims today are concerned about fanaticism and terrorism, they also feel under siege. Is the issue the West versus the Muslim world? Is there a clash of cultures? Is the issue religion, or is it politics? Is the key in the struggle against extremism and terrorism military action or a policy to win minds and hearts? What should be done?

Many of Gallup's findings challenge conventional wisdom and therefore will surprise and even anger many people. In the spirit of scientific inquiry, we encourage readers to question and challenge what they learn. As Albert Einstein said, "The important thing is not to stop questioning." He also said, "A man should look for what is, and not for what he thinks should be." We therefore offer what follows for your objective consideration. Let the data lead the discourse.

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## Chapter 1: Who Are Muslims?

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WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, when the Western media talks about Islam and Muslim culture, discussion tends to center on religious extremism and global terrorism: How many Muslims support extremism and terror? What is it about the religion of Islam and Muslims that produced extremism and terror? What can be done to counter and eliminate religious extremism and global terrorism? Is there hope for Islamic reform?

These are important questions, and they will be answered in the pages ahead. But to appreciate the complex and nuanced findings presented in this book, it is necessary to move beyond the sensational headlines and violent images that often influence perceptions of Islam to understand Muslims holistically. What do they believe? What principles does their faith call them to? What are their hopes and dreams?

It would be particularly helpful to provide answers to these questions to Americans, many of whom don't currently find much that is redeemable about Islam or Muslim society. In a December 2005 Gallup Poll of American households<sup>4</sup>, when Americans were asked what they most admire about Muslim societies, the answer "nothing" was the most frequent response. The second most frequent response? "I don't know." Combined, these two responses represented the majority (57%) of Americans surveyed.

*The majority of the world's Muslims live in Asia and Africa, not the Arab world.*

## **The World's Muslims: Does One Size Fit All?**

While many people commonly speak of Islam and Muslims in broad, all-encompassing terms, there are many interpretations of Islam and many different Muslims. Muslims come from diverse nationalities, ethnic and tribal groups, and cultures; speak many languages; and practice distinct customs. The majority of the world's Muslims live in Asia and Africa, not the Arab world. Only about one in five of the world's Muslims are Arabs. The largest Muslim communities are in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nigeria rather than Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or Iran. And millions of Muslims live in Europe, the United States, and Canada, where they represent the second and third largest religion (second largest in Europe and Canada and third largest in the United States). Because of globalization and emigration, today the major cities where Muslims live are not only exotic-sounding places such as Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Mecca, Islamabad, and Kuala Lumpur, but also London, Paris, Marseilles, Brussels, New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

Religiously, culturally, economically, and politically, there are multiple images and realities of Islam and of Muslims.

Religiously, Muslims are Sunni (85%), who are the majority in most Muslim countries, or Shia (15%), who predominate in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. After the Prophet Muhammad died, Sunnis believed that the most qualified person should be selected as his successor. A minority, the followers of Ali (Shiites), said the Prophet Muhammad had designated Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, to be leader (*imam*) and that leadership should

be within the family of the Prophet. In contrast to a Sunni caliph or ruler, a Shia *imam* is both a religious leader and a political leader and has special spiritual significance.

Further adding to the diversity, Shia Islam later split into three main divisions: the Zaydis; the Ismailis, whose leader today is the Harvard-educated Aga Khan; and the Ithna Ashari, who are majorities in Iran and Iraq. Like other religions, Islam also has different — and sometimes contending — theologies, law schools, and Sufi (mystic) orders. Finally, Muslims, whether Sunni or Shia, can be observant or non-observant — conservative, fundamentalist, reformist, secular, mainstream, or religious extremist.

The world's 1.3 billion Muslims live in some 57 countries with substantial or majority Muslim populations in Europe, North America, and across the world.<sup>5</sup> Major Muslim communities today are not only in Dakar, Khartoum, Cairo, Damascus, Riyadh, Tehran, Islamabad, and Kuala Lumpur, but also in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, New York, and Washington, D.C. Muslims speak not only Arabic, but also Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Bahasa Indonesia, and Chinese, as well as English, French, German, Danish, and Spanish.

