

#2 ISLAM

Islam is the religion founded by Muhammad, the prophet, in Arabia in the seventh century A.D. The meaning of the Arabic word "Islam" is "surrender" or "submission," which implies that a believer fully accepts the will of Allah, or God, and surrenders to that will. Islam as a religion and a form of government is prevalent in the Middle East, northern Africa, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Like the other major world religions, Christianity and Judaism, Islam has many variations and sects, but the main divisions are Sunnism and Shiism.

Muhammad was born in Mecca (in what is now Saudi Arabia), a commercial center and major crossroads for trade in the sixth and seventh centuries. All that is known about the prophet's early life is that he was poor and an orphan. In 610, when he was in his forties, he began to have visions, or revelations from God that put him into a trance-like state. One of the things that God told him was that he was a messenger equal to prophets like Abraham, Noah, and Jesus.

Not everyone was quick to believe Muhammad's message, and he was persecuted in Mecca so severely that he and his followers fled to Medina in 622. Medina was a lush oasis in the desert, 450 kilometers north of Mecca, where a group of people already followed Muhammad's teachings and believed in his special powers. At a time when the clans around Medina were looking for a strong leader to unite them, relocating allowed Muhammad to strengthen his power.

Muhammad died in 632 without an heir. In the century following his death, Islamic adherents split into two main groups, Sunnis and Shiites. The Shiites, a small minority representing about 10% of Muslims today, believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the true spiritual and political heir to Muhammad. The Sunni majority follows the teachings of Muhammad as revealed to him by the angel Gabriel and recorded in the Koran.

There are five pillars of Islamic belief. First, the profession of faith, "There is no god but God; Muhammad is the prophet of God," must be recited at least once in a person's lifetime. Second, Muslims must pray five times daily. Third, Muslims must pay the *zakat*, an obligatory tax on possessions and cash. Fourth, Muslims must fast during Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar. Fifth, Muslims should make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Some Muslims add a sixth tenet, jihad, meaning struggle or holy war, with the purpose being to assure a united community under the same religious and political ideals. The concept of jihad can be as simple as the struggle to balance work in an office environment with the daily prayers, or as complex as whether to impose belief practices on non-Muslims in a given region. A few Muslims believe that jihad allows them to oppress or force others into Islamic belief, but that meaning of jihad is only held and practiced by a small minority in the 21st century.

The pillars of belief that Muslims throughout the world share begin with the concept that Allah is the one and only God, to whom all beings must surrender. God is powerful, as shown in his ability to create the world, but he is also just and merciful. The will of Allah was revealed to his messenger, Muhammad, and is recorded in the Koran. Pride is a cardinal sin because a proud spirit is an attempt to be like God, a feat no human can achieve. Those core beliefs bind most Muslims together with a strong sense of community even though they live on several continents and all do not speak Arabic.

The second pillar of belief, the daily ritual prayers, can be performed in any sanitary location, as the literal meaning of the Arabic word *masjid* (translated into English as "mosque") is simply "a place of prostration." Bathhouses and camel pens are the only exempt spaces. The daily prayer, or *salat*, is preceded by ablutions, or ritual cleansings, and is a sequence of standing, bending, kneeling, and reciting phrases in Arabic. Thanks and praise to Allah are included in every prayer, and for Muslims who are not fluent in Arabic, they are at least able to repeat, "God is great." Friday worship, around noon on Friday, is a full service including a sermon or scriptural interpretation. Sometimes a moral or political issue is presented

Although it is preferable to go to a designated place of worship for the five prayers, adaptations to fit modern lifestyles have been made in the worship process. A devout Muslim can pause at his or her desk, face the direction of Mecca, and bow in a simple, short prayer. In far northern countries where the sun almost never shines in winter and shines for nearly 24 hours in summer, Muslims adopt the time reference of the Middle Eastern region in order to have prayers and fasting at the proper times.

The third pillar, the custom of *zakat*, may be described as a form of taxation or tithing. *Zakat* requires Muslims to pay a percentage of their income to help the poor. In some countries, this money is collected by the government as a tax, and in other countries, it is voluntary and similar to the Christian tradition of tithing and offerings. The sincere concern for community and social service that is deeply embedded in Islamic tradition is more important than prayers. In fact, a believer is deemed a

hypocrite if he or she follows the ritual of prayer but does not reach out to the needy in the community. A Muslim can even be punished for neglecting his or her civic duties.

As the fourth pillar of belief, the fast of Ramadan is also central to Islamic faith. During that month, believers are not allowed to eat, drink, or smoke during daylight. The historical context of this fast is based on the belief that Allah revealed the words of the Koran to Muhammad during this month. Most devout Muslim men end each day of Ramadan at the mosque reciting words of the Koran. The last 10 days of Ramadan are especially important; believers are not allowed to have sexual encounters and spend most of the daylight hours studying the Koran instead of working. Although children who have not reached puberty, pregnant women, the sick, and travelers are exempt from fasting (travelers, however, are encouraged to make up the days of fasting at a later time), the strict observance of those exemptions varies from country to country. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, no one eats or drinks in public during Ramadan, not even children. Restaurants are closed during the day and open at night in a festive mood.

