Sources of Authority in Islam

Qur’an
Also spelled as Koran and Quran. It literally means “recitation”

The Qur’an is the final authority for Muslims. Many people think it is better to compare the Muslim view of the Qur’an with the Christian view of Christ rather than comparing the Qur’an with the Bible or Christ with Muhammed.

According to Muslims, Muhammed received the Qur’an over a period of approximately 23 years from A.D. 609 to 632. The Qur’an was originally memorized and passed down orally. The final written form of the Qur’an was established between A.D. 650 and 656 under the caliphate of Uthman. The earliest manuscripts of the Qur’an date to the early eighth century.

Muhammed is in no way the author of the Qur’an according to Muslims. Allah is the author and Muhammed received it over a period of twenty-three years.

According to Muslims the Qur’an cannot be translated. Any translations are just interpretations of the Qur’an and not actually the Qur’an. Muslims also believe that God has perfectly preserved the Qur’an and will do so for all time. Text Criticism of the Qur’an is considered unnecessary and impious.

Muslims believe that the existence of the Qur’an is miraculous because it is so beautiful and poetic, yet Muhammed was illiterate.

The Qur’an consists of 114 chapters known as Suras. These are arranged by size, rather than chronologically. But interpretation and application of the Qur’an depends upon the time the revelations were given. Suras and verses are classified as either Meccan or Medinan based upon when they were received.

Hadith

Hadith consists of two parts. First it contains collections of supposedly verbatim quotes from Muhammed (matn). Second it contains the record of communication as to how that quote was transmitted from Muhammed to the time of the hadith (isnad). Hadith include not only quotes from Muhammed, but also records of his actions. The Hadith is important because Muhammed’s life is considered exemplary as are the lives of the other prophets. In other words Muhammed is the perfect example of how a Muslim should live.

There is no written record of the hadith until 200 years after Muhammed’s death.

The hadith are the second most important authority source for Muslims.
The quotes are classified according to “authentic” “good” or “weak” depending upon how certain scholars are that they are reliable. Different scholars and different groups will classify hadith differently.

There are different collections of hadith and not all Muslims accept various hadith.

For most Sunni Muslims the Hadith of al-Bukhari is the most authoritative of the hadith.

**Sunnah**

Often used synonymously with hadith. Technically the sunnah is contained within the hadith.

Sunnah refers to the quotes or example of Muhammed.

Many Muslim beliefs and practices are prescribed in the Sunnah, not the Qur’an. These would include practices such as liturgical prayers and male circumcision as well as beliefs such as the return of Jesus and the miracles of Muhammed.

**Tafsir**

*Tafsir* is a commentary on the Qur’an by an Islamic scholar or mufassir.

Just as in Christianity commentaries on the Qur’an come from a variety of perspectives.

Tafsir contain information about the context of the events described in the Qur’an, the people mentioned, vocabulary, grammar, etc.

**Sharia**

*Sharia* or law is basically the application of religion to life in Islam. Islam is to be a way of life for Muslims and sharia is the application of Islam to life.

Law is more important in Islam than theology...with exceptions for the basic core beliefs.

There are many variations or “schools” of thought on Islamic law. The sources used to develop sharia and the weight given to those sources, as well as the methodology of using the sources will vary according to the school of thought.

The different schools developed early in the history of Islam with schools being prominent based upon geographical location.

Sharia divides all human activity into the following categories:
1. **Fard, wjib.** These are actions that are required such as daily prayer. Neglect of these duties can be punished. *Fard* actions are further divided into actions that are required by each individual Muslim and actions required by the community.

2. **Mandub.** These are actions that are recommended and rewarded, but not punished if neglected...such as using the Muslim greeting.

3. **Mubah.** These are actions that are legally neutral and neither rewarded or punished. This would include most activities in human life such as the vocation a person chooses.

4. **Makruh.** These are actions that are bad, but not punished such as sleeping in after sunrise.

5. **Haram.** These are actions that are bad and punishable, such as stealing or drinking alcohol.

Muslims believe that the *Qur’an* was God’s revelation for the Arabs but that God gave essentially the same revelation to other prophets. The details of this message differ, but the essence is allegedly the same. However, Muslims also believe that these revelations have been hopelessly corrupted and only the *Qur’an* is the final authoritative revelation from God. The other revelations include:

- **Suhuf** Revelation given to Abraham also known as the book or leaves of Abraham
- **Tawrat** revelation given to Moses also known as Torah
- **Zabur** revelation given to David also known as the Psalms
- **Injil** revelation given to Jesus