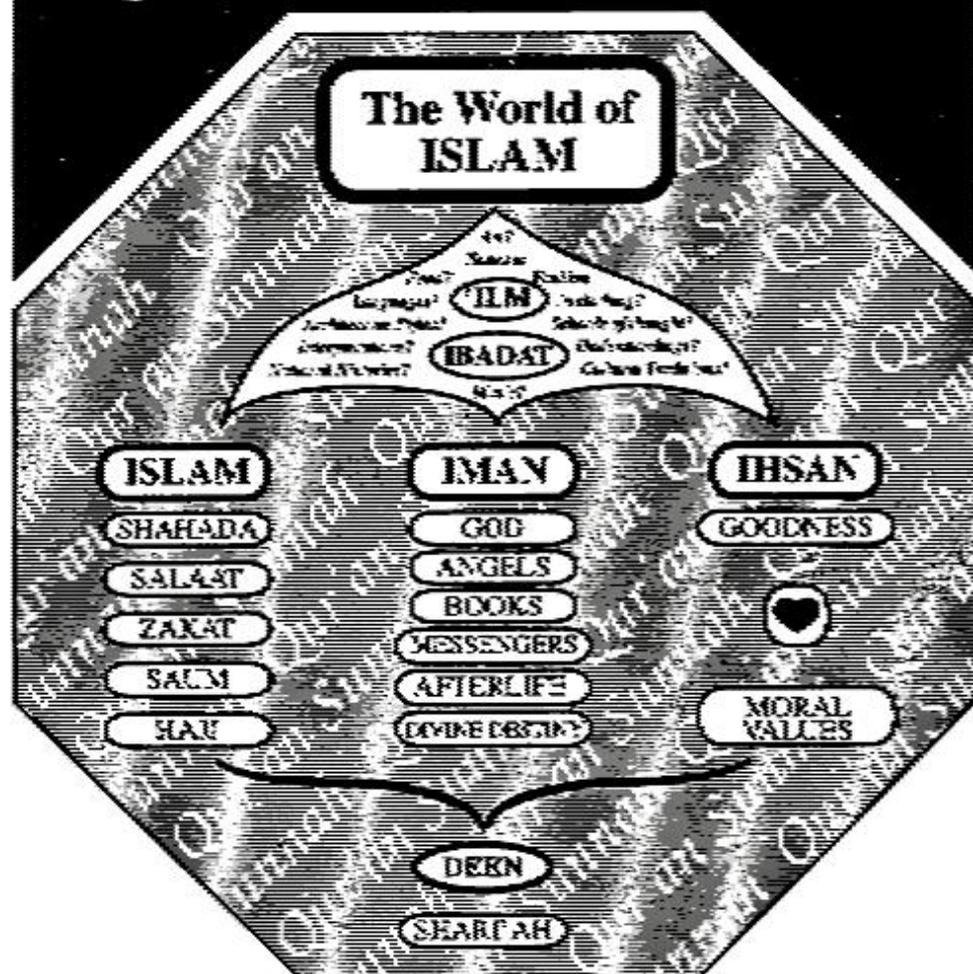




# Islam



## An Overview



## Islam - An Overview

(All words within the text in **bold** are in the glossary)

Like no other religion Islam is centred on the principle of Unity, but this is sometimes rather hard to see expressed in the community itself which often seems more representative of the '*variety of tongues and colours*' mentioned as one of the signs of God in the Qur'an (Q.30.22). It is a common human trait, however, for people to reinforce their personal tastes and beliefs by seeing them as normative, and Muslims are no exception. For non-Muslims with no personal contact with Muslims, it can be very difficult to find out what the Muslim world community really have in common, and establish an Islamic framework from which to examine and evaluate Muslim differences of opinion. For those having limited contact with a small number of Muslims, that task may seem even harder.

One may hear that imagery is forbidden in Islam, yet remain aware that in the Islamic world advertising images abound, images of the local ruler gaze down from nearly every wall, and the flickering images on the TV screen are as prevalent as anywhere else in the world. One may hear that music is forbidden, yet know that Muslims all around the world have their own regional folk songs and musical traditions that can be heard on the local radio, or bought as cassettes in the local market. Styles of dress that are considered essential in some regions are clearly not universal, and practices that some Muslims make central to their worship are denounced as un-Islamic by others. When considering the huge cultural variety of the Muslim world, how can it be sorted into some kind of order?

The first key to avoid confusion is to recognise that the word "Islam" is used in two very different ways. It has both a general and specific meaning.