Muslim women's dress, educational and professional opportunities, and participation in society vary significantly too. Women in some Muslim societies cannot drive cars and are sexually segregated, but women in many other parts of the Muslim world drive cars, ride motorcycles, and even fly planes. Some Muslim women are required by law to fully cover themselves in public, while others are prohibited from displaying the Muslim

headscarf. A growing number of Muslim women are choosing to cover their heads, while others do not. In the United Arab Emirates and Iran, women make up the majority of university students. In other parts of the world, women lag behind men in even basic literacy.

Women serve in government in parliaments and cabinets and have headed governments in Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, while in other Muslim countries, women are struggling for the right to vote and run for office. Muslim women may wear a *sari*, pantsuit, blue jeans, dress, or skirt, just as Muslim men may wear long flowing robes, blue jeans, pullover sweaters, or three-piece business suits and may be bearded or clean-shaven.

Perhaps the most striking examples of diversity in the Muslim world are in economic and political development. Economically, the oil-rich and rapidly developing Persian Gulf states such as Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia are worlds apart from poor, struggling, underdeveloped countries such as Mali and Yemen. And politically, Islamic governments in Iran, Sudan, and the Taliban's Afghanistan stand in sharp relief with the more secular-oriented governments of Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Indonesia.

In Turkey, Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Yemen, Pakistan, and Malaysia, Islamic activists have emerged as an "alternative elite" in mainstream society. Members or former members of Islamic organizations have been elected to parliaments and served in cabinets and as prime ministers and presidents of countries such as Turkey, Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon,



*Asked what they admire most about the Islamic world, the No. 1 response from significant percentages of populations in countries as diverse as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia is "people's sincere adherence to Islam."*

Sudan, Iran, Egypt, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Islamic associations provide social services and inexpensive and efficient educational, legal, and medical services in the

slums and many lower middle-class neighborhoods of Cairo, Algiers, Beirut, Mindanao, the West Bank, and Gaza.

All the while — and in stark contrast — militant groups have terrorized Muslim societies in the name of Islam; attacked New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.; and set off bombs in Madrid and London. They reflect a radicalism that threatens the Muslim and Western worlds.

The vast diversity of Islam and of mainstream moderate Muslims has been overshadowed and obscured by a deadly minority of political (or ideological) extremists. In a monolithic "us" and "them" world, Islam — not just Muslims who are radical — is seen as a global threat, and those who believe in an impending clash of civilizations are not only the bin Ladens of the world, but also many of us.

## The Importance of Faith

So, what role does religion really play in Muslims' lives? According to Gallup Polls in 2001 and 2005-2007, of countries with substantial or predominantly Muslim populations, majorities in many countries (several in the 90% range) say that religion is an important part of their daily lives. Sizable percentages rate

“having an enriched religious/spiritual life” as an aspect of life that is essential, that one cannot live without. Asked what they admire most about the Islamic world, the No. 1 response from significant percentages of populations in countries as diverse as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia is “people’s sincere adherence to Islam.”

Many regard religion as a primary marker of identity, a source of meaning and guidance, consolation and community, and essential to their progress. Majorities of both men and women in many predominantly Muslim countries want to see Islamic principles, *Sharia*, as a source of legislation. These respondents have much in common with the majority of Americans who wish to see the Bible as a source of legislation.<sup>6</sup> Both groups emphasize the importance of family values and are deeply concerned about issues of social morality. In fact, what respondents in the Muslim world *and* a significant number of Americans say they admire least about Western civilization is an excessive libertinism in society.

Islam is not to its adherents what it might appear to outside observers: simply a restrictive shell of rules and punishments. To many Muslims, it is a spiritual mental map that offers a sense of meaning, guidance, purpose, and hope. Vast majorities of residents in predominantly Muslim countries say their lives have an important purpose (90% of Egyptians, 91% of Saudis).

The importance of religion is reinforced by what Muslims say about their traditions and customs, which also continue to play a central role in their lives. When asked, “Are there traditions

*Islam means “a strong commitment to God” and shares the same Arabic root as the word for peace, or salaam.*

and customs that are important to you, or not?” majorities in many predominantly Muslim countries say “yes”: Jordan (96%), Saudi Arabia (95%), Turkey (90%), and Egypt (87%). This contrasts sharply with percentages of those answering “yes” to the same question in the United States (54%) and especially in European countries such as the United Kingdom (36%), France (20%), and Belgium (23%).

If religion is regarded by so many Muslims as a core life value, beyond the sensational images and religious rhetoric of extremists, what is this faith that has won the devotion of so many? What does it mean to be Muslim? What principles call more than a billion people, with different languages and cultures, spread all over the world?

