

Chapter 1

Getting to Know the Koran

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining the Koran
- ▶ Summarizing the Koranic message
- ▶ Zooming in on the audience for the Koran
- ▶ Discovering the basics about the Islamic faith and Muslims

As you begin the exciting journey into one of the world's most respected and sacred texts, you need to become familiar with some basics regarding the divine revelation known as the Koran.

In this chapter, I address the meaning of the Koran and explore its divine message to readers and followers alike. I also point out some key information about the Islamic faith and the Muslim community that should help prepare you for a look into the Koranic worldview.

Receiving Revelation Straight from the Source



Muslims view the Koran in its original form and language as the literal and unaltered word of God, preserved for all times to come. When Muslims say, “God says,” or “the Koran says,” they are in fact using different words to quote one source — namely God Himself.

The Koran provides a direct relationship from its source (God) to its audience (humanity). As such, Muslims have a deep reverence for the Koran. In fact, in traditional understandings of Islam, if you express doubt that the Koran is the word of God, then you have uttered words of disbelief.

Finding meaning in the word “Koran”

Linguistically, the word *Koran* (pronounced *Qur'an*) comes from several roots that shed some light on the significance of the Book to Muslim culture and identity.

Koran comes from the root word *Qara'a*, which means “to read” or “to recite.” The word *Koran*, therefore, means “recitation.” (Interestingly, the very first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad was *Iqra*, meaning “read” or “recite.”) This definition points to the nature of the *Koran* as an oral tradition that is understood and preserved with the majestic voice of God through the human voice of recitation (see Chapter 2).

Koran also comes from the root word meaning “city,” which denotes civilization. The *Koran* is the foundational book for Islamic civilization, just as the Bible is for Western civilization or the Torah is for the Hebrew people. For Muslims,

the *Koran* forms Islamic identity in individuals and societies alike.

The *Koran* is also referred to as the Book, which in itself was a revolutionary concept for pre-Islamic Arabs. Up until the Koranic revelation, the Arabs didn't transmit knowledge through writings, but mostly through oral culture. The *Koran* was literally the first book for the Arabs.

The root word for *book* in Arabic means “to bind.” The *Koran* served, and to this day serves, as the Book that unites hearts all around the Muslim world, irrespective of language or cultural origin. Muslims have different cultural attitudes and lifestyles, but all Muslims can understand one another through a shared Scripture that transmits the same basic ethics and morals. This shared experience facilitated the spread of Islam throughout Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe.

Guiding the Way: Prophet Muhammad



Muhammad is the final prophet and messenger of God, through whom the *Koran* was revealed and taught to the people of Arabia. As such, he has a very important role in the *Koran* and Islam.

The *Koran* describes Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to mankind (21:107) and the best example to be followed in worshipping God (68:4). Muslims seek to emulate Muhammad's nature, character, and actions on a daily basis as the best of God's servants.

The role of Prophet Muhammad is extremely important in Islamic law because his sayings and actions are considered only second to the *Koran* in the interpretation and development of Islamic law (see Chapter 17). Furthermore, the life example and teachings of the Prophet supplement Koranic teachings by clarifying or expanding on ideas and concepts.



Muhammad preached the message of Islam, which means submission to God alone; he never asked to be worshipped himself. In fact, worshipping Muhammad would immediately place you outside the Islamic faith. Therefore, the term *Muhammadanism*, which some people use to describe the Koranic message, is not only incorrect, but also offensive to Muslims.

In this book I quote sayings and examples of Muhammad, wherever appropriate, to provide further explanation of Koranic concepts. See Chapter 11 for more about Muhammad and his role in Islam.

Discovering the Basic Messages of the Koran

This section gives you a brief glimpse into the different themes covered in the Koran.

The unity of God

The Koranic message centers around the teaching of God's unity as One, known as *Tawhid* in Arabic. This concept says that God is the Creator of all beings, the Sustainer of each living creature, and that He has power over all things (see Chapter 8).

Worship and service to God

The Koran teaches that all creations on earth and in the universe submit to God in worship by following His laws. So, the sun and the moon, the plants and the trees, and the animals bow down in praise of God for sustaining them with His mercy and compassion (24:41) (see Chapter 9).

