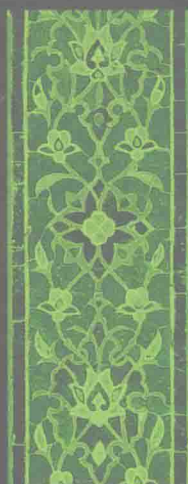


# ISLAM

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## A CONCISE INTRODUCTION



Neal Robinson

# Islam

## A Concise Introduction

*Neal Robinson*

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# Islam

## A Concise Introduction

*In memory of my grandparents  
George and Nellie Pettit*

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# Preface

On numerous occasions, people in various walks of life have asked me to write a simple book about Islam. This work should appeal to them and other general readers. Nevertheless, it is aimed more specifically at would-be students. In many colleges and universities, course tutors are required to recommend preparatory reading to be undertaken during the vacation. Despite the ever-increasing number of introductory texts on Islam, there is none which really meets their needs. They know from experience that if they prescribe a book which is too long or too technical, the majority of their prospective students will not read it. On the other hand, they are understandably reluctant to recommend briefer works written by popularizers or apologists. I have tried, therefore, to produce something which is concise and relatively simple but not simplistic. Those with no previous knowledge of Islam will, I hope, find that it provides them with a panoramic view of the subject and whets their appetite for study.

Introductory courses on Islam often focus primarily on the classical period and deal in turn with the life of Muhammad, the Quran, the Hadith, Islamic law, theology, Shiism and Sufism. I have therefore discussed these important subjects relatively briefly, giving just enough information for the lecturer to build on. On the other hand, I have devoted much more space to subjects which feature only marginally in many lecture courses. For instance, there are two historical chapters ('Islam in History' and 'Islam in the Modern World') which should help students see the development of Islam in perspective, and four chapters

on worship ('Ritual Prayer', 'Zakat', 'Ramadan', and 'The Pilgrimage') which should help them appreciate it as a living faith.

It is not possible to study Islam in any depth without encountering Arabic proper names and technical terms. In order to make these appear less forbidding to the novice, I have used a simplified system of transliteration. For example, I transliterate the name of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law as Ali, rather than 'Alī, and the term for 'religious scholars' as *ulama* rather than 'ulamā'. The more accurate system, together with several others which are in circulation, is explained in Appendix I, where the reader will also find some useful hints about the structure of Muslim names. Moreover, accurate transliterations of the more important names and terms are furnished in the indices. Another bugbear for the beginner is the profusion of unfamiliar dates. I have tried to lighten the burden by using bold type to distinguish key dates, which the reader should attempt to memorise, from others which are included for future reference. Events are dated in accordance with the common era in order to facilitate correlation with European and American history. Nevertheless, the Islamic calendar is explained in detail in Appendix 2.

The Quran comprises 114 suras each of which is subdivided into ayas. In order to save space, I have frequently referred to quranic passages rather than quoted them in full. For example, 42.3 indicates the third aya of the forty-second sura. The numbering system is that of the standard Egyptian edition, which is employed in most modern translations (but see pp 71–2). Apart from quranic references, which are usually given in brackets, I have deliberately eschewed notes except to indicate the sources of quotations. Moreover, in the bibliography I have included only a brief selection of books and articles which are relatively accessible. Needless to say, however, I have learned a great deal from other scholars who are not mentioned by name, including many whose works are more technical or are not available in English. I am also grateful to my students, especially those who ask awkward questions and offer constructive criticism of my courses. Alan Thacker read a first draft of the opening chapter

and made some helpful suggestions. Finally, this book could not have been written without the constant support and encouragement of my wife Danielle.

*Neal Robinson*  
*The University of Leeds*



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# What do you Know about Islam?

## News Coverage of Islam

This book is intended for beginners. Nevertheless, it would be naive of me to assume that you had no previous knowledge of the subject. How could that be when the media bombard you daily with information about the Muslim world? With this thought in my mind, I decided to spend half an hour with a newspaper before settling down to write this opening chapter. It is Monday May 26 1997. The international news, on page 12 of today's *Guardian*, begins with a map of the Sudan and a large photograph of soldiers loading their automatic rifles on strips of cloth aligned like prayer mats in the desert. The caption reads, 'The Islamic state-in-the-making promises martyrs divine marriage with houris in paradise if they fight in the south', and the accompanying article about the Sudanese civil war is headed, 'Dark times loom for visionary Sudan'. At the foot of the page, there is a briefer article covering the election results in Iran. It mentions the struggle of the police to maintain dress and behaviour codes; during the post-election celebrations a woman was stopped in her car and arrested for wearing make-up, and schoolgirls (whom the Iranian authorities require to wear Islamic cover from the age of nine) discussed ripping off their head scarves. On the facing page the heading is, 'Taliban put neighbours on alert'. Beneath it there is another large photograph, this time of turbaned warriors aboard a battered truck in front of a domed mosque. The Taliban have now gained almost complete control of Afghanistan, and an earlier article in the