## One God and Many Prophets: Basic Beliefs and Practices

Because faith is central to the lives of so many Muslims around the world, a basic understanding of Islam is necessary to fully grasp much of what is to follow. This section, which discusses the basic tenets of Islam, will be particularly useful to readers who are less familiar, or not familiar at all, with Islam.

*Islam* means “a strong commitment to God” and shares the same Arabic root as the word for peace, or *salaam*. Some Muslim theologians define Islam as *attaining peace through commitment to God’s will*. This general definition is significant because Muslims regard anyone who meets these criteria at any

time in history to have been a “Muslim.” And therefore, the first Muslim was not the Prophet Muhammad, but Adam, the first man and prophet of God. Islam asserts that all nations were sent prophets and apostles (Quran 35:24) who all taught the same basic message of belief in one unique God, and in this regard, all the prophets are believed to have been “Muslims.”

*We believe in God and what has been revealed to us; in what was revealed to Abraham and Ismail, to Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We do not make a distinction between any of them [the prophets]. For we submit to God. (Quran 3:84)*

Like Jesus and Moses, the Prophet Muhammad (570 CE-632 CE) was born and taught his message in the Middle East, where Islam quickly spread. Muslims worship the God of Abraham as do Christians and Jews. Rather than a new religion, Muslims believe Islam is a continuation of the Abrahamic faith tradition. Thus, just as it is widely acknowledged that the current meaning of Judeo-Christian tradition was forged during World War II, today there is growing recognition of the existence of a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, embracing all the children of Abraham.

Muslims recognize the biblical prophets and God’s revelation to Moses (Torah) and Jesus (Gospels). Indeed, Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus), and Maryam (Mary) are common Muslim names. Jews, Christians, and Muslims trace their biblical lineage to Abraham. Muslims learn many of the same Old and New Testament stories and figures that Jews and Christians study (Adam

*Jesus' mother, Mary, is mentioned by name more times in the Quran than in the New Testament.*

and Eve, Noah's Ark, the Ten Commandments, David and Solomon, Mary and Jesus), sometimes with differing interpretations. For example, in the Quran, Adam and Eve disobey God and eat the apple together, and this disobedience does not impose "original sin" on future generations. Also, Jesus' mother, Mary, is mentioned by name more times in the Quran than in the New Testament. The Quran describes Mary's virgin birth of Jesus, who is venerated as one of the great prophets in Islam but not considered divine.

According to the Quran, diversity in belief, cultures, and traditions is part of God's intended creation and a sign of his wisdom:

*If God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has given you. Race one another then in doing good works! (Quran 5:48)*

*Among His signs is the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, and the diversity of your languages and colors. Surely there are signs for those who reflect. (Quran 30:22)*

*O humankind, We have created you male and female, and made you nations and tribes for you to get to know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (Quran 49:13)*

Though no society is free of racial prejudice, Muslims today take great pride in what they regard as Islam's egalitarian ideals. For example, a Moroccan World Poll respondent says what



he admires most about the Muslim world is Islam's message of racial equality. "I have a high regard for Islam's values and teachings and the non-racial attitudes of Muslim people."

The Quran emphasizes the unity of believers around a shared faith, regardless of ethnicity or tribe. What are the core Muslim beliefs that unite this diverse, worldwide population? As Christians look to Jesus and the New Testament and Jews to Moses and the Torah, Muslims regard the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, God's messenger and message, as the final, perfect, and complete revelation. And, because of the remarkable success of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community in spreading Islam and its rule, Sunni Muslims look to an ideal portrait of "the first generation" of Muslims (called the companions of the Prophet) as their model — a common reference point by which to measure, judge, and reform society.

## The Profession of Faith

*There is no god but God [Allah] and Muhammad is the messenger of God.*

To become a Muslim, a person simply makes this confession of faith (*shahada*). Repeated many times each day by those who pray regularly, it affirms the foundations of Islam: belief in the one, true God and his messenger, the Prophet Muhammad.

