

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

Islam, which means “peace, security and wholeness through total submission to God’s will”, is the name of the religion that began around 610 CE with a series of divine revelations given to the Prophet Muhammad, which became known as the Qur’an (Al-Qur’an al-Karim, Kalam-Allah – the speech of God). Islam received its greatest momentum, however, from the Hijrah (HEEJ-rah) in 622 CE when Muhammad fled Mecca to Medina, where the Muslim community was established. For this reason, 622 CE is the year 0 in the Muslim calendar.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 CE, and as a young man became known as *Al-Amin*, meaning honest and trustworthy. At the age of 25 years he married Khadijah, a well-respected business woman 15 years his senior. When he was 40 years old, and while he sat meditating in a cave, he was called by God through the angel Jibril (Gabriel) to receive the divine revelation.

After thirteen years of persecution in Mecca, Muhammad migrated to Medina, and sent missions to all the surrounding empires. The Muslim community was established in the entire Arabian Peninsula within 10 years. Following the Prophet’s death in 632 CE (10 on the Muslim calendar), the *Ummah*, or Muslim community, was first led by four Caliphs, and then by a succession of dynastic rulers. The spread of Islam and the expansion of Muslim rule changed the world map and world history. From 711 until 1492 CE, the time of the dark and Middle Ages in Europe, Muslim caliphates ruled most of the known world from Spain to Asia and Africa. Over this time, Islamic civilization provided an integration and preservation of ancient knowledge that might otherwise have been lost forever, and led world civilization in this era, known as the Golden Age.

Although the historical conflict between Islam and the West that began with the Inquisition and Crusades resulted in the disintegration of this Islamic empire, Islam continued to spread, gaining adherents. Today, Muslims are estimated to total over 1 billion worldwide.

BELIEFS and PRACTICES

Muslims are strict monotheists whose basic creed is simply “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.” Allah is the Arabic word for God. Muslims accept the same God as Jews and Christians, and also revere the same Biblical prophets, including Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus, who they consider the word of God and a prophet, but not the divine son of God. Therefore, they declare Muhammad to be the “seal of the Prophets,” or the final prophet of God.

The six articles of faith for Muslims, found in the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) are:

1. Belief in One God, who is the Unique, Infinite, Transcendent Creator and Sustainer of all that exists.
2. Belief in the eternal afterlife, which includes the end of the world, resurrection and judgment before God for one’s life, leading one to paradise or hell.

3. Belief in the unseen, be they scientific realities such as electricity, or angels, who are creatures of God and are constantly in service to Him.

4. Belief in the Books, or Revelations of God. Muslims believe God sent his message to different prophets at different times. They include the scrolls of Abraham, the Torah to Moses, the Psalms to David, and the Gospel of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, all culminating in the Qur’an which is understood by Muslims to correct human errors in the previous texts produced by translations and loss of material.

5. Belief in human messengers/prophets of God. Muslims believe that God chose certain human beings to be His messengers and to deliver his guidance by exemplifying it in their lives, and that Muhammad was God’s final Messenger.

6. Belief in the Omnipotence of God. Muslims believe that all that happens – good and evil – happens under the decree and plan of God.

The Muslim way of life is based upon the Five Pillars of Islam. The Sunnah dictates the Pillars and other practices. The Pillars are:

1. **Shahadah**, or the statement of faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.” A person becomes a Muslim by accepting and making this proclamation of faith.

2. **Salat**, or the five daily prayers that all post-pubescent male and female followers are expected to make (pre-dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening).

3. **Sawm**, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. This fast includes abstaining from food, drink, and sex during the daylight hours.

4. **Zakat**, or sharing the wealth. All adults who are able are expected to make charitable donations roughly equivalent to 2.5 % of their savings.

5. **Hajj**, or the Pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able are expected to make a journey to this holiest of Muslim cities at least once in their lifetime. The Pilgrimage is usually made during the first 10 days of the last month of the Muslim calendar.

Muslims do not eat pork or pork products, and meat must be slaughtered according to Islamic law, similar to the Kosher requirements in Jewish law. They are also required to abstain from alcohol or other intoxicating substances. Circumcision of male children is also required.

SACRED BOOKS/SCRIPTURE

The sole scripture of Islam is called the Qur’an (less accurately spelled Koran). The Hebrew Bible and New Testament of Christianity are respected, but are seen as precursors of the Qur’an, which affirms, confirms and completes their message. Hence, the Qur’an is understood as correcting the mistakes of human error. The Qur’an is considered the literal word of God, revealed to Muhammad. The revelations were memorized and dictated by Muhammad to his disciples, who either memorized them, or in some cases, wrote them down. Zaid ibn Thabit collected all of the revelations a few years later into what is now the Qur’an. The Qur’an is written in Arabic and consists of 114 chapters or *surahs*.