Its general meaning would be better expressed as "The World of Islam", and is used as an umbrella term to embrace all the cultural variety of the Muslims, with their different languages, literary traditions, fashions and foods, tastes in art and architecture, social norms and niceties etc. This world of Islam is based on the interrelationship of three areas of Muslim experience known as **Ihsan**, **Iman**, and **Islam** in its specific meaning.

**Ihsan** translates as goodness and is the language of moral values

**Iman**, translated as faith or belief, relates to those aspects of creation which are beyond logical proof, but which we need to understand for our life experience to be based on truth.

Here the word **Islam** refers only to the **Five Pillars** of Islamic practice.

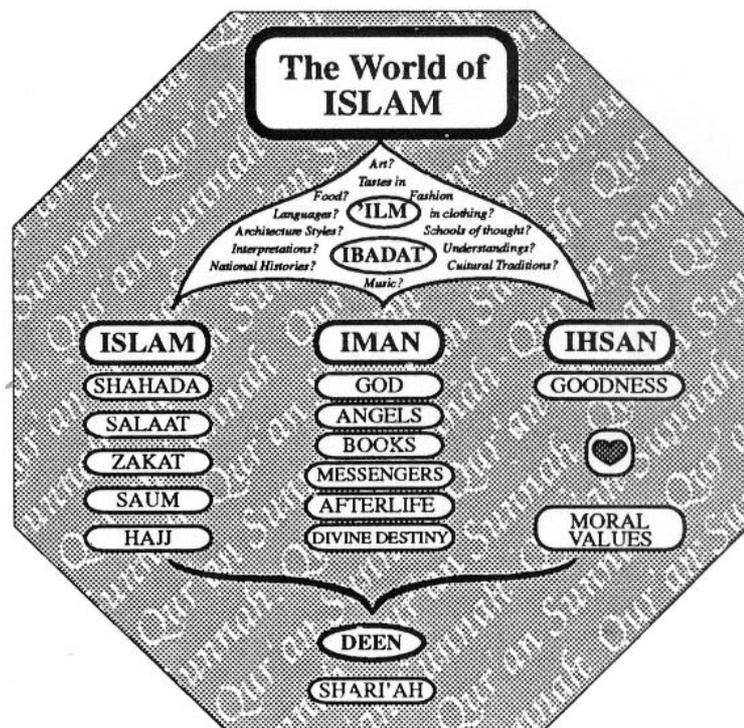


# Islam - An Overview

## The Five Pillars

<b>Shahada</b>	declaration of faith
<b>Salaat</b>	prescribed prayer
<b>Zakat</b>	alms tax
<b>Saum</b>	fasting
<b>Hajj</b>	pilgrimage

The understandings covered by these three terms are interwoven throughout all areas of Muslim life. All knowledge (known in Arabic as 'ilm) is founded on them, and the Muslim concept of worship (**ibadat**) is not restricted to the five pillars but extends through Iman and Ihsan throughout the whole of a Muslim's life experience. All three terms are integral to **Deen**, the Islamic way of life, and hence to **Shari'ah**, the definition of that way of life in terms of the necessary structure required for a Muslim community to live together in justice and harmony. Of course, the **Qur'an** and the **Sunnah** of the Prophet, as the foundation of all Islamic understanding, should not be seen as topics separate from the above, but ubiquitous in all areas of the Islamic way of life.





## Islam - An Overview

Inevitably, any brief summary of the subject is going to be simplistic, but in general there would be agreement with the components of this outline throughout most of the Muslim world, though individuals and groups within the Ummah would give different stress to different components.

Some would give great importance to concepts not included. Sufi groups might prefer to set the above in a whole terminology of esoteric structures and concepts, **Shi'a** Muslims would certainly consider the concept of **Imamate** to be in a similar ubiquitous position to the Qur'an and Sunnah in the diagram, and would probably prefer to approach some of the other terms through the subject of '**Adl** (justice), which is not in the diagram either.

So although the overview may be useful, its limitations must always be recognised. In fact, what is perhaps the most central concept in the world of Islam, Tauhid has not been mentioned until now, though it would be intrinsic. It is only one view of a complex and subtle subject.

Umar reported that the Prophet said:

*"Islam is to testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God, to perform the prayers, to pay the zakat, to fast in Ramadhan, and to make pilgrimage to the House if you are able to do so."*

Of Iman he said:

*"It is to believe in God, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in Divine Destiny, both the good and the evil thereof."*

Of Ihsan he said:

*"It is to worship God as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you."*