Associating anything else with God is idolatry, the one unforgivable sin. That is why Islamic art often does not depict God or the Prophet Muhammad, but relies heavily on calligraphy, geometric form, and arabesque design. However, the concept

*“There is no god but God” means that nothing except God deserves to be “worshipped” — and this belief permeates every aspect of a Muslim’s life.*

of the unity of God — in Arabic, *taʾwḥīd* — reaches beyond what many of the West might

assume. It is the heart of Islam, the one fundamental idea from which everything else radiates, from Islam’s principles to its practices. “There is no god but God” means that nothing except God deserves to be “worshipped” — not money, ambition, or ego — and this belief permeates every aspect of a Muslim’s life, from prayer to the treatment of a neighbor to the conduct of business. If nothing is worthy of worship except God, then all humans are equal, as the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “as teeth on a comb.”

The second part of the declaration of faith, “Muhammad is the messenger of God,” turns theory into a model for a way of life. Like Jesus in Christianity, the Prophet Muhammad, whom Muslims view as the final prophet of God, is the central role model for Muslims; but unlike Jesus for Christians, the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims is solely human. Muslims see him not only as the ideal political and military leader, statesman, merchant, judge, and diplomat, but also the ideal husband, father, and friend. The Prophet Muhammad is so revered that the name Muhammad, or names derived from it (Ahmad, Mahmud), is the most common Muslim name.

Muslims look to the Prophet Muhammad as the perfect human example of living. Volumes of stories about his life, *ḥaʾdīth*, record what the Prophet is reported to have said and done: how he dealt with friends and enemies, how he behaved with heads of state and with servants, how he treated his spouse or child, or how he conducted himself in battle. In his lifetime,

throughout Muslim history, and today, the Prophet Muhammad is called the “living Quran,” the embodiment in his behavior and words of God’s will. Sunni Muslims take their name from *sunnah*, meaning those who follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

To help them translate the idea of *tawhid* into everyday life, Muslims are given tools called “pillars of Islam,” which are supposed to help them turn theory into practice. After the first pillar, the *shahada*, is *salat*, or prayer.

## Prayer

Prayer (*salat*) is a central and frequent practice for many of the world’s Muslims. Five times each day, from the early morning hours until evening, the muezzin calls Muslims across the world to prayer. “Allahu Akbar . . . God is greater . . . Come to prayer . . .” The muezzin’s call reminds Muslims that God is greater than whatever worldly activity they may be doing and to put it aside for a brief time of remembrance. While Muslims are encouraged to stop everything and pray right when they hear the call, they may pray later as well.

In some Muslim countries, shops are closed, office workers adjourn to a prayer room, and professionals and laborers simply stop what they are doing and face Mecca to worship God. In non-Muslim countries, many Muslims, from government officials and corporate lawyers to workers and shopkeepers, find a quiet, private place to pray. On Fridays at noon, Muslims go to a mosque for congregational prayer (*jum’a*). As we see in the Quran:

*O you who believe! When the call to prayer is made on the day of congregation, go quickly to the remembrance of God, leaving business aside: That is best for you if only you knew!*  
(Quran 62:9)

For those not within the sound of the muezzin, local prayer times are printed in virtually every Muslim newspaper. Travelers can find the specific prayer times for almost any location on the globe on the Internet or set their wristwatches to alert them. Hotel rooms in the Muslim world routinely include a small *Qibla* indicator, applied to the desk or nightstand, showing the direction of Mecca.

Many Westerners may be struck by the seemingly excessive frequency of Muslim prayer. "Five times a day seems like a lot," one American businessman admitted frankly at a recent workshop about doing business in Muslim countries. However, Salma, a practicing Muslim and an American management consultant explains *salat* this way:

How many times do people in our comfortable society eat? Dietitians recommend three meals and two snacks, but if you are a teenage male, it's more like five meals and ten snacks. Well, Islam views the human being as not only a physical being, but a spiritual being as well, and just as our physical dimension requires regular nourishment throughout the day, so does our spiritual dimension.

I pray my morning prayer at dawn before I go to work. I pray my noon and afternoon prayer at work in my office during my lunch break and as a ten-minute break in the afternoon. My other two prayers are in the evening when I

*Muslims pray not only because it is a religious obligation, but also because it makes them feel closer to God.*

get home; one in the early evening and one before I

go to bed — five small meals for the soul. I honestly cannot imagine keeping up with my hectic work and family life without this constant connection with God.

