

Islam

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Islam is one of the largest religions in the world, with over 1 billion followers. It is a monotheistic faith based on revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad in 7th-century Saudi Arabia. The Arabic word *Islam* means “submission,” reflecting the faith's central tenet of submitting to the will of God. Followers of Islam are called Muslims.

According to Islamic tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet over the course of 20 years, revealing to him many messages from God. Muslims recognize some earlier Judeo-Christian prophets—including Moses and Jesus—as messengers of the same true God. But in Islam, Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets, whose revelations alone are pure and uncorrupted.

The Prophet dedicated the remainder of his life to spreading a message of monotheism in a polytheistic world. In 622, he fled north to the city of Medina to escape growing persecution. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Eight years later, Muhammad returned to Mecca with an army and conquered the city for Islam. By Muhammad's death, 50 years later, the entire Arabian Peninsula had come under Muslim control.

The sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an, was written in Arabic within 30 years of Muhammad's death. Muslims believe it contains the literal word of God. Also important is the tradition of the sayings and actions of Muhammad and his companions, collected in the Hadith.

Islamic practices center on the Five Pillars of Islam—faith; prayer; fasting; pilgrimage to Mecca; and alms—and include several holidays and rituals as well.

Islam and the Judeo-Christian West have had a challenging relationship for centuries and today's conflicts in the Middle East are religiously charged. Thus a focus on the facts and efforts towards mutual understanding are particularly important when it comes to Islam.

Islamic beliefs

Beliefs are important in Islam. Right beliefs about God, the universe, and humanity is of primary concern to Muslims. The Quran, the sacred text of Islam states, "Righteous is he who believes in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels and the Scriptures and the Prophets" (2:177). Beliefs in these doctrines, as well as many others, are important to Muhammad's followers, both past and present.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam teaches that there is one God in the universe, giving Muslims a monotheistic worldview. Also like Judaism and Christianity, Islam holds to the ministerial office of prophet, although not all of these faiths agree on who is, and who isn't, a prophet. For example, Christians believe John the Baptist was a prophet and Jews and Muslims don't. And Muslims believe that Muhammad was a prophet, yet Jews and Christians don't. All three faiths also believe in an afterlife, although the makeup of those destinations is immensely different in nature from each other.

Muslim Beliefs about Allah

The single most important belief in Islam, and arguably the central theme of the religion, is that there is only one God. The name of God is Allah, which is simply Arabic for "the (al) God (Ilah)."

Muslim Beliefs about the Prophets

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is revered as "the Seal of the Prophets" - the last and greatest of the messengers of God. He is not divine in any way, for the strict monotheism that characterizes Islam (as well as Judaism) does not allow for such an interpretation. Other prophets are important in Islam as well, all of which are shared with the Jews or the Christians.

Muslim Beliefs about Human Nature

According to the Quran, Allah "created man from a clot of blood" at the same time he created the jinn from fire. Humans are the greatest of all creatures, created with free will for the purpose of obeying and serving God.

Muslim Beliefs about Life and Salvation

For a Muslim, the object of life is to live in a way that is pleasing to Allah so that one may gain Paradise. It is believed that at puberty, an account of each person's deeds is opened, and this will be used at the Day of Judgment to determine his eternal fate.

Muslim Beliefs about the Afterlife

Like Christianity, Islam teaches the continued existence of the soul and a transformed physical existence after death. There will be a day of judgment and humanity will be divided between the eternal destinations of Paradise and Hell.

Six Articles of Faith

There is no official creed to which one must adhere to be considered a Muslim. All that is required is to believe and recite the Shahada: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet." Beyond this core belief, however, Muslim doctrine is often summarized in "Six Articles of Faith." Many

Muslims believe that one must adhere to the six articles to be considered a Muslim.

Muslim Views of Other Religions

The Quran is clear that there must be "no compulsion in religion" (2:256). Yet Islam is not indifferent to conversion either - Muslims consider their religion to be the one true religion, and invite people of all races, nationalities and religions to be part of it.

Islamic sects and schools

In the religion of Islam, sects are not really "denominations," if that word is understood to mean various valid approaches to the same religion. The division between Muslim sects - mainly Sunni and Shia - is deeply rooted in Islamic history. Debates revolve around key historical figures and important core beliefs, all of which have significant implications for how Muslims are to live in the world today.

