

Things to Know About Islam

What We Call God

Allah is the Arabic word for God. It is used by Arab Christians as well as Muslims. For Muslims, God was not created and there is no other being like him. They believe that one of God's most important qualities is his "Oneness." According to Muslims if God is One, then there cannot be different or rival Gods, such as a God for the Jews, a God for the Christians and a God for the Polytheists. God is believed to have 99 beautiful names. These are descriptive adjectives given throughout the Quran, including All Powerful Creator of the Cosmos, The Compassionate, The Merciful, The Guardian, The Loving, The Patient and The Ever Forgiving. Muslims traditionally repeat these descriptive names with the help of a rosary known as a **misbah**. This rosary has 100 beads. Ninety-nine represent God's qualities while one larger bead symbolizes God.

Holy Book

The Muslim holy book is called the **Quran**. It is believed to be the word of God, revealed to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel over a period of 22 years. Initially written on any available materials, it was compiled in its final form after the death of Muhammad in 632 AD. It is divided into 114 chapters (**suras**) consisting of verses (**ayat**). All chapters except for chapter nine start with "in the name of God the merciful and the compassionate." Muslims learn the Quran in its original language, Arabic, because its recitation as the word of God is a ritual that allows Muslims to experience God symbolically, as a community of faithful. That is comparable to the symbolic Christian experience of God found in taking of the Eucharist, which defines the Christian community. Islam prohibits pictorial depictions of God as way to discourage idol worship. As a result, the art of writing (calligraphy) is used to decorate the Quran and mosques. Muslims look to the Quran along with the **Hadith** (a collection of teachings thought to derive from the prophet and his companions) for guidance in many aspects of life. Muslim law, known as **Shari'a**, is based upon the Quran and the Hadith.

Worship and Prayer

Muslims gather at their mosque on Fridays at noon for communal prayer. The Imam leads the prayer and addresses the congregation from a stepped platform called **minbar**. He never preaches from the top step, which is symbolically reserved for the prophet Muhammad. Mosques are built with a special tower called a minaret, where a person known as the **muezzin** calls the people to prayer five times a day. When Muslims pray they face toward Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad. The direction is marked by an alcove known as the **mihrab**, which serves as a focal point for the prayer hall.

The prayer hall has no seats because prayer involves standing, kneeling and prostrating. All prayers start with the same call for peace for Muhammad, his followers and the descendants of Abraham. In some mosques there are separate balconies for women. Before praying, Muslims clean themselves by washing their face, mouth, nostrils, hands, lower arms and feet. For hygienic reasons worshipers are required to

remove their shoes before entering a mosque, and many Muslims use a prayer mat, some with attached compasses to indicate the direction of Mecca.

Mosques are usually domed structures with pillars and arches decorated with calligraphy and abstract geometric designs. The interiors are kept simple so as not to distract worshippers. The Blue Mosque in Istanbul and the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain are famous for their architecture. However, the most important mosque for Muslims is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It was built in 691 A.D. to commemorate Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven. Muslims believe humanity will assemble at the Dome of the Rock on the Day of Judgment.

Rituals

The most important rituals in Islam are collectively known as the five pillars of Islam.

Shahada is the first and most important ritual. It is a simple declaration, "There is no god, but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." These words are a profession of faith and provide the basis for conversion. A person who sincerely recites the Shahada is considered a Muslim no other ritual is needed.

Salat is prayer performed five times a day at specific times facing toward Mecca. The call by the muezzin from the minaret lets people know it is time for prayer. All prayers start with ritual salutations and calls for peace for Muhammad, his followers and the descendants of Abraham. Friday is the day that Muslims pray communally in a mosque. As a result, weekends in Muslim countries are either Thursday and Friday or Friday and Saturday.

Zaka is the giving of money to help the less fortunate. Muslims who are financially able are expected to give 2.5% of their net worth for social welfare.