Gallup research found similar sentiment around the world. Muslims pray not only because it is a religious obligation, but also because it makes them feel closer to God. In a 2001 Gallup Poll, an overwhelming majority of respondents in seven predominantly Muslim countries indicated that prayer helps a great deal in soothing their personal worries. In six of these countries, more than two-thirds of respondents gave this response (Morocco: 83%; Pakistan: 79%; Kuwait: 74%; Indonesia: 69%; Lebanon: 68%; and Iran: 68%). Only in Turkey did as many as 6% (in contrast to the 53% who said prayer helps them a great deal) tell Gallup they felt that prayer does not help ease their personal worries.<sup>7</sup>

The interconnection of prayer with other important aspects of Muslim faith is captured in the saying: “Prayer carries us half-way to God; fasting brings us to the door of his praises; almsgiving procures for us admission.”

## The Fast of Ramadan

The month-long fast of Ramadan is a time for both physical discipline and spiritual reflection. Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sexual activity from dawn to dusk; spend time in religious reflection and prayer; perform good works; and distribute alms to help the less fortunate. At dusk, the fast is broken



by a light meal. The month of Ramadan ends with one of the two major Islamic feasts (*Eids*), the Festival of Breaking the Fast, called *Eid al-Fitr*. The celebration resembles Christmas in its spirit of religious joyfulness, special celebrations, and gift-giving.

## Almsgiving

Almsgiving (*zakat*, “purification”) requires an annual contribution of 2.5% of all liquid assets, not just annual income, to the poor, sick, or suffering. This is not viewed as voluntary or charity, but as sharing wealth received from God. Social responsibility is emphasized in Islam. The Quran condemns the fatalistic argument that people are poor because God wills it and therefore should be left to their own destiny:

*Thus, when they are told, “Give to others out of what God has provided for you as sustenance” the disbelievers say to those who believe, “Why should we feed those that God could feed if He wanted? Clearly, you are deeply misguided!”*  
(Quran 36:47)

At the same time, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “*The hand that gives is better than the hand that takes,*” encouraging self-reliance. (Sahih Bukhari, Volume 2, Book 24, Number 508)

## Pilgrimage to Mecca

The declaration of faith (*shahada*), prayer five times a day, the fast of Ramadan, and *zakat* are four of the five pillars of

Islam — required observances that unite all Muslims. The fifth pillar is the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the holy city of Mecca. Just as Muslims are united five times each day as they face Mecca in worship, so too each year, more than 2 million believers travel from all over the world to the city where the Prophet Muhammad was born and first received God's revelation. Men and women wearing simple coverings to symbolize purity, unity, and equality together participate in rituals that re-enact key religious events. There is no segregation. Muslims who have experienced the *hajj* describe the incredible experience of 2 million pilgrims chanting together as equals, entering into the divine presence, connecting them to something greater than themselves.

This experience had a transforming effect on the black activist Malcolm X, whose time at *hajj* resulted in his denouncing racist rhetoric and adopting a more inclusive understanding of human brotherhood. In a letter he wrote from Mecca, he notes his impression of *hajj*:

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the five-day *hajj*, Muslims throughout the world celebrate *Eid al-Adha*, the Festival of Sacrifice commemorating when God sent Abraham a ram as a substitute for sacrificing his son. This is a time of grand celebration as Muslim families, much like Jews and Christians in their celebrations of Hanukkah and Christmas, come together to visit and exchange gifts.

*Jihad is not associated or equated with the words "holy war" anywhere in the Quran.*

## **Jihad: The Struggle for God**

*Jihad*, which in the Quran means "to strive or struggle" to exert oneself to realize God's will, to lead a virtuous life, is sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam, but it has no such official status. *Jihad* is not associated or equated with the words "holy war" anywhere in the Quran. However, historically, Muslim rulers, with the support of religious scholars and officials, did use *jihad* to legitimate wars of imperial expansion. Early extremist groups also appealed to Islam to legitimate rebellion, assassination, and attempts to overthrow Muslim rulers.

The earliest Quranic verses dealing with the right to engage in a "defensive" *jihad*, or struggle, were revealed shortly after the *hijra* (emigration) of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers to Medina, where they fled persecution in Mecca. At a time when they were forced to fight for their lives, the Prophet is told: "*Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged — surely God is able to help them — who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God'*" (Quran 22:39–40). The defensive nature of *jihad* is clearly emphasized in 2:190: "*And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors.*" At critical points throughout the years, the Prophet received revelations from God that provided guidelines for the *jihad*.