The season of Ramadan ends with festivities called *Id al-Fitr*. The celebration begins when the waxing crescent moon becomes visible and reveals the beginning of the 10th lunar month. For three or four days, people visit one another and exchange gifts and food. In Muslim nations, businesses close, and the streets are crowded with revelers. Because the lunar calendar has only 355 days, the dates change each year according to the Western calendar, but Ramadan often coincides with the holiday season of Christmas and Hanukkah.

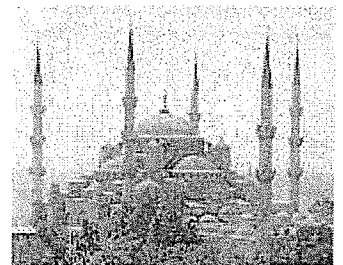
The last pillar of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca, exists in two forms, the hajj and the *umra*. The major difference between the two types of pilgrimage is the time of year when they are performed. The hajj is restricted to a specific time, the second week of the 12th month of the Muslim year, whereas the *umra* pilgrimage can be undertaken at any time. A devout Muslim is encouraged to participate in the sacred hajj at least once in a lifetime. Ritual cleansings, prayers at various locations, the throwing of seven pebbles to denounce evil, and for those who can afford it, the sacrifice of a lamb are performed at various locations spread out over a distance of 24 kilometers.

Since the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938 and the resulting wealth for that nation, and with the conveniences of modern travel, the pilgrimage to Mecca has changed. It is not uncommon to see wealthy pilgrims arrive in private or commercial jets, transfer to air-conditioned BMWs, check in at the Hilton Hotel, and walk through air-conditioned underground tunnels between prayer locations. Billboards along the road between the airport at Jeddah and Mecca invite pilgrims to praise Allah or eat at McDonald's. Yet for most pilgrims who save for many years to make the once-in-a-lifetime trip, the sacredness of the rituals and sites combined with the kinship of believers far outweigh the commercialization that crops up along the route.

Women do not play a central role in Muslim public worship but are allowed to go to some mosques and worship in designated spots like balconies or a back corner. At Mecca, separate tunnels and halls are designated for women, and some of the rituals differ. Men shave their heads, but women are only allowed to cut an inch off their hair. The rules of Islam also call for women to dress modestly. In some Muslim countries today, women wear a dark piece of clothing called a burqa that completely covers everything but their eyes. In other countries, a simple head scarf is considered sufficient.

One part of Islamic tradition that seems to include women almost equally with men is Sufism, or mysticism. Not all Muslims embrace Sufism, but it is popular among poor, rural people. Sufis dedicate themselves to communicating with God and experiencing his presence in the here and now rather than waiting to know God in heaven. Many of these mystics experience ecstaticism, a state of mind that takes a person from the cares of this world into the holy realm of "God-thought." One Sufi story tells of a young man who heard a bird song in his garden that transported him into a holy trance that lasted 40 years. Sufi poetry, particularly love poetry, is also well known in the field of literature.

The Sufis are credited with spreading the teachings of Muhammad to India, central Asia, Turkey, and the countries of northern Africa in approximately the 13th century. Islam was introduced into Indonesia in the 14th century and barely had time to grow political roots before the Dutch colonists came to dominate the government. Indonesia to this day continues with the struggle to balance the powers of religion and politics among Muslims, Christians, and indigenous beliefs and traditions.



Like many world religions with long histories, Islam has evolved and adapted to fit local cultures, been split into factions and sects, spawned wars and uprisings, and is often misrepresented by outsiders. The core beliefs of devotion to a merciful God, the hope of a resurrection into a better life, and the deep sense of community explain why the religion maintains a strong following. In fact, Islam is thought to be the fastest-growing religion in the world.

ISLAM questions:

- 1) What does the word Islam mean?
- 2) What are the two main sects of Islam?
- 3) Who was the prophet of Islam?
- 4) Where was the prophet of Islam born?
- 5) Label Mecca on your maps?
- 6) Explain the difference between Sunni and Shiites.
 - Sunni-
 - Shiites-
- 7) What are the 5 pillars of faith in Islam? Explain each in detail.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
- 8) Explain how many Muslims believe that Jihad means to oppress of force others into believing in Islam.
- 9) What is considered a cardinal sin? Why?
- 10) What kind of change took place in the Middle East after 1938? How did that change impact the Hajj?
- 11) How do you feel about the expectations of women in the Muslim religion?
- 12) What is a Burqa?
- 13) There is on sect of Islam that attempts to treat women equally- what sect is this and how do their beliefs differ?
- 14) Which sect of Islam is less tolerant of other religions?