

Islam: Basic Beliefs

How did Islam begin?

Islam is a monotheistic faith centered around belief in the one God (Allah). In this regard, it shares some beliefs with Judaism and Christianity by tracing its history back to the patriarch Abraham, and ultimately to the first prophet, Adam. All the prophets preached the same universal message of belief in one God and kindness to humanity. The last in the series of prophets, according to Muslims, was Muhammad.

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia around 570 CE. He worked first as a shepherd and then as a merchant. He was not happy with the people around him because of superstitions and social and economic injustice. The people were worshipping many gods and had forgotten the message of prophet Abraham to worship one God. Muhammad loved to pray and meditate in the mountains. On one of those occasions, in the year 610 CE, when he was about 40 years old, he received a revelation from God through the angel Jibril (Gabriel). He continued to receive messages from God throughout his life and he began preaching to others what he had learned. His main message is that there was no other God but Allah and that people should lead their lives in a way that was pleasing to Allah.

How many Muslims are there?

Islam spread quickly first throughout Arabia and surrounding countries and then throughout the world. There are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world with 7 million in the United States. Only about 18% of Muslims are Arabs and live in the Middle East. The countries with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia and India. There are two basic groups of Islam: the Sunnis (about 80% of the world's Muslims) and the Shi'ites (about 20% of the world's Muslims). Although they share the same basic beliefs, they disagree on who was the rightful leader of Islam after Muhammad's death.

What does Islam mean?

Islam is an Arabic word which means "surrender, submission, commitment and peace." Thus, Islam can be defined as a path to attain complete peace through voluntary submission to the divine will.

Who is Allah (God)?

"Allah" is simply the Arabic word for God. He is the same universal God worshipped by people of all faiths. The word "Allah" is sometimes preferred over God because it is neither masculine nor feminine. Also, there is no plural for "Allah."

What do Muslim's believe?

Muslims have six major beliefs.

- Belief in one God (Allah).
- Belief in the Angels.
- Belief in the holy books sent to all the prophets including Torah that was revealed to the prophet Moses, Bible that was revealed to the prophet Jesus, and Qur'an (Koran) that was revealed to the prophet Muhammad.
- Belief in all the prophets sent by God including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Although Muslims believe in Isa or Jesus they don't think of Jesus as the Son of God the way Christians do.
- Belief in the Day of Judgment and life after death. The best reward for performing good deeds is getting closer to God.

•Belief in divine decree. This means that God is all-powerful and nothing can happen without His permission, however, he has given human beings freedom to choose whether to be good or bad. In the end, everyone will be questioned about how they lived in this life.

What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

These are guides for daily life for putting the beliefs of Muslims into practice.

- Shahadah (declaration of faith)—to bear witness or testify that there is no god except one God (Allah) and Muhammad is His prophet or messenger.
- Salat (ritual prayer)—the five daily prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and night. The prayers are offered in Arabic language and facing the direction of Mecca.
- Zakah (alms tax) –Giving 2.5% of one's wealth to the poor and needy.

Sawm (fasting)—Muslims fast during the daylight hours in the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar called Ramadan. The purpose is to remind people of the goodness of what they have and to show equality with the poor. Ramadan is a time for study and self-discipline.

•Hajj (pilgrimage): Muslims believe in making a pilgrimage to Mecca to the Ka'bah at least once in their lifetime. The Ka'bah is believed to have been built by Ibrahim (Abraham) and one of his sons. Muhammad restored it to worship Allah. For this reason it is a very sacred place to Muslims.

What is the final revealed scripture (a sacred text) for Muslims?

Muslims believe that the last revealed scripture sent by God is the Qur'an or Koran. It is the speech of God revealed in the Arabic language to Muhammad during his mission of twenty-three years. The Qur'an was written down by scribes and memorized during the lifetime of Muhammad. The Qur'an emphasizes moral, ethical and spiritual values with the aim of establishing justice for everyone. Many Muslims try to learn to read the Koran in its original language, Arabic. It is not uncommon for Muslims to memorize whole chapters of it. They read part of it every day. The Sunnah is a record of Muhammad's words and deeds. The Sunnah is used to help interpret the Koran. There is also instruction in it on belief, worship and behavior.

Islam: Sacred Spaces

Although Muslims pray five times daily in their homes or wherever they are, in fact even in the streets, Muslims also worship in mosques. Mosques can be very elaborate, large structures or very simple ones. However most have these common features.

Sahn — a courtyard surrounded by arcades called riwags. There are fountains of water inside the courtyard to symbolize purity and where worshippers can bathe before entering the mosque.

Minaret-- a tower from which the muezzin calls Muslims to prayer. The minaret looks down on the sahn.

Mihrab — an empty arch which indicates the direction of Mecca.

Minbar -- a pulpit from which the imam (prayer leader) gives the sermon and leads prayers. Zulla or prayer hall off the sahn.

Mosques are decorated with a special kind of art. Muslims do not believe in making images of Allah, Muhammad, any other prophets, or any person or animal. There are two reasons for this. One is that the worship of images is forbidden in Islam. The other reason is that no artist's representation of Allah's creation would be able to show its true beauty. It is a way of honoring Allah.

So, instead, Islamic artists use geometric shapes and patterns on their walls, floors, in their holy books, and on other decorative items. Islamic mosques are known for incredible complex mosaic work. This medium suits the geometric nature of Islamic art. Stars and crescents are also found on mosques and are symbols associated with Islam. The crescent comes from the fact that Islam has a lunar calendar. In the Koran, stars are often signs from Allah.

Islam: Festivals and Celebrations

Id ul-Fitr

This festival marks the end of the month of fasting, Ramadan. It ends with the sighting of the new moon in the sky. Muslims visit their mosque to say special prayers, visit friends and relatives, eat special feast foods and exchange gifts and cards. It is a time of thankfulness for Allah's blessings which are better appreciated because of the experience of fasting during Ramadan.

Hajj

This is the pilgrimage to Mecca to worship in the Ka'bah. Muslims try to do this at least once in their lifetime. Pilgrims wear plain, identical clothes to show that all are equal in Allah's eyes. They walk around seven times, counterclockwise. They they walk or run seven times between two hills followed by a 16 mile walk to Mount Arafat where Muhammad preached his last sermon. On the way back to Mecca, Muslims throw stones at three stone pillars which represent Satan. Then they make a final seven circles around the kA'bah.

Id ul-Adha

The Hajj, whether on pilgrimage or at home, ends with the festival of Id ul-Adha in which a sheep or goat is sacrificed. This is a reminder of the sacrifice Ibrahim (Abraham) was asked to make of his son, Isma'il (Ishmael). When Ibrahim was just about to sacrifice his son to show his obedience to God, God provided a lamb instead. The festival celebrates God's mercy and Ibrahim's obedience. This story in different versions is in the Koran, the Bible, and the Old Testament which shows the common heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Id Ul-Ghadir

This festival in Shia communities around the world celebrates the anniversary of the Holy Prophet Mohammed's completion of his final message to humankind with regard to his succession. Ghadir-e-Khun is the famous place where this event took place during the month of Hajj in the 10th year of the Hijra, or migration, of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina.

Milad an-Nabi (birthday of the Holy Prophet)

Muslims celebrate this occasion with great rejoicing. Muslims gather to narrate the stories of the Prophet's birth, childhood, his character, manhood and his mission.

Lailat al-Qadr (Night of Power)

The night in which the prophet Mohammed received the first revelation from God. The Night of Power is one of the odd-numbered nights of the last ten days of Ramadan. A portion of this night is spent reading the Qur'an and making special prayers.