As the Muslim community grew, questions quickly emerged as to what was proper behavior during times of war. The Quran provided detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of war: who is to fight and who is exempted (Quran

48:17, 9:91), when hostilities must cease (Quran 2:192-193), and how prisoners should be treated (Quran 47:4). Most important, verses such as 2:194 emphasized that warfare and the response to violence and aggression must be proportional: *"Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind."*

However, Quranic verses also underscore that peace, not violence and warfare, is the norm. Permission to fight the enemy is balanced by a strong mandate for making peace: *"If your enemy inclines toward peace, then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God"* (Quran 8:61) and: *"Had Allah wished, He would have made them dominate you, and so if they leave you alone and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah allows you no way against them"* (Quran 4:90). From the earliest times, it was forbidden in Islam to kill noncombatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were given the promise of immunity unless they took part in the fighting.

But what of those verses, sometimes referred to as the "sword verses," that call for killing unbelievers, such as: *"When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush"* (Quran 9:5)? This is one of a number of Quranic verses that critics cite to demonstrate the inherently violent nature of Islam and its scripture. These same verses have also been selectively used (or abused) by religious extremists to develop a "theology of hate" and intolerance and to legitimize unconditional warfare against unbelievers.

During the period of expansion and conquest, many of the religious scholars (*ulama*) enjoyed royal patronage and provided

a rationale for caliphs to pursue their imperial dreams and extend the boundaries of their empires. They said that the “sword verses” abrogated or overrode the earlier Quranic verses that limited *jihad* to defensive war. In fact, however, the full meaning and intent of the verse: *“When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them”* is missed or distorted when quoted in isolation. For it is followed and qualified by: *“But if they repent and fulfill their devotional obligations and pay the zakat [the charitable tax on Muslims], then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind”* (Quran 9:5). The same is true of another often-quoted verse: *“Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor hold the religion of truth [even if they are] of the People of the Book,”* which is often cited without the line that follows: *“Until they pay the tax and agree to submit”* (Quran 9:29).<sup>9</sup>

Today *jihad* continues to have multiple meanings. It is used to describe the personal struggle to lead a good or virtuous life, to fulfill family responsibilities, to clean up a neighborhood, to fight drugs, or to work for social justice. *Jihad* is also used in wars of liberation and resistance as well as acts of terror. Religious extremist groups have assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981; murdered innocent civilians in suicide bombings in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan; carried out the 9/11 attacks; and have subsequently continued to engage in other acts of global terrorism in Muslim countries and in Europe. Many mainstream Muslim theologians have asserted that radicals who encourage a “jihad against the infidels” employ a faulty reading of the Quran, and they point to verses that teach



that an all-powerful God could certainly eliminate disbelief if he wanted. Therefore it is not up to any Muslim to eliminate it for him by force:

*If it had been God's will, they would not have practiced idolatry so. We have not made you their keeper, nor are you responsible for what they do. (Quran 6:107)*

*We know best what the disbelievers say. You are not there to force them. (Quran 50:45)*

*And if it distresses you that those who deny the truth turn their backs on you . . . [remember that] if God had so willed, He could bring them all to guidance. So do not join the ignorant. (Quran 6:35)*

The Quran portrays a self-sufficient God who is in no need of, and therefore prohibits, the use of force in gaining believers:

*The throne of God extends over the heavens and the earth, and it does not weary Him to preserve them both. And He alone is truly the Most High and the Powerful. There is no compulsion in religion. (Quran 2:255-256)*

The multiple meanings of *jihad* were captured in a 2001 Gallup Poll in which 10,004 adults in nine predominantly Muslim countries were asked an open-ended question: "Please tell me in one word (or a very few words) what 'jihad' means to you."

In the four Arab nations polled (Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco), the most frequent descriptions of *jihad* were "duty toward God," a "divine duty," or a "worship of God" — with

no reference to warfare. However, in three non-Arab countries (Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey), significant minorities mentioned “sacrificing one’s life for the sake of Islam/God/a just cause” or “fighting against the opponents of Islam.” An outright majority mentioned these in non-Arab Indonesia.