In this theatre of divine creation, humans play a unique role. God chose humans, over all His creations, as His vicegerents and representatives on earth (see Chapter 8 for more information on the purpose of human life). Human beings, then, must nurture civilization into a God-conscious society by establishing God's laws, known as *Shariah* in Arabic (see Chapter 17).

Prophets to teach and guide

Humans are endowed with reason, superior thought, articulation, and free will that allow them to work for the betterment of humanity. To guide humans in this daunting task, God sent prophets, throughout history and to every community on earth, who taught mankind the ways of spiritual, moral, and ethical excellence (16:36). Muslims show their reverence for these prophets by saying, "Peace be upon him," after mentioning any one of them by name.

From time to time, God also sent down His revealed Books, such as the Psalms and the Torah, to teach humans the difference between right and wrong, and the application of divine laws on earth.

Completion of past revelations

The message of God's Oneness, and the belief system it entails, remained the same with each prophet, but the laws of God changed for each community and time period, ending in the Koranic revelation and prophethood of Muhammad (see Chapter 11). The prophets who preached this message, and their subsequent followers, are all known in the Koranic worldview as Muslims — those who submit willingly to God's will (22:78).

The Koran doesn't preach a new message or even introduce a new religion. Instead, the concept of Islam as submission to the will of God has existed from day one and was taught to Prophet Adam as the first man on earth. The message was introduced in different time periods to each community on earth, specific to the condition of those people and relevance of their time.

According to the Koran, God chose the Koranic revelation as the final message that completes the teachings of all previous revelations, both in theology and law. As the final message, the Koran provides guidance not only for a specific community or time, but for all of humanity.

Guidance to a spiritual path



Submitting to God creates peace and harmony within an individual that then spreads to society. In submission to God, people are free from servitude to other people and to their own lower desires (9:31). Through service to the Divine, people can reach heights of spiritual and moral success. (See Chapter 13 for more information on the Koranic view of the self.)

Followers of this path of enlightenment, described as Light upon Light, constantly seek ways to earn the good pleasure of God that spiritually feeds the soul throughout their lives.

Movement for social change

The Koran places heavy emphasis on using divine revelation as a catalyst for establishing justice in all its forms, and struggling against injustice in all its forms. (See Chapter 16 for more info on relating the Koran to society.) At the center of this teaching is the concept of *Jihad*, which means to struggle in the path of God, both inwardly and outwardly, for good against evil.

The Koran focuses much of its attention on warning against the mistreatment of the poor, orphans, widows, and all those who are oppressed in society (5:8). In fact, almost every story of past prophets focuses on the theme of establishing justice and fighting against evil.



These social teachings make it impossible for Muslims to separate their religious lives from their social responsibilities (6:162–164). The Koran teaches that such a distinction is wrong, and preaches that not only individuals, but also social institutions, should serve God as a means of producing an equitable society.

Accountability of deeds

Carrying out the teachings of the Koran is a trust from God, about which every single individual will be asked on the Day of Judgment and rewarded accordingly (17:13–14). The Koran teaches that God is the most Just, and that those who are punished on that day will only be punished because of what their own hands have sent forth. Those who will be granted paradise will be granted this prize based on their faith in God and righteous deeds. (See Chapter 9 for details on the Day of Judgment.)

Naming the Revelation

To understand what the Koran is and the purpose for its revelation, you need to look at how the Koran identifies itself using various names and qualities in the revelation. The Book uses 50 different names for itself; I describe five of the most-telling and encompassing names in the following sections.

The Guidance

The Koran introduces itself to the reader as a Book of Guidance (2:2) for those who are conscious of their Sustainer. The Koran, therefore, isn't a book of history, science, or even of philosophical arguments — although it has an element of each in it — but is meant, at its very core, to guide human life towards the “straight path” (1:6) of worship and service to God alone.



You can think of the Koran as a kind of user's manual for everyday living. Devout Muslims remember its teachings and guidance in almost every step they take throughout the day. Muslims don't recite the Koran throughout the day for ritualistic purposes, but rather to serve as an internalizing voice of God that directs believers to make ethical and moral choices in every aspect of life, be it in personal worship, family relationships, or social interactions. (See the chapters in Part IV for more information on the Koran as a source of guidance.)

