

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

Why Learn about Islam?

- *Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today, with more than one and one-half billion adherents. One in every 4.5 persons on earth is a Muslim.*
- *Worldwide, Muslims live in many different cultures and speak many different languages. It is the majority religion in at least thirty-four countries.*
- *Only about 18 per cent of Muslims live in the Middle East. The country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia.*
- *Islam is the second largest religion in the United States. Nationwide, there are approximately seven million Muslims, about fifty thousand of who live in the Washington, D.C. area.*
- *Muslims have a shared history and common spiritual beliefs with both Jews and Christians. All three Faiths share stories of the same prophets including Adam, Noah, Jonah, Moses, Daniel, and others. Islam is the third (and believed final) revelation in the progression of Prophets of God to the people of the earth.*
- *Islam teaches that Jews and Christians are also 'People of the Book.' The Qur'an teaches that God spoke first to the Jews by giving them the Torah. He later sent Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, as a light to the Christians. Finally, He gave Muhammad (PBUH) the final revelations that are contained in the Qur'an.*
- *All three Faiths believe in angels as God's messengers. Gabriel (known as Jibral in the Qur'an) is the angel said to have spoken to Daniel, thus allowing him to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. Gabriel is also said to have spoken to Zachariah concerning the birth of John the Baptist and later to Mary, announcing the Virgin Birth of Jesus. It was also Gabriel who spoke to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the early 7th century C.E. instructing him to write these messages in the Qur'an (means 'recitations').*
- *Throughout their history, Muslim scholars and artists have contributed greatly to the fields of arts, science, literature, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and a host of other human disciplines. They continue to do so today.*

Brief Background and History

- *“Islam” means “submission” and is the name of the religion that began with the teachings of Muhammad (PBUH) around 620 C.E. Followers are known as “Muslims.” At its essence, Islam is a call to “peace.”*
- *The progression of Prophets from God begins with Adam and continues through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, and Jesus, culminating with Muhammad (PBUH), the last and therefore the greatest messenger of God.*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia around 570 C.E. He heard his first “call” at age 39 while meditating in a cave at Mount Hira. A voice identified itself as the angel, Gabriel (known as ‘Jibril’ in the Qur’an).*
- *For twenty-three years, Muhammad was instructed by the voice of Gabriel. These messages are recorded in the Qur’an exactly as they were given to Muhammad, without chronology or narrative.*
- *These messages were given in Arabic. This is significant because the Arabic nation alone would be able to fully understand their meanings.*
- *For the first few years, only a handful of Meccans believed these messages were authentic. Eventually, Muhammad had to flee Mecca. He accepted an invitation to go to a city almost 300 miles to the north (Medina) to become that city’s leader.*
- *The year of this flight was 622 C.E. and is the most important date in Islamic history. The flight is known as the “Hijra,” and it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.*
- *When opposing armies tried to defeat the followers of Muhammad, he initially refused to do battle, believing that the messages of the Qur’an spoke against this. Eventually, Gabriel appeared again, instructing Muhammad to defend his band of followers.*
- *After several battles, Muhammad’s armies successfully defeated the Meccan armies and soon united a new “Arabia.” Before the century’s end, Muhammad’s armies had also conquered regions of Armenia, Persia, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, North Africa, and Spain.*
- *Huston Smith says that “... but for their defeat by Charles Martel in the Battle of Tours in 733 C.E., the entire Western world today might be Muslim!”*

Basic Concepts and Beliefs

- *The word “Islam” comes from the attribute the religion seeks to cultivate: “s-l-m” = “peace.” It is the same word as in “Shalom” and “Jeru-salem.”*
- *“Al-lah” is Arabic for “the One True God.” Muslims believe there is only one God. Like Jews, Muslims reject the Christian notion of a ‘Trinity.’*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) cautioned his followers not to revere him nor to hold him up as anything higher than their equal. He makes no supernatural claims except for being the “messenger of God.”*
- *Muhammad taught that along with Muslims, Christians, and Jews, Zoroastrians were also “People of the Book.” As such, they were not to suffer at the hands of Muslim conquerors but were to be treated with respect and allowed to practice their faiths openly.*
- *Muslims hold to Friday as the day for gathering together in mosques to pray. Most mosques are also used for social gatherings such as weddings, as well as community centers for learning or serving the poor.*
- *Islam is a model for a fully integrated physical, social, political, and religious life. As a religious leader, Muhammad was also a head of state and governed its political, economic, and social structures. Islam, therefore, is meant to permeate every thought, deed, and action.*
- *Islam is a straightforward faith that teaches respect for parents, protection for orphans and widows, and charity to the poor, as well as the virtues of kindness, honesty, generosity and peace.*