Members of one Islamic group do not usually recognize members of other groups as fellow Muslims, and open conflict between sects is not uncommon.

Yet, numerically, it could be said that Islam is less divided than many other faiths because the vast majority of the world's Muslims are Sunnis.

To read more on the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims, read this [article](#).

History of Islam

The story of Islam starts with the prophet Muhammad. However, Islam rose in a certain historical and geographical context. What was Arabia like before Muhammad and the rise of the Islamic religion? The Arabian Peninsula was

originally the home of nomadic peoples who coped with the desert climate by migrating every season ("Arab" roughly translates as "desert dweller").

When some people groups began to establish settlements around the fifth century BC, many chose Mecca, near the west coast of Saudi Arabia, as their home. It did not offer a favorable climate or many natural resources, but it was the site of the Ka'ba, a large cubical shrine dedicated to various deities.

The religion of the Arab world before the advent of Islam was an animistic polytheism. It was believed that the desert was populated with fiery spirits called jinn. Numerous gods were worshipped as well, with most towns having their own patron god. Mecca soon became the religious center, with 360 shrines, one for each day in the lunar year. Local merchants depended heavily on pilgrims to these shrines for their livelihood, a fact which would become significant for Muhammad.

Islam: past and present

Muhammad

Arab polytheism was focused entirely on the earthly life, and religion was not a source of morality. By Muhammad's time, blood feuds, violence, and general immorality abounded. Yet monotheism was not unheard of among the Arabs.

There was contact with Zoroastrianism, which was the official state religion of Persia from the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD and influential on its neighbors. It was a dualistic religion with beliefs in heaven, hell and a final judgment. In addition, both Judaism and Christianity had established a presence on the Arabian Peninsula, especially in the south. In Yathrib (later renamed Medina), the Jewish population was especially influential.

Allah

Even among the innumerable deities of Arabian polytheism was a god who was more impressive than the rest. Allah (Arabic for "the god") was "the creator, provider and determiner of human destiny," and "he was capable of inspiring authentic religious feeling and genuine devotion" (Smith, 225).

In general, Allah was regarded as the greatest among the many gods deserving worship, but one contemplative sect, the hanifs, worshiped Allah exclusively. It was into this world of sporadic monotheism and rampant immorality that Islam was born.

After Muhammad

Rightly-Guided Caliphs

Upon the death of Muhammad, his followers were faced with the decision of who should take his place as the leader of Islam. This leadership position was called the kalifa, which means "deputy" or "successor" in Arabic.

Umayyad Dynasty

The Umayyad family established a system of hereditary succession for the leader of the Muslim world. Mu'awiya assumed this position for the first 20 years of the Dynasty's rule. Under the Umayyads, the Islamic Empire spread to North Africa, Spain and central Asia.

Abbasid Dynasty

Abbasid was the dynastic name generally given to the caliphs of Baghdad, the second of the two great Sunni dynasties of the Muslim empire that overthrew the Umayyad caliphs.

Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire was founded by Osman I (in Arabic Uthmān, hence the name Ottoman Empire). As sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453, the state grew into a mighty empire.

Islamic holidays and festivals

What are the sacred days in Islam?

Islam has relatively few holidays compared to most other religions; nevertheless, their sacred days and times are very important to Muslims. When holidays are being observed, it is common for routine social activities, such as work and commerce, to stop temporarily out of respect for the person or event being remembered.

Traditionally, Muslims celebrate two major festivals - 'Id Al-Fitr and 'Id Al-Adha. They celebrate one month of daytime fasting - Ramadan. And they also observe a day of voluntary fasting - 'Ashura, which is also an important Shiite festival. (Also compare: Sunni and Shia Muslims.)

The popular festival of Mawlid an-Nabi celebrates the birthday of the prophet Muhammad, but is frowned upon as an idolatrous innovation by conservative Muslims. Most Islamic holidays either commemorate events in the life of the prophet Muhammad or are special days founded by him.

Holidays in the Muslim faith

Islamic Calendar

The Islamic calendar is lunar, like the Jewish calendar, but it has no corrective system to align it with the solar calendar so Islamic holidays do not always fall in the same season.

Al-Hijra: Islamic New Year

Al-Hijra, the Islamic New Year, is celebrated on the first day of Muharram, the month in which Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (the Hijra).

