

A Brief Introduction to Islam

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Islam

23.2% of the world's population (1.6 billion) adheres to Islam. It is the second-largest religion (after Christianity) and is arguably the fastest-growing religion in the world.

Islam is a monotheistic religion. Its main beliefs are contained in the *Qur'an* (a book considered by its adherents to be the verbatim word of God), as well as in the teachings and example (called *Sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad -*Peace be upon Him*- (PBUH), who is considered by Muslims to be the last prophet of God. Muhammad (PBUH) lived from about the year 570 until 8 June 632 CE in the Arabian Peninsula.

Islam is the verbal noun of the Arabic root-word, s-l-m, which is used in referring to concepts like wholeness, safeness and peace. In terms of religion Islam means “*voluntary and complete submission to God*”.

Muslim

Muslim is the word for one who practises Islam. Believers demonstrate submission to *Allah* (God) by serving God, following God's commands, and by rejecting polytheism. Muslims believe that *Allah* (God) is One and does not resemble nor can be compared to any person or thing. The purpose of human existence is to worship God.

Muslims also believe that Islam is the complete and universal version of the faith that was revealed many times before throughout history, around the world; including through Adam, Noah (*Nuh*), Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Moses (*Musa*), David (*Dawud*) and Jesus (*Isa*); all of whom are considered prophets in Islam. Muslims consider the Arabic Qur'an to be both the unaltered and the final revelation of God to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Holy Qur'an, together with the *Hadith* (accounts of the teachings and examples of the Prophet Muhammad –PBUH-) provide a complete system of religious concepts, beliefs and practices. These include the *Six Articles of Faith* and the *Five Pillars of Islam*, which are basic concepts and obligatory acts of devotion and worship.

Islamic Law (*Shariah*) provides guidance on virtually every aspect of life and society from banking and welfare, to family life and the environment.

Six Articles of Faith

1. Oneness of God

Islam's most fundamental concept is strict monotheism, called ‘*tawhīd*’. While *Allāh* is the term (with no plural or gender) used by Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews alike, to refer to God, Muslims reject the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and divinity of Jesus, comparing it to polytheism. In Islam, God (*Allah*), the Creator of the universe and all that is, is beyond all comprehension and Muslims are not supposed to visualize or depict God in any way. *Allah* is described and referred to by certain names or attributes, the most

common being ‘*Al-Rahmān*’, meaning "The Compassionate" and ‘*Al-Rahīm*’, meaning "The Merciful".

2. Angels

Belief in angels is fundamental to the faith of Islam. According to the *Qur'an*, angels do not possess free will, and therefore worship and obey God in total obedience. Angels’ duties include communicating revelations from God, glorifying God, recording every person's actions, and taking a person's soul at the time of death.

3. Revelations

Muslims believe that God dictated His revelations to the various prophets. Islam teaches that parts of the previously revealed scriptures, the *Tawrat* (Torah), the *Zabur* (Psalms of David) and the *Injil* (Gospels), had become distorted, either in interpretation and/or in content. The *Qur'an* is viewed by Muslims as the final revelation and literal word of God. For Muslims, all earlier revelations through Adam, Moses (*Musa*), David (*Dawud*), Jesus (*Isa*) and others are clearly and unambiguously restated in the *Qur'an*, it, for them, being the fulfillment of all Divine revelation. Muslims believe that the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad (PBUH) by God through the archangel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) on many occasions between 610 CE until his death on June 8, 632 CE.

Muslims usually regard only the original scripture, revealed in Arabic, as being the true *Qur'an*. Translations of the *Qur'an* into English or any other languages are regarded as being deficient and are referred to as being mere commentaries on the *Qur'an*.

4. Prophets

Muslims identify the prophets of Islam as those humans chosen by God to be God’s messengers. They believe that prophets are human and not divine, though some are able to perform miracles to prove their claim. Islam teaches that all of God's messengers preached the message of Islam; i.e. submission to the will of God. The *Qur'an* mentions Adam, Noah (*Nuh*), Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Moses (*Musa*) and Jesus (*Isa*) among others, as being prophets of Islam.