Islam’s Five Basic Tenets of Belief

- *There is only “One True God.” Angels are His messengers.*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) was the last and greatest in a line of Prophets.*
- *The Qur’an was and is the last and final book revealed by God.*
- *Life on earth is a test and preparation for the eternal life to come.*
- *A final judgment will take place and the faithful will go to an eternity in Heaven; the faithless will be consigned to an eternity in Hell.*

Islamic Scriptures

- *The Qur'an. This is said to be the world's most recited/memorized book. Muslims call it "a standing miracle," and consider it to be "poetically perfect."*
- *The Hadith. These are recorded traditions believed to be actual practices of Muhammad (PHUH) and his early followers and, therefore, examples to live by.*
- *The "Pentateuch" (Torah) and "Psalms" of the Old Testament. "We made a covenant of old with the children of Israel and you have nothing of guidance until you observe the "Torah" and the "Gospel."*
- *The Christian "Gospels" of the New Testament. Muslims believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Mary is the model for all women because of her chastity, humility, and total submission to God. Many Muslims believe that Christians created the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and believe that he never died; rather that because he was sinless, he was taken directly up into heaven.*

The Sunni – Shi'a Branches of Islam

- *"Sunni Islam" describes the Muslim community who revere the four Rashidun, or "rightly guided" caliphs, who succeeded Muhammad. A succession of caliphs followed to lead the Sunni community, though none were held with the distinction of the Rashidun caliphs. The succession of caliphs ended with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire on March 3, 1924.*
- *"Shi'a Islam" describes the Muslim community who follow the succession of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and closest male relative. They do not embrace the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. Shi'a Muslims believe in a bloodline succession of 12 Imams beginning with Ali, the last of which is known as the Mahdi, or "Hidden Imam." Shi'as believe that the spirit of this Twelfth Imam is still on the earth (in occultation) and will reveal himself on the last day.*
- *The majority of about 85% of Muslims around the world are Sunni Muslims. There are four orthodox schools of thought among Sunni Muslims including the Hanbali, Shafi, Hanifi, and Maliki. These distinctions may be less important today than in their earlier histories.*
- *Shi'a Muslims are about 14% of the Islamic community, though they are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and a few other regions. Some "sacred sites" of Shi'a Muslims are burial sites of these Imams in Mashed and Qom in Iran and Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra in Iraq.*

- *All Muslims share the Basic Tenets of Belief and follow the Five Pillars of Islam.*

The Five Pillars of Faith

The Shahadah *(statement of faith)*

“There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

- *The first part speaks of monotheism, as distinct from the trinity.*
- *The second part speaks of the human character of Muhammad; he is fully human, not “God.”*

The Salat *(be constant in prayer)*

- *Every man and woman is obliged to offer five prayers every day, facing the Holy City of Mecca*
- *These prayers assure that there is a “constant prayer” offering to God, because somewhere in the world, there are always people facing Mecca to pray.*

The Sawm *(fasting during the holy month of Ramadan)*

- *This occurs during the ninth lunar month of the Muslim calendar; it is the month Muhammad (PBUH) was commissioned as a Prophet, and is also the month during which he fled from Mecca to Medina.*
- *Participants must abstain from eating and drinking (even water) during daylight hours. (This is sometimes determined to be “when one can distinguish a white thread from a black one in natural light”).*
- *Fasting teaches self-discipline; makes one think clearly; underscores man’s dependency upon God; reminds man of his essential frailty; and sensitizes man to the human suffering of hunger in the world, thus making him or her more compassionate.*

The Zakat *(practice of charity)*

- *The Zakat is a social system of the wealthier supporting the poorer.*
- *The sharing of wealth purifies the heart from greed and reconciles the heart of the recipient.*

The Hajj *(holy pilgrimage to Mecca)*

- *A pilgrimage to Mecca is required of every able-bodied Muslim at least once in a lifetime. After this pilgrimage, one becomes known as “Hajji.”*

- *At Mecca everyone from prince to pauper dons a simple sheet-like garment as they stand together as equals before God in these multi-day ritual traditions.*

Scriptures from the Holy Qur'an

*“All praise be to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, Most beneficent, ever-merciful,
King of the Day of Judgement.*

You alone do we worship, and to You alone turn for help.

Guide us, O Lord, to the path that is straight,

The path of those You have blessed,

Not of those who have earned Your anger, nor those who have gone astray.”