Each verse of the Koran teaches the ways to spiritual and moral success through stories of past prophets and peoples. The Book also warns mankind against the destructive paths that previous generations took.

Establishing the Koran as a Book of Guidance also gives meaning to Koranic laws and prescribed rituals, which guide human actions in ways that benefit both the individual and society. (See Chapter 17 for more about Islamic law.)

The Criterion

The Koran says, “Blessed is He who from on high, step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false (The Criterion), so that to all the world it may be a warning” (25:1).

The Koran, in other words, makes clear distinctions between right and wrong, righteousness and impiety. The Book rejects *moral relativism*, in which cultural attitudes or the trends of time blur the concepts of good and evil. Rather, morality and ethics are based on a divine revelation that judges good and evil on universal, unchanging principles (see Chapter 14). These ethical principals seek to preserve religion, life, intellect, human dignity, wealth, and lineage — rather than maintain the status quo or service to temporal, worldly objectives.

The Proof

The Koran doesn’t expect people to blindly follow the Koranic message without using the faculty of thinking and reasoning. In fact, the Koran heavily criticizes those who simply do things because they saw their forefathers doing the same (2:170).

The Koran acts as a kind of proof (4:174) for God’s message. In almost every chapter, the Book goes into deep discussions about the wonders of God’s creation, asking the reader to reflect on the universe, the plants, animals, and mountains of the earth, and upon the creation of humanity (2:164). All of this is a means of affirming God’s true existence, His favors on mankind, and due submission to His divine laws and message alone.

The Koran as proof also has a historical implication regarding people who doubted Muhammad’s claims to prophethood. The Jews and Christians asked Muhammad to bring some miracles as proof of the divine inspiration he claimed to receive from God. After all, if Muhammad was a prophet, then he should be able to perform miraculous magic, like Prophet Moses, or instantly cure the sick, like Jesus. The Koran responds to this challenge by exhibiting the highest form of literary Arabic ever to appear in the history of the language.

The majestic words of the Koran changed the face of the Arabic language, outclassing all the famous poetry that was at its height before the Koranic revelation. To this day, the Koran serves as the standard by which all other Arabic is judged. The Book's language proves especially remarkable since it was transmitted through Prophet Muhammad, who was illiterate and was not known for his recital of poetry. (The sayings of Prophet Muhammad, known as *Hadith*, are full of wisdom, but don't come close to the majestic literary standards of the Koran, which comes directly from God.)

In short, the primary miracle and proof that defines Muhammad's prophethood is the Koran itself.

The Reminder

The Koran says that the divine revelation is no less than a reminder to all the worlds (6:90). The Book reminds its followers and readers of three things in particular:

- ✓ Of the original, pure teachings and struggles of past prophets who preached submission to God's Will alone (Islam) as a way of life. Also, of the original laws and moral teachings of previous divine scriptures, such as the New Testament and Old Testament.
- ✓ Of the natural, pure state of the human soul that is in tune with the ethical teachings of God. The Book is a reminder of that which the soul already knows and accepts, but may have deviated from after a life without awareness of divine presence.
- ✓ Of God's constant presence from which mankind can hide nothing. Believers should live their lives in full awareness of this reality.

As a reminder to the world, the Koranic message advocated throughout the scripture is universal. The Koran wasn't sent for one nation or time period, but for all peoples until the end of time. (See Chapter 5 for more information on the Koran as a universal message.)

The Koran also sees itself as a reminder because it continues and confirms previous revelations that preach God's Oneness (21:25). The Koran teaches that this message was revealed to the world's communities through various prophets and messengers throughout history, ending with Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet and messenger of God.

Due to the universality of the prophetic message, you can find a lot of similarities between the Koran and the revealed scriptures of Prophets Moses and Jesus (see Chapter 5 for more on the similarities between Koran and Judeo-Christian scripture). However, the Koran was also revealed to clarify theological misunderstandings that developed in previous divine faiths, and to call people towards the reformed laws of God.

The Healing

The Koran describes itself as a healing cure for the hearts of men and women (17:82). This Koranic quality illuminates a spiritual path for the heart's purification through the remembrance of God. The revelation attempts to soften hearts that have become hardened, in order to reclaim and preserve the humanity of people.

