## What You Need to Know About Islam - Part 2
### *Islam's Authority Sources*
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It is amazing how widespread Islam is around the word, but also how little most people know about it. It does have its own reputation, but that only tells part of the story. Reputations are generalizations that tend to be rather shallow. They may reveal some of the "what" about a faith, but not much about the "why."

This article is part two of a five part series to provide a more in-depth understanding. Here is what will be covered in each of the installments. Today's article shares Islam's authority sources.

**Introduction**

**Qur'an**
The Qur'an is the authoritative scripture of Islam. It is believed to have a unique and divine status. Parts of it were compiled after his death by Muhammad's followers from notes and writings of close associates. The rest is based upon his oral teachings that were written from memory by his disciples – also following his death. Islam maintains that the Qur'an was dictated directly, word-for-word, by God through Gabriel to Muhammad in the Arabic language. Thus, the Qur'an is considered to be the literal word of God (Allah), revealed in the Arabic language to Muhammad. Because it is considered God's exact speech and not merely inspired ideas, Muslims generally do not consider translations to be "versions" – only interpretations. As such, in order to interpret it accurately and authoritatively, the Qur'an must be read in Arabic. The belief that its words are a *perfect* transmission of God's revelation well after Muhammad's death is considered a powerful miracle, and evidence of Islam's truth.

But there is much more to understand about the place of the Qur'an in the hearts and minds of Muslims. They hold it in much higher regard than Christians hold the Bible. That is not because Christians don't have a high view of the Bible. Rather, it is because, to Muslims, the Qur'an is not just a holy book. It is the eternal Word of Allah himself. It is the very speech of Al-lah. It is not inspired, as Christians think of the Bible, but was directly dictated to Muhammad as the revealed Word of God.

The original message of the Qur'an is believed to have been directly dictated to Muhammad, and since he was illiterate he passed these revelations on to his followers as an oral tradition. Thus, there was no original written version. The result was, over time, there came to be numerous oral variations. So, about 20 years after Muhammad's death, differences in recitation began causing disputes among early Muslim communities.

In the meantime, several of Muhammad's close companions did start writing parts of it down and had their own personal manuscripts – resulting also in many early variants. These were not "different Qur'ans" in the modern sense, but they did contain differences in wording and order, and some even had unique material. These personal codices were well-known and were referenced in early Islamic literature.

So, around 650 A.D., the third caliph, Uthman ibn ʿAffan, recognized this as a problem and ordered a standard written copy to be produced based on manuscripts held by Muhammad's secretary Zayd ibn Thabit. With that, Uthman recalled all other copies with variant readings and had them burned. This included: personal codices of companions, local city codices, written fragments, earlier collections, and manuscripts containing variant readings.

He then sent copies of the standardized text to all the major Islamic centers. This created one official written text, later called the Uthmānic mushaf (codex). That is the primary reason that today there exists only "one Qur'an." The fact that there is only one Qur'an is considered a miracle by Muslims, in spite of the fact that it is not a miracle at all. The truth is, the Qur'an was not perfectly preserved from Muhammad's time based on a miracle of God, but because of Uthman's standardization.

The Qur'an is the closest thing Muslims have to God incarnate. In Islam, the Qur'an holds the status that Jesus holds for Christians. That is why the burning of the Qur'an by a non-Muslim provokes riots. It would be as if they were burning God himself. By the same token, their view of Muhammad would be closer to what Christians think of the Bible in that he was the instrument that carried the message from God.

## Hadiths

Hadith is an Arabic word that means a "report," "account," or "narrative." As an Islamic authority source, Hadiths are reports about what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, approved of, or forbade. Muslims believe the Qur'an gives general guidance, while the Hadiths record how Muhammad lived out that guidance. Together with the Qur'an, they form the foundation of Islamic law, theology, and practice. They are specifically used for:

- Understanding Qur'anic Commands - (e.g., Qur'an commands prayer; Hadith explains how to pray).
- Legal Rulings (shariah) - Regarding things such as marriage, divorce, crime, war, inheritance, trade, etc.
- Theology and Doctrine - For example, about angels, the Day of Judgment, heaven, and hell.
- Practical Ethics - Especially concerning charity, kindness, honesty, modesty, and fasting.