(Qur'an 1:1)

“We sent down the Torah which contains guidance and light, in accordance with which the prophets who were obedient to God gave instructions to the Jews, as did the rabbis and priests, for they were the custodians and witnesses of God's writ. ... Later, We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah which had been sent down before him, and gave him the Gospel containing guidance and light ... And to you, We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations, and preserving them ...”

(Qur'an 5:44-48)

*“We were indeed gracious to Moses and Aaron, and saved them and their people from great distress, and helped them so they were victorious.” **(Qur'an 37:14-15)***

*“(And) the angels said: ‘Oh, Mary, God gives you news of a thing from Him, for rejoicing ... (news of a child) whose name will be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the next, and one among the honored ...” **(Qur'an 3:45)***

*“So your Lord has decreed: Do not worship anyone but Him, and be good to your parents. If one or both of them grow old in your presence, do not say ‘fie’ to them, nor reprove them, but say gentle words to them. And look after them with kindness and love, and say: ‘Oh Lord, have mercy on them, as they nourished me when I was small.” **(Qur'an 17:23-24)***

*“Muhammad is only a messenger; and many a messenger has gone before him.” **(Qur'an 3:144)***

*“We believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what had been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Christ, and to all other prophets by the Lord. We make no distinction among them, and we submit to Him.” **(Qur'an 2:136)***

“We gave to (Abraham) Isaac and Jacob and guided them, as We had guided Noah before them, and of his descendants, David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. Thus we reward those who are upright and do good., Zachariah and John We guided, and guided Jesus and Elias who were among the upright, and We gave

guidance to Ishmael, Elisha and Jonah and Lot and We favored them over other peoples of the World.” (**Qur’an 6:84-86**)

More Scriptures and Prayers

“O mankind! We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Truly, the most honored of you in God’s sight is the greatest of you in piety. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.”

Qur’an 49:13

“Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to parents. you, do not say ‘uff’ to them or chide them, but speak to them in terms of honor and kindness. Treat them with humility, and say, ‘My Lord! Have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little.”

Qur’an 17:23-4

“When some trouble touches man, he cries unto his Lord, turning to Him in repentance; but when he bestows a favor upon him as from himself (man) doth forget what he cried and prayed for before.”

Qur’an 39:8

“Oh, ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may learn self-restraint.”

Qur’an 2:183

*“God is most great!
God is most great!
I testify that there is no God but God.
Arise and pray;
God is most great!
God is most great!
There is no God but God!”*

Call to prayer

“None of you is a believer until he wishes for others that which he wishes for for himself.”

Sunnah

“Oh followers of earlier revelation: Come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common, that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him and that we shall not take human beings for our lord beside God.”

Qur’an 3:64

“From the earth did We create you, and to it shall we return you. And from it shall We bring you out once again.”

Qur’an 20:55

Glossary of Terms

- Ashura** *The 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram and the climax of the Shi'a mourning ceremonies.*
- Ayatollah** *"Interpreter" for Allah; highest ranking clergy in Shi'a Islam.*
- Caliph** *The successor to Muhammad and temporal leader of the Sunni Muslim community. After 1400 years the Caliphate was eliminated in 1924.*
- Fatwah** *A formal legal opinion or decision of a respected religious scholar on a matter of Islamic law.*
- Hadith** *Documented traditions of the Prophet Muhammad which were not in the Qur'an but were recorded for posterity by his close companions.*
- Hijrah** *The migration of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the first Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. This marks the beginning year of the Muslim calendar (currently 1433).*
- Imam** *The leader of a Muslim community. For Shi'ites, the first 12 legitimate leaders after Muhammad's death; for Sunnis, the leader of a mosque.*
- Jihad** *A struggle or striving, primarily the internal effort of one's personal struggle between good and evil (known as the "greater jihad"). Also refers to battle in the defense of Islam (known as the "lesser jihad.").*
- Kaa'ba** *The ancient stone and cube-shaped shrine in the holy city of Mecca which Muhammad dedicated to Allah. This is the focal point for Muslim prayers and place of gathering for performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).*
- Madrasah** *Islamic religious school.*
- Mahdi** *For **Shi'ites**, the "Hidden Imam" who is in occultation until the Last Days, at which time he will return to usher in a time of justice on the earth.*
- Qiblah** *The direction of prayer toward Mecca.*
- Rashidun** *The first four "Rightly Guided" Caliphs for Sunni muslims: Abu Bakr; Umar; Uthman; and Ali.*
- Shariah** *The body of Islamic law derived from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Hadith.*
- Sunnah** *The traditions of the Prophet as composed in the Hadith.*

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