

A Brief Introduction to Islam

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Islam is a religion of over 1.3 billion people. It is the second largest religion in the world, and one of the fastest growing. Muslims can be found all over the world, but are predominately located in the regions of the Middle East, North Africa, and Indonesia.

The Arabic word Islam means “submission,” and those who practice it are called Muslims (“one who submits”). The focus of Islam is submission and obedience to the will of **Allah** (God) as revealed by his prophets, through the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, and culminating in the **Qur'an**, the message of the final prophet **Muhammad** (Sura 2:136; 3:3, 84; 4:136, 163).

Muslims believe that all men and women are accountable to Allah, and that each will be judged according to how we have lived our lives. Those who obey and worship Allah will be rewarded in Paradise, and those who refuse will be punished in Hell (Sura 3:133; 4:93; 5:9; 47:2).

The Five Pillars

The Muslim way of life is centered on the following five items, known as the five pillars, which are said to be transforming factors in conforming to the will of Allah.

- 1) **Shahadah** (Testimony). “There is no god except Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” This is the foundational belief of Islam (Sura 4:136; 7:158; 49:15; 57:7; 64:8).
- 2) **Salah** (Compulsory Prayer). Prayers are offered five times per day (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, night), facing the direction of Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Sura 2:149; 4:103; 17:78; 24:58).
- 3) **Zakah** (Charity). An individual annual payment (minimum 2.5%) must be spent on helping those in need (Sura 9:60).
- 4) **Sawm** (Fasting). An annual period of fasting during the month of Ramadan (9th month, August, September, October), where Muslims must refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex, from dawn to sunset (Sura 2:180-185).
- 5) **Hajj** (Pilgrimage). An annual event that is obligatory for Muslim's to participate in at least once in their lifetime, if at all possible. This pilgrimage is a trip to the Ka'bah in Mecca (the focal point of prayer and holiest place in Islam) during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah (12th month). It involves a number of rituals, including circling the Ka'bah seven times, kissing the Black Stone, throwing stones, running between hills, and making animal sacrifices, among other things. Millions of Muslims participate in this event (Sura 2:196-197).

Holy Places

- 1) The **Ka'bah** in Mecca. This structure is the holiest shrine in Islam (Sura 5:97), and is allegedly the first house of worship built by Abraham and his son Ishmael (2:125; cf. Sura 3:65-67). It measures approximately 40 feet on each side, and contains the Black Stone, a rock (perhaps a meteorite) recovered by Abraham, that originally fell from heaven and told Adam and Eve where to build the first altar. Muslims are to kiss the stone as they circle the Ka'bah seven times as part of the Hajj. It is surrounded by the **Sacred Mosque**, the largest in the world.

- 2) **The Mosque of the Prophet** in Medina (Green Dome). This mosque is on the site of the first mosque built by Muhammad in 622 AD, about 250 miles north of Mecca. It houses the **tomb of Muhammad**.
- 3) **The Dome of the Rock** in Jerusalem. This mosque is located where Muhammad allegedly ascended to heaven (al-mir'raj) and received the command to pray five times per day. This mosque is located in the same place as was the Jewish Temple, and is the oldest surviving Islamic building.

The Qur'an

As stated above, according to Muslims, the Qur'an is the final message from Allah revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel (Sura 2:97). Muhammad descended from Ishmael, the son of Abraham, and was commissioned to spread the same message as Abraham concerning "The Oneness of God" (Tawhid) (Sura 2:135; 3:95). The Qur'an contains 114 chapters called *suras*, which are traditionally ordered by length, as opposed to chronologically, of which the first 86 were revealed during his time in Mecca, and the following 28 at Medina. It was originally written in Arabic, thought to be the language of Allah himself, which most Muslims contend is the only true form of the book (Sura 46:12). This is why many translations are called interpretations, since it is so difficult to capture the real meaning of the "miraculously" preserved Arabic.

It is contended that, of all the revelations from Allah (i.e., Torah, Psalms, Gospel, see above), only the Qur'an has remained uncorrupted throughout history.

The Hadith

The Hadith are collections of oral traditions concerning the sayings and actions (sunna) of Muhammad. This information helps the Muslim correctly interpret the Qur'an, and provides an example to follow (Sura 33:21).

Note 1: In Islamic literature, when the name of a prophet is mentioned, it is always suffixed with the blessing "Peace Be Upon Him." This is most notable when making mention of Muhammad. Because it is stated with each mention of his name, it is often abbreviated as "p" or "pbuh."

Note 2: Some translations of the Qur'an have different numbering systems for the verses. The verses referenced here are from Pickthall's translation, as provided at <http://www.islamicity.com/QuranSearch/>

Vocabulary

Allah	God (literally "The God")
caliph	the successors to Muhammad 1) Abu Bakr (632-634), 2) Umar (634-644), 3) Uthman (644-656), 4) Ali (656-661)
Hadith	the "traditions" that report the words and actions of Muhammad (Sunna), considered to be an example for Muslims, and an aid in interpreting the Qur'an.
Hijra	Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD, marking beginning of Islamic calendar (lunar cycle). Year designation is AH, Anno Hijra (year of the Hijra) or After the Hijra. Also called Hegira.
Iblis	Satan
Imam	prayer leader
Islam	"submission" to Allah

Ka'bah	“cube” referring to the holiest shrine of Islam in Mecca. Prior to Islam, this was the focus of Arab pagan worship.
jihad	“to struggle” for God
jinn	spirits (good or evil)
Mecca	city in Saudi Arabia, birthplace of Muhammad
Medina	city in Saudi Arabia, formerly called Yathrib, where Muhammad was forced to flee when opposed by Meccans
mihrab	niche in a mosque that marks the direction (qiblah) of Mecca
mosque	“place of prostration” (masjid in Arabic) where Muslims worship
muezzin	person who calls Muslims to prayer
Muhammad	the “final prophet” and founder of Islam (570 – 632 AD)
Muslim	“one who submits” to Allah
Qur'an	“recitation”, the word of Allah revealed to Muhammad
Quraysh	Arabian tribe of Muhammad's family
Ramadan	ninth month of Islamic calendar, when the Qur'an began to be revealed to Muhammad. This is a month of fasting
shahadah	confession “There is no god except Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”
shari'a	divine law based on Qur'an and Sunna (as written in the Hadith)
Shi'ite	“faction” or “partisan” of Ali, a sect that views the true rulers of Islam descend from Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. Also called Shi'a.
sunna	example of Muhammad
Sunni	“people of the example”, a majority sect that disagrees with Shi'ites concerning Muhammad's successors.
sura	chapter of the Qur'an (114 total)
umma	the Islamic community (all the Muslims in the world)

References

- Arberry, A.J. (1955), *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster), Touchstone Edition, 1996.
- Denny, Frederick M. (1987), *Islam and The Muslim Community* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press).
- Honeycutt, Jack, *Islam: True or False?* (Michigan Bible Lectureship).
- Miller, Dave (2005), *The Quran Unveiled: Islam and New Testament Christianity in Conflict* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press).

Web Sites

- Answering Islam, <http://www.answering-islam.org/>
- Islam: Truth or Myth?, <http://www.bible.ca/islam/>
- Islamic Organization of North America, <http://www.ionaonline.org/>
- Qur'an Explorer (Online Qur'an), <http://www.quranexplorer.com/>
- Qur'an Search (Online Qur'an), <http://www.islamicity.com/QuranSearch/>
- Translations of the Qur'an (Online Qur'an),
<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/>
- Why Islam?, <http://www.whyislam.org/>