Each Hadith has two parts:

1. *Isnad* (chain of transmission) - This is a list of narrators who passed the report down through the generations. They consider this essential for verifying authenticity.
2. *Matn* (the text of the report) - This is the actual content that shares what the Prophet said, or gives a description of something he did.

The Hadiths are not a single literary work that is accepted by all Muslims. Rather, there are various collections of works, and different Muslim denominations accept different ones (or none at all).

Sunni Islam accepts "Six Canonical Books" (*Kutub al-Sittah*):

- *Sahih al-Bukhari* (the most authoritative)
- *Sahih Muslim*
- *Sunan Abi Dawud*
- *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*
- *Sunan al-Nasa'i*
- *Sunan Ibn Majah* (although sometimes *Ibn Majah* is replaced by Malik's *Muwatta'*)

Shi'a Islam (Twelver Islam) accepts four major books. The Shiites especially consider narrations from Ali and the Imams as authoritative.

- *al-Kafi*
- *Man la Yahduruhu al-Faqih*
- *Tahdhib al-Ahkam*
- *al-Istibsar*

Islamic Hadiths were generally not compiled until between 150 - 250 years after Muhammad's death. Various reports about his life, actions, and habits were orally circulated for decades among people who had been around him before they were ever written down. Finally, in the 8th and 9th centuries, they were gathered into large collections. Because of this long gap, authenticity became a central concern. In the succeeding years, various groups determined what they would accept as authoritative as a source of religious law and moral guidance.

Even Muslims themselves recognize that there is a problem dealing with the Hadiths. As a result, Hadith criticism is an actual scholarly field. The major problems include:

- Some narrators exaggerated
- Some narrators fabricated Hadiths for political or sectarian reasons
- Some Hadiths contradict others
- Some Hadiths appear uncharacteristic of Muhammad's reported behavior

While most Muslims accept that Hadiths are an important part of understanding the faith, there are those who reject them entirely or minimize their importance.

## Sunnah

The Arabic word Sunnah means "habitual practice," "a path," "a way," or "a manner of life." In pre-Islamic Arabia, the term Sunnah referred to precedents established by tribal ancestors that were accepted and practiced by the entire community.

In Islamic life, the Sunnah explains all the traditions and practices of Muhammad himself, and has become the source of the traditional social and legal customs and practices of the Islamic community. As a messenger of God, Muslims believe that Muhammad was the best example for Muslims to follow concerning how to carry out God's divine commands, perform religious rites, and live life according to the will of God. Without the Sunnah, large parts of Islamic practice would be undefined. It is considered to carry divine authority, though it is not equal to the Qur'an.

The Qur'an contains a lot of material that is not explained in detail and needs a supplement in order for people to know how to properly follow it. The Sunnah helps fill in those gaps. For example:

- The Qur'an commands prayer, but the Sunnah shows how to pray.
- The Qur'an commands charity, but the Sunnah defines the charity categories.

Along with the Qur'an and Hadiths, the Sunnah is a major source of Islamic law. It is considered to be the verbally transmitted record of the actual teachings, deeds, sayings, permissions, and disapprovals of Muhammad himself, as well as descriptions passed on by his close associates. It was preserved over the years mainly through Hadith literature and *sirah* litera-

ture (biographies of the Prophet, describing his life and character).

Early Muslims did not have a Sunnah, as the traditions that would later emerge had not yet had time to develop. In the early days, some looked to the people of Medina for an example of how to practice their new religion, as they were the ones who lived in close proximity to Muhammad. Others looked to his close associates.

The formalized Sunnah was not "established" at a single moment in time, but developed naturally during Muhammad's lifetime, and was later preserved more fully through Hadith collections. Its existence began during his lifetime as people observed his words, actions, and approvals. However, that was not a period of great formal education, so after his death, his followers mostly practiced his Sunnah as they remembered it. Some made private written notes, but it was primarily transmitted through oral tradition. As Islam spread, the need for a more formal Sunnah emerged and various collections began being compiled. Early organization of this literature began in the 7th - 8th centuries, and the official canonical collections began to emerge in the 9th century. By the early 10th century, the Sunnah was fully codified in Hadith literature.