Muslims believe that God finally sent Muhammad (PBUH) as the last prophet (*Seal of the Prophets*) to convey the final summation of all divine revelations to the whole of humanity. This final revelation is believed to be contained in the *Qur'an* as well as being exemplified in the life, words, actions and personal characteristics of Muhammad (PBUH) called the *Sunnah* ("the trodden path"). The collections of sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are known as the *Hadith*.

5. Resurrection and judgment

Muslims believe in the "*Day of Resurrection*" and the *Qur'an* emphasizes the resurrection of the body, which is a distinct break with the pre-Islamic Arabian understanding of death.

Muslims believe that on '*The Day of Resurrection*' all humankind will be judged according to their good and bad deeds. The *Qur'an* describes this as: "*whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it; and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it*" (Qur'an 99:7-8). The *Qur'an* mentions certain sins that are punishable by hell, such as disbelief in God and

dishonesty. However, the *Qur'an* also teaches that God will forgive the sins of those who sincerely repent and that one's good deeds, such as charity, prayer and compassion will be rewarded with entry to heaven.

6. Preordainment

Muslims believe that God has full knowledge and control over all that occurs. Everything in the world that occurs, good or bad, has been preordained and nothing can happen unless permitted by God. According to Muslim theologians, although events are pre-ordained, humans possess free will in that each of us has the faculty to choose between right and wrong, and so each of us is responsible for her/his own actions.

Five Pillars of Islam

1. Testimony

A Muslim is one who sincerely believes and is prepared to declare publically, under oath that: "*I testify that there are no gods other than Allah alone and I testify that Muhammad is his Messenger*" ("ašhadu 'al-lā ilāha illā-llāhu wa 'ašhadu 'anna muhammadan rasūlu-llāh"). This testimony, known as the *Shahadah*, is a foundation for all other beliefs and practices in Islam. Muslims repeat this testimony every time they pray. Conversion to Islam requires reciting the *Shahadah* in the presence of the Muslim community.

2. Prayer

Practising Muslims are obliged to pray five times a day. These prayers are called *Ṣalāh* or *Ṣalāt*. Prayer is intended to focus the mind on God, and is seen as a personal communication with *Allah* that expresses gratitude and worship through complete submission. *Salat* consists of various body movements and gestures, which include standing, bowing and prostrating in direction of the *Kaaba* (the black, stone centre-piece in Mecca), while reciting Arabic verses from the *Qur'an*. Congregational prayers in the mosque are led by an *Imam*.

The five *salat* prayer times are, *Fajr* (pre-dawn), *Dhuhr* (midday), *Asr* (afternoon), *Maghrib* (sunset) and *Isha'a* (night). On Fridays, during the *Dhuhr* prayer, the *imam* (or other invited theological leader) preaches a sermon to the local congregation and worshippers gather at the mosque in large numbers.

3. Alms-giving

The Islamic term: '*Zakāt*' means giving a fixed portion of one's wealth to help the poor and needy. Giving *Zakat* is a religious obligation for those who can afford to do so. The amount of *Zakat* to be paid on capital assets (e.g. money) is 2.5% per annum for those Muslims who can afford it. The *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* also urge Muslims to give much more than this as an act of voluntary alms-giving to the poor (which is called *Sadaqah*).

4. Fasting

During the Holy Month of *Ramadhan* (or *Ramazan*) fasting from all food and drink must be performed from sunrise till sunset. The *Ramadhan* fast, called *Sawm*, encourages a feeling of nearness to God, gratitude for blessings received, dependence on *Allah*, atonement for sins,

and helps Muslims to focus their minds on the hungry and needy. *Sawm* is not obligatory for those whom it would constitute an undue burden. For many Muslims, Ramadhan is a time to make a special effort to fulfill religious obligations that tend to get neglected at other times of the year.