same issue described how yesterday in Mazar-i-Sharif men doffed turbans and long shirts, while the few women who dared to venture outside their homes wore the one-piece head-to-toe *burqa*. The writer concluded, 'It is as if the country is being plunged back in time for the sake of peace'. Now, in this article, the focus is on the likely impact of the Taliban victory on the neighbouring central Asian states, which were until recently part of the Soviet Union. The words of a United Nations official are printed in bold type in a central panel, 'The fear is that you have five new states in search of an identity. Amid all their problems, one rallying identity is Islam'. The only other articles featuring Islam mention matters of more immediate concern to British citizens: two British nurses condemned to be beheaded under Islamic law in Saudi Arabia continue to plead their innocence, alleging that they confessed to murder under duress after being sexually abused by the police; and Mohammed Sarwar, the first Muslim Member of Parliament, is still resisting calls for his resignation in the wake of accusations of bribery.

As far as I am aware, none of the above information is untrue. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these newspaper reports is to project a distorted image of Islam as a backward and barbaric religion which is inimical to the values of western civilisation and which poses a threat to British citizens at home and abroad. There are three reasons why the image is distorted. First, all the articles which feature Muslims involve violence, repression, sexual immorality or corruption, and the two photographs combine martial and religious motifs. Nothing is said about situations in which Muslims live in peace, or about Islam's emphasis on charity and personal integrity. Presumably, such things are not considered newsworthy.

Second, the incidents which are mentioned are reported in a highly selective way. It is not made clear that there are many Muslims in the Sudan who do not support the National Islamic Front; that many of the young people in Iran who long for a less repressive regime nonetheless have no desire to reject Islam; and that in Afghanistan the majority of those who fought against the Taliban were themselves Muslims. Nor is sufficient emphasis given to the fact that Islam encourages the next of kin of murder victims to accept compensation rather than press for the death-penalty, and that if the two British nurses in Saudi Arabia are



beheaded it will be because of the hardness of heart of their alleged victim's non-Muslim brother in Australia. As for the scandal surrounding the newly-elected MP for Govan in Glasgow, there is no mention of the reactions of Britain's Muslims, many of whom feel that he has disgraced not just himself but them and the whole of their community.

Third, the articles do not furnish the readers with the historical background which they would need in order to see these current affairs in perspective. The roots of the Sudanese civil war reach back to the colonial period, when the British exacerbated ethnic and religious divisions by closing the south of the country to the Arabic-speaking Muslims from the north and giving grants to Christian mission schools where pupils were taught in English. The present regime in Iran dates from the Islamic revolution which put an end to the tyrannical rule of the Shah in 1979. Because the Shah was pro-western and enjoyed the full support of the USA, the Islamic government has been staunchly opposed to western influences of any sort, not least the relaxation of conventions governing female modesty. The endemic instability in Afghanistan was made worse by the clash of western and Soviet interests during the Cold War. The USSR invaded the country in 1979 to prop up the communist government. The USA and Britain reacted by aiding the Mujahidin, who were a loose alliance of Muslim groups united in their opposition to communism. When the Soviet troops finally withdrew in 1989, however, external support for the Mujahidin dried up and their former foreign backers encouraged factional fighting to undermine their attempt to establish an Islamic state. Nevertheless, in the face of near total anarchy they decided eventually to back the Taliban as the faction most likely to restore order. As regards Saudi Arabia, it is important to remember that the British and American economies are heavily dependent on the purchase of petroleum and the sale of armaments. Over the years, the Saudis have proved reliable suppliers of the former and avid customers of the latter. It has therefore been in Britain's and the USA's economic interest to turn a blind eye to the deficiencies of Saudi Arabia's judicial system, especially as the majority of its victims have been Saudi dissidents or migrant workers from the Third World. Finally, in the UK, Muslims have been present in large numbers since the nineteen-fifties and now comprise a