The second source to which Muslims look for direction is the *Sunnah*, or sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. A narration on the *Sunnah*, called the *Hadith*, is also an important text. The most authentic source of Islam is the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and Hadith are subject to religious evaluations on the parameters of their transmission and content. For example, Prophet Muhammad reportedly said through Hadith that statements attributed to him that contradict the Qur'an should be dismissed.

RITUALS and CELEBRATIONS

Communal worship takes place for Muslims on Fridays at noon. Muslim men are required to gather for prayer and a sermon by the *imam* (prayer leader) of the local mosque (*masjid*). Parents who must attend to infants and toddlers, and women who are on their periods are exempted.

Muslim holidays follow a lunar calendar, which is about 11 days shorter than the solar cycle, so the dates of their holidays move through in a 32-year cycle.

The two holidays observed by Muslims are:

‘Id al-Fitr (Festival Breaking the Fast). Occurs at the close of the Ramadan fast and is a time of gift giving and feasting.

‘Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). Occurs on the 10th day of the month when pilgrimages are made to Mecca, and is a period of sacrifice commemorating the willingness of Abraham to offer his son (Ishmael) to God. Muslims often sacrifice an animal on this day to mark the gift of a ram that God made to Abraham. It is also a time of gift giving, charity and hospitality. Abraham and his elder son, Ismail, built the Kaaba in Mecca, the first House of Worship to the One God (Allah) in history. Id Al-Adha comes at the end of the hajj, which brings over 1 million people to Mecca, the Kaaba and other historical sites.

MAIN SUBGROUPS

As in other traditions, a good deal of diversity exists in Islam. Below are overviews of three of the largest denominations.

Sunni. *Sunnah* in Arabic means “customary practice” or the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis comprise about 85-90 percent of all Muslims today worldwide. They reject the idea that the Prophet’s blood descendants should inherit his authority, and instead opt for the election of their leaders, or *caliphs*.

Shi’a (or **Shi’i**). Shi’a in Arabic means “supporters” and refers to the supporters of the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Shi’as venerate the descendants of the Prophet as imams, and believe that the last of them will return at the end of the world to redeem it. In Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, Shi’a Muslims are the majority.

Sufism. Sufi refers to a simple cloth worn by those who rejected materialism at the time that Muslim dynasties were controlling the rich resources of the world. While not technically a branch of Islam, Sufism is a mystical tradition dating from the eighth century that stresses the immanence of God and seeks intimate union with Him. They are best known by the “whirling dervishes” of Turkey, and by small Sufi communities that exist in North America.

As many as 1 million African Americans follow orthodox Islam. The Nation of Islam, which is commonly confused with orthodox Islam, is not recognized as a legitimate

Islamic group by United States Muslim authorities. Although The Nation of Islam follows most Muslim practices, such as the Five Pillars, it does not recognize the inherent equality of all peoples and races. The concept of equality before God is integral to Muslim belief, and means that anyone may become a Muslim.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN

According to many scholars of Islam and women’s roles in religion, the arrival of Islam provided women vast improvement over previous conditions. As Islam gained territory, it brought high culture, literature, science, law, philosophy and crafts, and it allowed conquered people to continue their own religious faiths.

The Qu’an and Hadith also lay groundwork for basic rights of women, and Muhammad’s committed and compassionate life as a family man provides the example for all Muslim men. Muslim women have the right to dictate the terms of their marriage contract (marriage is contractual, rather than sacramental), and to receive a dowry. Although women are only allowed to marry one man, and he must be Muslim, according to Islamic law, men may marry up to four wives, but they must be able to provide adequately for each. Although no case involving Muslim polygamy has been addressed in the United States, existing laws and court cases outlawing polygamy would presumably apply. Wives may also retain their private property and earnings after marriage, and the Qu’an guarantees specific inheritance rights.

Islam recognizes remarkable women and “mothers of the faith”, including Khadija, Muhammad’s first wife, who exemplify the traditional feminine ideal of beauty, modesty, and devotion. ☞

ISLAM – Did you know?

- “Muhammadanism” is a term that one often sees used in outdated textbooks to refer to Islam. It is completely inaccurate as it suggests that Muslims worship Muhammad as a divine being. Islam stresses submission before God, not Muhammad.
- Many customs inaccurately associated with the submission of women in Islam actually originate in the cultural customs of various countries or regions, and have no basis in Islamic doctrine. For example, after marriage, Muslim women may retain any property or wealth they brought with them into the marriage, and may or may not wear the *Hijab*, or veil.
- There are approximately 4-5 million Muslims living in the United States, coming from various countries of origin. According to the New Historical Atlas of Religion in America, 28.4% are from the Middle East and Africa, 26.6% from Europe, 11.5 % from Asia, and 30.2% are from the United States and they are primarily African American.
- The term *jihad* is often misunderstood. It has two basic meanings: to struggle in defense of the faith; the spiritual struggle to become a better Muslim. It does not mean “holy war”.
- The crescent moon and star symbol often used in reference to Islam represents the position of the new moon at the start of the month of fasting — Ramadan.