In addition to the two broad categories of responses, personal definitions included:

- “a commitment to hard work” and “achieving one’s goals in life”
- “struggling to achieve a noble cause”
- “promoting peace, harmony, or cooperation and assisting others”
- “living the principles of Islam”

The two broad meanings of *jihad*, nonviolent and violent, are contrasted in a well-known prophetic tradition that reports the Prophet Muhammad returning from battle to tell his followers, “*We return from the lesser jihad [warfare] to the greater jihad.*” The greater *jihad* is the more difficult and more important struggle against ego, selfishness, greed, and evil.<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to note that for Muslims, whether *jihad* means a struggle of the soul or one of the sword, it is in both cases a just and ethical struggle. The word *jihad* has only positive connotations. This means that calling acts of terrorism *jihad* risks not only offending many Muslims, but also inadvertently handing radicals the moral advantage they so desperately desire.

*Most respondents in countries with sizable Muslim populations say they “have a lot of love in their life.”*

## Family and Culture

Marriage and family life are the norm in Islam and at the center of community life. According to Gallup’s poll of nine predominantly Muslim countries in 2001, the vast majority of Muslims considered being married and having children as extremely important (81% of Kuwaitis and Moroccans, for example, hold this view). This is reflected in many respondents’ descriptions of their aspirations for the future, in which a significant number expressed the hope to find a “loving spouse” and start a family. Family bonds are among the aspects of Islamic societies that Muslims say they most admire, signaling that family is not only something Muslims value, but an attribute of their society they take pride in. Not surprisingly, most respondents in the 2005–2007 survey of countries that are predominantly Muslim or have sizable Muslim populations say they “have a lot of love in their life” (95% of Egyptians and 92% of Saudis, for example).

The importance of family comes into sharper focus in the status afforded to motherhood, defined by respondents in the 2001 poll of predominantly Muslim countries as “a gift of God, a source of everything in existence.” Women have always been seen as the bearers of culture, the center of the family unit that provides a force for moral and social order and the means of stability for the next generation.

A famous *hadith* explains Islam’s reverence for mothers: A man asked the Prophet Muhammad who was most worthy of honor, to which the Prophet responded, “*Your mother.*” The man was undoubtedly surprised at this response, considering the

patriarchal nature of traditional tribal societies. He went on to ask the Prophet again, "And who next?" The Prophet again responded, "*Your mother.*" Bewildered, the man asked a third time, "And who next?" The Prophet again responded, "*Your mother.*" Finally, in response to the fourth repetition of the question, the Prophet responded, "*Your father.*" (Sahih Muslim Chapter 1, Book 32)

Family law is viewed as the "heart of the *Sharia*" and the basis for a strong, Islamically oriented family structure and society. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the family provided religious, cultural, and social protection from colonial and Western domination, as well as a site for political resistance. In a rapidly changing, unpredictable, and sometimes hostile 20<sup>th</sup> century, the family in many Muslim countries came to face economic, political, and personal pressures brought about by unemployment and economic need and by disruption from war and forced migration.

Debates in many parts of the Muslim world center on the changing roles and rights of men, women, and children in modernizing societies. These debates come into sharp focus as some respondents cite the breakdown of the traditional family as an aspect of the Western societies they least admire, as these verbatim survey responses from Pakistan illustrate:

"18-year-old youngsters are independent to make any decision, and parents have no importance; they misbehave with parents."

"They are vulgar with no respect for elders."

“They have weak family bonds and don’t care for others’ feelings.”

## Memory of a Glorious Past

Many Muslims, educated and uneducated, remember well the stories of a romanticized Islamic past that celebrates heroes and great empires. These stories, along with the message of the Quran and life example of the Prophet Muhammad, are deeply valued sources of inspiration and guidance and give the Muslim community a strong sense of identity.

Within 100 years of the Prophet Muhammad’s death, Muslims created an empire extending from North Africa to the Indian subcontinent — an empire greater than Rome at its zenith. From the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to be a Muslim was to live in an Islamic empire or one of many sultanates stretching from Timbuktu to Mindanao.

Muslims also produced a rich Islamic civilization, promoting religious and cultural synthesis and exchange. With significant assistance from Christian and Jewish subjects, Muslims collected the great books of science, medicine, and philosophy from the West and the East and translated them into Arabic from Greek, Latin, Persian, Coptic, Syriac, and Sanskrit.

The age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity as a new generation of educated Muslim thinkers and scientists made their own contributions to learning in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, optics, art, and architecture.