Sawm is the practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan. Muslims will not eat or drink from dawn until dusk during this holy time. The idea behind such a fast is to teach people to empathize with those less fortunate who are often hungry and thirsty. Only healthy and mature Muslims are required to fast. Although Ramadan is a time for reflection and discipline, it has also become a time of special gatherings of family and friends with delicious meals followed by traditional desserts. Muslims may decorate their homes with the crescent moon shape and star which have come to symbolize Islam. Socializing often extends late into the night ending with a late or early predawn meal called **suhur**.

Haj is the pilgrimage to Mecca required at least once in the lifetime of a Muslim. Muslims perform specific rituals and prayers around the **Ka'aba**, a black cubic structure believed to be God's first house on earth rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael and where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Ishmael. Around two million Muslims perform the annual pilgrimage. Pilgrims wear seamless white clothes so that no stitch or fabric can distinguish one worshiper from the other. This is a sign of the equality of all under God.

Holidays

Muslim holidays fall according to the Islamic calendar which has 12 months lasting from one new moon to the next. The Islamic year begins on the day of **Hijra**, which recalls Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in the year 622 AD.

Ashura is celebrated on the tenth day of the first Muslim month. For many Muslims this day commemorates wonderful events like the coming to rest of Noah's ark, the birth of the prophet Abraham and the building of the **Kaaba**. For Shia Muslims, however, it is a day of special sorrow commemorating the martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson Hussain in the battle of Kerbala in Islam's first century. It is commemorated in Shi'a communities with the reenactment of these events and is a time for mourning.

Milad al Nabi is the prophet's birthday. It occurs on the 12th day of the third Islamic month. It is celebrated in some Muslim countries with great festivities.

Laylat Al Miraj is celebrated on the 27th day of the seventh month and it commemorates the journey of the prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension to the seven heavens.

Laylat al Baraa falls on the 15th day of the eighth month. It is a night when forgiveness is granted to those who repent. It is also a time when people forgive and settle disputes. Many Muslims spend the night in prayer.

Ramadan is the ninth and holiest month of the Islamic calendar. Mature and healthy Muslims fast from dawn to dusk so that they can empathize with the struggles of the poor who often go hungry and thirsty. Although Ramadan is a month of reflection and self-discipline in which people earn the blessing of God and his forgiveness, it is also a time when family and friends gather for special meals and late nights of socializing.

Laylat Al Qadr commemorates the first revelation to the prophet and is usually on the 27th day of the 9th month, known as the month of Ramadan. It is said to be equal to one thousand months and on this night the prayers of the sincere Muslim are said to be answered. Most Muslims go for special night prayers at their Mosques.

Eid al Iftar is the feast that celebrates the end of the month of Ramadan. Elaborate dishes are prepared as family and friends gather around the table to celebrate. The traditional greeting is "Eid Mubarak" which translates to Blessed Eid. Children are dressed in their best clothes often bought for the occasion and gift giving and merrymaking are widespread.

Haj is the required pilgrimage to Mecca and falls in the 12th Islamic month. The 9th day of the Haj is known as the day of Arafat when fasting pilgrims stand before God on Mount Arafat and Muslims around the world gather at local mosques for prayer in spiritual solidarity with the pilgrims.

Eid al Adha commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God and God's mercy in substituting a lamb for Ishmael. This feast coincides with the end of Haj. Traditionally, Muslims will sacrifice a lamb and distribute its meat to the poor. They then celebrate with their own family and friends.

Islam Around The World

With 1.6 billion followers, Islam is the world's second largest religion. About one in five people in the world is Muslim. The largest population of Muslims is found in Asia, with Indonesia being the most populous Muslim country. Africa constitutes approximately 27% of world Muslims, and Arab lands represent 18%. Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe and North America, and there are nearly six million Muslims in the United States.

Approximately 90% of Muslims practice **Sunni Islam**. Another variety, **Shi'a Islam**, is dominant in Iran and is popular in southern Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. The division between Sunni and Shi'a occurred during a dispute over who would succeed Muhammad after his death. Shia'as wanted Muhammad's nearest relative while Sunnis wanted to choose the best qualified man. Little else separates them except that the Shi'as exalt their **imams**, a succession of leaders whom they regard as a line of inspired teachers. **Sufism** is a mystical branch of Islam which promotes the use of music, chanting, dancing and breathing exercises to reach a mystical state.