The Koran in this role seeks to elevate the spiritual human heart to a level that is in love with the Divine, and therefore submits the soul into a constant state of gratitude to God, known as *Shukr*, during the best and worst of times (2:152). The teachings of healing guide the perception of mind and heart into a state of contentment that allows God's light to enter the soul, so that a person's every word and action are in tune with deep awareness of divine presence.

Hearing the Words: The Audience of the Koran

The Koran's audience is universal, without limitation on gender, culture, or religious beliefs. However, the Koran specifically addresses six general groups of people in various passages and at varying lengths:

- ✔ **Humankind:** These verses usually carry universal teachings, warnings, and glad tidings. Such passages usually begin with "O mankind" or "O Children of Adam." You find most of these addresses in the earlier periods of revelation, known as Meccan Chapters (see Chapter 2).
- ✔ **Believers:** These verses address Muslim behavior and etiquette and often introduce a law. You also find warnings of falling into the wrong path and glad tidings for those who are steadfast and patient in faith. Such passages usually begin with "O you who believe" or end with "this is for those who believe."
- ✔ **People of the Book:** The Koran gives a lot of attention to Jews and Christians as recipients of earlier revelations. When the Koran addresses both religious communities, it uses the term "People of the Book." The Koran uses stories of the respected prophets that all three faiths share to remind People of the Book about the universal message of submission to God alone.

The Koran sometimes addresses each group separately. For example, after the historic migration of the early Muslim community from the city of Mecca to the city of Medina, Prophet Muhammad interacted with Jewish tribes in discussions and debates about the Koranic revelation. The Koran contains several passages that answer the questions of the

Jews and also highlight some of the tensions that existed between the two communities. (I tell you more about this dialogue between the Koran and the Jews in Chapter 5.)

- ✓ **The hypocrites:** The Koran finds hypocrisy detestable and uses strong language to condemn it. Usually these verses warn about what awaits hypocrites in the Hereafter and call such people to change their ways from hypocrisy into true belief.
- ✓ **Rejecters of faith:** The Koran speaks extensively about those who reject the Koranic message with philosophical arguments and warnings of disbelief.



Referring to such people as “unbelievers,” or even worse, “infidels,” is a serious mistranslation of the Koranic concept of disbelief. The word used in Arabic is *Kafir*, which is a very comprehensive term, but at its core means someone who is ungrateful. From the Koranic standpoint, the greatest ingratitude is to reject the Truth of the Creator (God) after it has been made manifest. However, someone who has never heard the message of the Koran, or only a misrepresentation of its teachings, has never had the opportunity to accept or reject. Therefore, “rejecter of faith” or “denier of God’s Signs and Blessings” are more accurate translations of this Koranic term.

- ✓ **The reader:** When reading the Koran, you can literally find yourself having a conversation with the Scripture as thought-provoking questions come up, one after the other. In one chapter alone the Koran asks 31 times, “Then which of the favors of your Sustainer will you deny?” (55) after recounting the blessings that come from God for mankind.

The Koran also poses questions to capture the full attention of its readers in an intimate way, such as “Has He not found you an orphan and given you shelter? And found you lost on your way, and guided you? And found you in want, and given you sufficiency?” (93:6–8).

Knowing the Essentials about Islam and Muslims

Understanding some fundamentals about Islam helps you more fully investigate the Koran.

The Six Pillars of Belief

Islam has six pillars of belief that altogether are known as *Iman*.

The first pillar of faith is belief in One God, complete monotheism, without any doubt or exception.

Coming to God with an attitude

Both the Pillars of Islam and the Articles of Faith can't be complete unless they are practiced and followed in a most beautiful and perfect way, known as *Ihsan*. Prophet Muhammad defined *Ihsan* as worshipping God as if you see Him, and to know that He truly sees you. This is the essence of God-consciousness, which nurtures a feeling of humility and thankfulness before God. Practicing and believing with this spirit leads to the full fruits of this way of life known as Islam.

The second pillar of faith is belief in angels (Chapter 9), who perform various functions based on God's instructions. Through these angels, God revealed His Books or Revelations to various prophets throughout time. Muslims must believe in God's Revelations and respect without distinction of any prophet who preached the unity of God as One. Belief in these Books and prophets make up the third and forth pillars of faith.