5. Pilgrimage

Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it is obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. This pilgrimage, called the '*Hajj*', has to be done during the Month of *Dhu al-Hijjah* in the city of Mecca.

Rituals of the *Hajj* include spending time in the desert of Arafat praying and worshipping God, as Abraham (*Ibrahim*) once did, symbolically stoning the devil while resolving to live a good life and worshipping around the *Kaaba* (black, stone center-piece in Mecca- which Muslims believe was built as a place of worship by Abraham).

Islamic Law

Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) is comprised of a system of duties and prohibitions to which all Muslims are bound to adhere if they are serious about practising their religion. It covers all aspects of life, from matters of state governance and foreign relations to issues of religious practice and daily living. The Qur'an is considered the main source of Islamic principles and values. Muslim jurists consult the hadith (the written accounts of Prophet Muhammad's life and sayings) both to supplement the Qur'an and to assist with its interpretation. Since *Shariah* law does not make distinctions between matters of religion and matters of state Islamic scholars function both as jurists and as theologians.

Jihad

'*Jihad*' literally means: "*to strive or struggle in the way of God*". Today the term '*Jihad*' is misused by extremist Islamists to justify their terrorist activities against civilians. Islamic theology traditionally talks about two types of *Jihad*. 'Greater Jihad' (*al-jihad al-akbar*) refers to the personal struggle to attain religious and moral perfection that involves fighting against the devil and those aspects of the self (such as sinful desires) that hinder one from following in the way of Allah. 'Lesser Jihad' (*al-jihad al-asghar*) refers to military exertion that is taken, by Muslims in self defence against combatants, who are oppressing Muslims, preventing them from freely practising their religion and insulting Islam. Most Islamic scholars agree that the conditions necessary for declaring 'Lesser Jihad' rarely, if ever, occur today.

Muslim Denominations

Sunni (89% of Muslims worldwide)

Sunni Islam makes up 89% of all Muslims. Also called *Ahl as-Sunnah*, Sunni Muslims regard themselves as being faithful to the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as found in the *Hadith*. Sunnis believe that the first four *caliphs* (leaders of the Islamic community) were the rightful successors to Muhammad; since God did not specify any particular leaders to

succeed him and those leaders were elected. They believe that anyone who is righteous and just could be a *caliph* but they have to act according to the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*.

The *Salafi* (also pejoratively called *Wahhabi*) is an ultra-orthodox Sunni Islamic movement which tries to model itself on the first generation of Muslims. It is found mostly in Saudi Arabia, but has a lot of influence worldwide.

For almost 1,000 years and until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (at the end of World War I) the Ottoman Emperor was considered to be the custodian of the holy sites of Mecca and the *Caliph* of Sunni Islam. During this time a form of Islam tolerant of Christianity and other religions was generally promoted. Since the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia took over the role of custodian of the holy sites of Mecca and (for all practical purposes) the leadership of Sunni Islam conservative *Salafi* Islam has gained much worldwide influence among Sunni Muslims.

Shia (9% of Muslims worldwide)

The largest population of Shias resides in Iran. Shia Islam has several branches, the largest of which is the *Twelvers*, followed by *Zaydis* and *Ismailis*. While the Sunnis believe that a *Caliph* should be elected by the community, Shias believe that Muhammad appointed his son-in-law, *Ali ibn Abi Talib*, as his successor and only certain descendants of Ali can be Imams. As a result, they believe that *Ali ibn Abi Talib* was the first *Imam* (leader), rejecting the legitimacy of the Sunni Muslim caliphs (*Abu Bakr*, *Uthman ibn al-Affan* and *Umar ibn al-Khattab*).

Other smaller, non-mainstream sects that have their roots in Shia Islam include the *Bohra*, the *Druze*, the *Alawites* (to which President Assad of Syria belongs) and the *Alevi*.

The *Ahmadiyya* constitute a distinct branch of Islam with significant numbers in Pakistan, where they often face persecution.

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