Ramadan: Month of Fasting

Ramadan is not a holy day to Muslims but a holy month. It is the ninth month of the Muslim year, in which "the Quran was sent down as a guidance for the people"

'Id Al-Fitr: Festival of Breaking the Fast

'Id Al-Fitr or Eid al-Fitr (Arabic for "Festival of the Breaking of the Fast") is one of Islam's two major festivals. It marks the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, and is celebrated during the first three days of the month of Shawwal.

'Id Al-Adha: Festival of the Sacrifice

'Id Al-Adha or Eid al-Adha (Arabic عيد الأضحية, "ecifircaS eht fo lavitseF") is a major Islamic festival that takes place at the end of the Hajj.

Ashura: Remembering Shiite Martyr Husayn

Ashura (also spelled Aashurah, 'Ashurah or Aashoorah), is an Islamic holiday observed on the 10th of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year.

Muslim rituals and practices

Certain sacred practices and rituals are very important to Muslims. They are a significant way that followers of Islam remember history, express conviction, and grow in devotion.

Some rituals are practiced daily, like prayer; others are practiced annually, like those aligned with specific Islamic holidays. The religious practices and rituals of Islam are relatively few in number, but great in importance. The Five Pillars of Islam are five practices regarded by all sects of the Islamic religion as essential to the Muslim faith.

Islam is a religion that is approximately 1,400 years old, having been founded by Muhammad in the 600's A.D. Muhammad's teachings were compiled after he died by his followers and makeup the sacred text for Muslim, called the Quran. Islam is one of the largest religions in the world at the beginning of the 21st century.

Islamic religious practices and rituals

Five Pillars of Islam

The Five Pillars of Islam (Arabic arkan ud-Din, "pillars of the faith") are the five religious duties expected of every Muslim. The five pillars are mentioned individually throughout the Qur'an and Muhammad listed them together in the Hadith when he was asked to define Islam.

Confession of faith (shahada)

The first of the Five Pillars of Islam is the shahada. Shahada is the Muslim profession of faith, expressing the two simple, fundamental beliefs that make one a Muslim:

La ilaha illa Allah wa-Muhammad rasul Allah. There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God.

Ritual prayer (salat)

Perhaps the most well-known Muslim practices among non-Muslims is ritual prayer, or salat, which is performed five times a day: at dawn (al-fajr), midday (al-zuhr), afternoon (al-'asr), sunset (al-maghrib) and evening (al-'isha).

Alms tax (zakat)

Almsgiving is a central activity in Islam. The Quran explicitly requires it (9:60) and often places it alongside prayer when discussing a Muslim's duties. ("Perform the prayer and give the alms." 2:43, 110, 277)

For those who are greedy and use their money outside of the will of Allah, the Quran has harsh words: the fires of hell will heat up the coins and the greedy will be branded with it (9:34-35).

Fasting during the month of Ramadan (sawm)

Sawm (also siyam), fasting, commemorates the revelation of the Quran to humanity during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year.

Pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj)

At least once in his or her lifetime, each Muslim is expected to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca, the sacred city of Islam. This holy journey is called the hajj in Arabic.

Islamic sacred texts

In Islam, there are two main sacred texts: the Quran (also spelled "Koran") and the Hadith (or Hadeeth). These books teach and illustrate Islamic beliefs, values, and practices. They are also important historical documents (especially the Quran), which tell the story of the origins of the Islamic faith.

The Quran is the most sacred text, as it is believed to be the literal word of God as revealed to Muhammad. The Hadith is a secondary text that records sayings of Muhammad and his followers. These two texts form the basis for all Islamic theology, practice and Sharia (Islamic law).

The Judeo-Christian Bible is also respected as revelations from the true God, but Muslims believe the Bible to have been corrupted in transmission and translation.

Quran

The word "Quran" means "recitation" in Arabic. This book is the sacred text of Islam and the highest authority in both religious and legal matters. Muslims believe the Quran to be a flawless record of the angel Gabriel's revelations to Muhammad from 610 until his death in 632 AD. It is also believed to be a perfect copy of a heavenly Qur'an that has existed eternally.

Hadith

The word "Hadith" means "narrative" or "report" in Arabic. The book is a record of the words and deeds of the Muhammad, his family, and his companions. Although not regarded as the spoken Word of God like the Quran, Hadith is an important source of doctrine, law, and practice.