Fifthly, Muslims must believe in accountability of their actions, both good and bad, and subsequent rewards and punishments for those deeds. This concept manifests itself in the belief of the Day of Judgment (Chapter 9), about which there can be no doubt, as the Koran says.

The sixth and last pillar of faith is to believe in the divine Decree of God, by which God's presence is understood as timeless. This belief also teaches God's perfect knowledge, and complete Power and Will over all things.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Muslims often compare Islamic practices to a well-built structure with a solid foundation and four supporting pillars (see Figure 1-1).

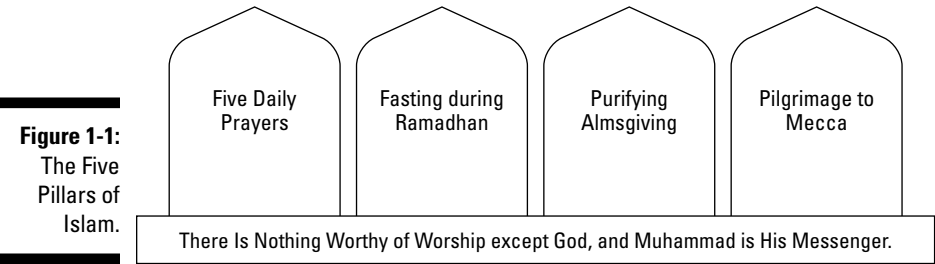


Figure 1-1:
The Five
Pillars of
Islam.

The foundation, and first pillar of Islam, is the declaration of faith, known as *Shahadah*. The declaration is that “I bear witness that there is nothing worthy of worship except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.” Muslims repeat this declaration several times throughout the day and are expected to speak and act with the *Shahadah*’s spirit in mind.

The declaration of faith comes to life through the four supporting pillars. The second pillar is prayer, *Salat* in Arabic, which is offered five times throughout the day between dawn and night. The usual prayer lasts about ten minutes and consists of Koranic recitation, bowing, and prostration before God.

During the month of *Ramadan* — the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and month in which God began revealing the Koran — all able-bodied Muslims who have reached the age of puberty practice Islam’s third pillar, fasting, known as *Sawm*. The fast begins at sunrise and ends at sunset each day of the month. The fast consists of avoiding food, water, and sex. Muslims are expected to be on their best behavior during this month.

The fourth pillar of faith is almsgiving, known as *Zakat*. Every financially-able Muslim must give to the poor and needy in society once every year.

The final pillar of faith is pilgrimage, known as *Hajj*, which consists of going on a once-in-a-lifetime journey to visit the city of Mecca and its surrounding areas. Here Muslims visit the *Ka’ba*, the first House of God built by Prophet Abraham and his son, Ishmael. Also, Muslims stand on Mount Arafah where Adam and Eve are believed to have descended to earth from heaven. The pilgrimage has several steps and is very challenging physically and emotionally. Millions of Muslims go each year for this rite that commemorates the life and struggles of Prophet Abraham, his wife Hagar, and son Ishmael, as a way of coming closer to God.

See Chapter 12 for more information on prayer, purifying alms, fasting, and pilgrimage.

Muslims: The followers of Islam

The term *Muslim* refers to anyone who follows Islam as a way of life and declares faith in God alone and in the prophethood of Muhammad. (Linguistically, the word “Muslim” means one who submits in worship to the Will of God alone.)

Since it is impossible (and not the job of humans) to see what is in the hearts of men and women, anyone who declares himself or herself as a follower of Islam is called a Muslim. However, this title of Muslim doesn’t guarantee success in this world or in the Hereafter. Only a person’s faith in God and righteous actions bring him or her closer to the eternal home of paradise.



Not all Arabs are Muslims, and more importantly, not all Muslims are Arabs. While Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, there are many Jewish and Christian Arabs as well. Moreover, Arabs constitute only about 18 percent of the entire Muslim population of approximately 1.4 billion people. Muslims are the majority population in much of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and even some parts of Europe; the highest population of Muslims is in Indonesia. Muslims are a strong and vibrant community in many Western societies, including the United States, which is home to approximately 7 million Muslims.

Please refer to *Islam For Dummies*, by Malcolm Clark, published by Wiley, for more information about Islam and Muslims around the world.