Muslims were skilled mathematicians. In fact, algebra comes from the Arabic word *al-Jabr*.

The cultural traffic pattern was again reversed when Europeans, emerging from the Dark Ages, turned to Muslim centers of learning to regain their lost heritage and to learn from Muslim advances in philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and science. Ironically, until recently, these Muslim accomplishments have not been recognized or taught in the West. Just as few recognize a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, very few realize the role of Islamic civilization and Muslim contributions to the development of Western civilization.

For many Muslims, a religious worldview and memory of Islamic empires and sultanates, which were wealthy, powerful, and successful, validated Islam's message and the rewards for faithfulness to God. On the other hand, some interpret the failures and subjugation of Muslims to foreign forces during European colonialism, or what is seen as American neocolonialism today, as well as the perceived corruption of local governments, as a failure to remain faithful to God, to follow the straight path of Islam.

In an often-repeated *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have told a group of companions that they would know whether God is pleased with the Muslim community by looking to its leadership. If God is pleased with a community, "*He will put the best among them as their leader.*" But if he is displeased, "*He will allow the worst among them to lead.*" Today, as many Muslims critique their societies for political corruption,



the lack of political freedom, and economic stagnation (while admiring the West for political and economic advancements), they look to Islam, not to Western values, as the way forward, with majorities in many of the surveyed countries associating progress of Muslim societies with “attachment to their moral and spiritual values.”

## **What Are Muslim Hopes and Dreams Today?**

Muslims face many of the same issues and concerns that any other people do. When asked about their hopes and dreams, many respondents first cite economic issues: better economic conditions, employment opportunities, and improved living standards for a better future. These are followed by the need to improve law and order, eliminate civil tensions and wars, and promote democratic ideals in their political systems, as well as enhancing their countries’ international status and independence to earn more respect from others and stop outside interference. At the same time, domestic priorities include access to better educational systems to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance and to achieve gender equality, social justice, and religious freedom.

## **Religion and Politics**

Many Muslims see their religion as much more than a personal faith. In contrast to the belief in separation of church and state, religion and society and faith and power are closely bound and intertwined in Islam. Throughout much of history, to be a Muslim was not simply to belong to a faith community or mosque but to live in an Islamic community/state, governed

by Islamic law. Historically, Islam has significantly formed and informed politics and civilization, giving rise to vast Islamic empires and states as well as Islamic civilization.

Like people of other faiths, Muslims continue to pursue a further understanding and interpretation of their faith. The development of Islamic law, theology, and mysticism reflects this complex process.

Religious doctrines, laws, and practices do not come merely from clear prescriptions in sacred texts, but also from fallible, limited interpreters whose conclusions reflect their intelligence, political and social situations and customs, and the influences of power and privilege. For example, that interpreters and guardians of Islam were mostly males living in patriarchal societies naturally affected Islamic law and thought — especially interpretations regarding women and the family.

Like Jews and Christians, Muslims today contend with questions about how their faith relates to reason, science, and technology on a range of issues: evolution, birth control, artificial insemination, transplants, ecology, nuclear energy, and issues of war and peace. Many seek to draw on the pluralism and flexibility inherent in Islam in the modern age. They are fighting two battles: one against the extremists who claim exclusive ownership of the truth of Islam, and another against those of us who strengthen the extremists by equating this minority with the religion of Islam rather than considering it a dangerous aberration.

*Arabs make up only roughly 20% of the global Muslim population.*

Muslims today struggle to redefine their religious tradition within a modern, secular world. Should Islam today be restricted to personal life or be integral to the state, law, and society? Is Islam compatible with modern forms of political participation such as democracy — or human rights and the status of women and religious minorities or non-Muslims? We will explore these questions and others in the coming chapters.

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## KEY POINTS:

- \* The many languages, customs, and ethnicities of the Muslim world illustrate its vast diversity. There are 57 countries around the world that are majority Muslim or have significant Muslim minorities — Arabs make up only roughly 20% of the global Muslim population.
- \* Faith and family are core values in Muslims' lives, and Muslims regard them as their societies' greatest assets.
- \* Muslims, like Christians and Jews, believe in the God of Abraham and recognize biblical prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.
- \* *Jihad* has many meanings. It is a "struggle for God," which includes a struggle of the soul as well as the sword. The Islamic war ethic prohibits attacking civilians.