**Sharia**
Sharia is an Arabic word that refers to God's unchangeable divine law. It represents Allah's divinely ordained code of conduct that expresses how people can please him in this world, and shares how one can successfully advance to the next life. Muslims believe that people must give total and unqualified submission to the will of Allah. Islamic law is, then, the expression of Allah's will for Muslim society, and all Muslims must follow it faithfully.

In Islam, Sharia forms the very basis for Islamic culture as it gets most of its footing from the Qur'an and the Hadiths. Since Sharia is, essentially, a practical interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadiths, various interpreters have not always agreed as to the proper interpretation of various teachings. In fact, there are some quite significant variations that have emerged in different Muslim populations – particularly between populations led by traditionalists and reformists.

Islamic legal philosophy recognizes four primary sources of Sharia:

1. Qur'an - This is considered the direct word of God and contains foundational teachings, ethical principles, commands, and prohibitions. Only a small portion of the Qur'an consists of specific laws.

2. Sunnah - These are the practices, sayings, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad himself and are preserved in Hadith literature. It explains or expands upon Qur'anic principles.

3. Igma (Juridical Consensus) - Consensus consists of the agreement of qualified Islamic scholars in a given era on a legal matter. This became important when new issues arose that were not explicitly addressed in earlier sources.

4. Qiyas (Analogical Reasoning) - Analogical Reasoning is the application of principles from the Qur'an or Sunnah to new situations by analogy. For example: if wine is prohibited for causing intoxication, jurists extended the prohibition to other intoxicating substances.

As Islamic legal philosophy developed, different legal schools also emerged. The most prominent of these schools are *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, *Hanbali*, and *Jafari*, with each one developing its own method of legal interpretation. Islamic legal philosophy recognizes two principal branches of law; one related to rituals, and the other to social relations. These branches are expressed in five different categories: mandatory, recommended, neutral, abhorred, and prohibited.

Over the centuries, the practice of Sharia has evolved. Originally, it was interpreted by independent judges (muftis) who expressed their legal opinions to legal authorities that had been appointed by the ruler of the land. During the Ottoman era, the rulers increased their control over the legal system by creating their own legal code and by turning muftis into state employees. With the breakup of the Ottoman empire and the creation of various nation states, Sharia-based criminal laws and court practices evolved to follow European models. In our current day, with the advent of great turmoil within the Islamic world, we find some Islamist movements calling for full implementation of Sharia (including punishments that were pushed aside by the modernization process), and in other cases we see progressive reformers pushing for a more modern approach to interpreting Islamic law.

Sharia law is distinct in two major regards. First, it regulates an individual's relationship with other people, the state, one's own conscience, and God. Second, it is seen as the expression of God's will. As a result, ritual practices (such as the daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage), ethical standards, as well as actions that affect other individuals and the smooth operation of the state, are all integral parts of Sharia. It expresses ways of acting and thinking that are recognized to be the very will of God. Thus, Sharia is not

merely a system of law, but a complete code of conduct that encompasses both private and public life. And, since it is considered to be the product of divine revelation that ceased with the death of Muhammad, it cannot evolve and grow as society develops. Rather, it is a rigid and static system that cannot change.

Some of the specific areas that Sharia regulates include:

1. Personal Ethics
• Honesty and Truthfulness
• Modesty
• Self-discipline
• Humility
• Sincerity in Worship

2. Social Ethics
• Respect for Parents and Elders
• Justice and Fairness
• Kindness to Neighbors and the Poor
• Prohibition of Harm
• Forgiveness and Reconciliation

3. Family Ethics
• Marriage Obligations
• Parental Responsibility
• Spousal Duties
• Inheritance Fairness

4. Economic and Business Ethics
• Honest Trade
• Prohibition of Charging Interest
• Fair Contracts
• Ethical Investment

5. Civic and Community Ethics
• Justice and Lawfulness
• Prohibition of Corruption
• Environmental Stewardship
• Prohibition of Public Immorality

While the basic ethical categories have a high aim, the application of Sharia is very different when it comes to non-Muslims – particularly in Muslim majority populations. Muslims are bound fully by Sharia in every area: worship, ethics, social conduct, contracts, and legal matters. "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews) are recognized as having received earlier revelations, and classical law allows them certain freedoms under Muslim rule. However, there are also various restrictions (for instance, they are not allowed to proselytize, rule over Muslims, or, in many cases, carry weapons. Other non-Muslims (pagans, polytheists, etc.) are also afforded certain protections under Muslim governance, but are required to pay the jizya tax and accept Muslim political authority.

There are also laws and regulations in Sharia that conflict with the freedoms guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. Some of those include:

1. **Freedom of Religion** - The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to leave a religion (considered apostasy under Sharia) or criticize religious beliefs (which are considered blasphemy against God under Sharia).
2. **Gender Equality** - The 14th Amendment ensures equal protection under the law, and both federal and state law forbids gender discrimination in inheritance, contracts, or legal testimony (which is not necessarily the case under Sharia).
3. **Criminal Punishments** - The Eighth Amendment prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, while Sharia accepts corporal punishments such as amputation for theft or stoning for adultery. Such corporal punishments would be unconstitutional in the U.S.
4. **Family Law** - Laws in all U.S. states prohibit polygamy, and divorce and custody laws must treat parents equally, irrespective of gender. Sharia allows polygamy for men (up to four wives), and divorce procedures can favor men by giving them greater unilateral rights. Additionally, custody rules may favor fathers or male relatives in certain schools of law.
5. **Religious Law Superseding Civil Law** - The Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution establishes U.S. federal law as the highest law of the land. Any religious law that contradicts civil rights, federal, or state law cannot legally override it. Sharia requires that it be supreme over all other laws.
6. **Non-Muslims in Legal Matters** - The equal Protection Clause also guarantees that all citizens be treated equally, regardless of religion. Under Sharia, non-Muslims may be treated differently in court, marriage, or inheritance.

### Evidence for the Authority
Despite Islamic claims, evidence for the Qur'an*'s* validity is weak on several fronts. First, it is said to have been the word-for-word message from God dictated by Gabriel to Muhammad. This divine communication was then transmitted to Muhammad's disciples who wrote it down years after his death. Muslims consider this a miracle, but it is unlikely that a literal word-for-word recreation of the prophet's sayings actually happened. In fact, over the years many revisions, corrections, alterations, interpolations, and changes have been made to the Qur'an's text.

A second problem concerns the actual content of the Qur'an. A great deal of contradiction is found within the text, itself. Qur'anic interpreters work hard trying to reconcile those contradictions. However, their system of interpretation only creates greater confusion in understanding what is written, and denigrates the nature of the authority.

Another huge problem is that in spite of the fact that Islam claims that the Qur'an is an exact representation of the words Gabriel spoke to Muhammad, there were actually several versions early on. In order to maintain the belief of the infallibility of the Qur'an, all of the versions not deemed original by the political leaders of the day were burned (including the earliest manuscript) so that there would only be one version. As such, it is impossible to vouch for the reliability even of the text that remains.

As for the other authority sources, the emergence of each of them happened over a period of three full centuries. The fact that it took that long, as well as the fact that the development of each of them has been uneven, and even internally disputed, gives solid evidence of the unreliability of these sources.

**Conclusion**
Every belief system in existence is rooted in its authority source(s), and the validity of the belief rises or falls on its reliability. Islam's authority sources simply do not stand up to scrutiny. It's origins are suspect and the record of its preservation does not meet the standards necessary to demonstrate its validity and accuracy.

While the principles of the religion seem good on the surface, there is a great deal of unfairness and immorality when you look a bit deeper. It does not respect individual conscience rights, it does not respect women's rights, it does not provide for freedom of religion, it approves of slavery, it affirms cruel legal punishments, and it elevates Sharia law above any other law.

Of course, there are many very good and moral Muslims in the world. However, the religion's authority sources provide an opening for immoral behavior and oppressive societies. This can be easily observed as radical Islamists act out their radicalism based on their religious beliefs, and by how Muslim dominated countries operate based on laws and values that are oppressive and discriminatory. And while it is certainly true that no society based on Christian values is perfect, and there are many people in these countries who claim to be Christians but act in evil ways, the reason for the imperfections is not in the values of its authority source, as is the case in Islam. Rather it is because of the nature of humanity itself. The Christian authority source simply does not condone that kind of belief.