

What is Islam?

A basic introduction prepared by the Middle East and Europe Office of Common Global Ministries.

With widespread attention being focused on the Middle East, we hope this resource will provide a helpful general introduction to the religion of Islam and its adherents.

BELIEFS

Islam is regarded as one of the three central Abrahamic faiths along with Judaism and Christianity. Islam's followers are Muslims, or those who "submit" to God's will. Islam is a universal religion that teaches that God is merciful and compassionate, and that promises the faithful worldly peace and equality and entrance to a sublime eternity.

The **Quran** is the sacred book of Islam, and is believed to be a collection of the direct "recitations" of Allah, or God, as received by the prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632 AD). Muslims do not regard Muhammad as divine with God, but as the last in a line of prophets. In fact, the most fundamental Muslim belief is that there is no other god besides God and no division within the divine Godhead. The Christian Trinity therefore remains problematic for many Muslims. Recognizing them as sacred, the Quran bears some overlap to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, yet differs on certain facts: one in particular is the blessing and role given to Ishmael rather than Isaac in Islamic tradition. And while Muslims view the Old Testament prophets and Jesus as true prophets, they believe that the revelation Muhammad received perfects the Abrahamic prophetic tradition. Accordingly, Muslims hold the life and teachings of the prophet Muhammad in highest esteem and believe faith requires discipleship to his example. Even so, it is a mistake to regard Muslims as 'Muhammadans' in the same sense that Christians believe faith is mediated and accessible only through Jesus Christ.

Islam and Muslim are related to Salaam, the Arabic word for Peace. The typical Arabic greeting is "Salaam alaikoum," "Peace to you."

The life and teachings of Muhammad and the story of early Islam are revealed in the **Hadith**, which are collections of sayings about the Prophet that have been handed down through generations by skilled and trusted oral historians. These chains of religious transmission vary however, and thus have been disputed frequently among different schools of Islamic law and theology. While generally in agreement about the Quran, various sects of Islam diverge largely over the authenticity or interpretation of each other's Hadith.

Two main groups of Muslims are the **Sunnis**, or those who believe they follow the more Orthodox "path" laid out by Muhammad's teachings, and the **Shi'is** (often Shi'ites), or that "party" which believes 'Ali (Muhammad's cousin) was the rightful successor to Muhammad's mantle of leadership. As Islam spread across time, culture, and diverse lands, many different schools of interpretation and practice developed both within and outside of these larger groups, similar to Christian denominationalism. One major expression of Muslim faith that intersects many schools of belief and practice is **Sufism**, or Islamic mysticism. Like Christian or Jewish mystics, Sufis place greater emphasis on the inward experience of God and on individual acts of spiritual discipline.

PRACTICES

Besides adhering to sacred writings, teachings, and particular schools of thought, the devotion or practice of Muslim faith is essential. There are five **Pillars of Islam** that all Muslims are obliged to practice if they are able. The first and greatest obligation is to “witness” to the absolute divine unity, which is done through the public expression of a credo called the **Shahada**. The shahada is comprised of two statements: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s prophet.” The second pillar is **Salat**, or the structured ritual of prayer and worship performed five times a day. Prayer is performed facing Mecca, can be done either alone or in a group (Friday prayers are commonly done as a group in a Mosque and include a sermon), and requires ritual purification and prostration. Often Muslims are called to prayer by the declaration from a towering minaret that “God is greater!”.

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is a time of spiritual reflection and daily fasting, one of the Five Pillars of Muslim observance. Eid al-fitr, the feast that ends the Ramadan fast, is one of Islam’s major holidays.

The third pillar is **Zakat**, or almsgiving. Whether through charitable giving or structured as a religious tax, zakat is an act of purification. **Sawm**, or fasting, is the fourth pillar. Fasting is a general obligation, but should be especially observed from sunup to sundown for the month of **Ramadan**, and includes abstention not only from eating and drinking, but from smoking, sexual activity, and any sensual desire. Sawm is both an act of renunciation and an opportunity for spiritual reflection. Ramadan, which is the month Muhammad received the first revelation from God, ends with a large festival, the **Eid al-Fitr** or “Feast of

Fast-Breaking”. The final pillar of Islam is the **Hajj**, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Those who are able are encouraged at least once in their lifetime to make the hajj during a sacred month of festivals, fasting, prayer and commemoration. During the pilgrimage all those who make the hajj behave and are regarded as spiritual equals.

One frequently misunderstood aspect of Islam is the concept of **Jihad**. Jihad is the striving of Islamic faith toward truth and right. It includes most importantly a Muslim’s spiritual commitment and devotional life, but also entails efforts to attain particular good ends, including struggling against evil and apostasy. While jihad is sometimes proclaimed by Muslim leaders to enjoin Muslims against political foes, much like an American leader might declare a cause a “crusade” or characterize an empire as “evil,” jihad does not essentially mean “Holy War.”

THE MUSLIM WORLD

Because Islam originated in **Mecca** and **Medina**, these two cities are considered sacred and the rulers of modern-day Saudi Arabia are entrusted to be the protectors of these sacred sites. Jerusalem, called **al-Quds** or “the Holy”, is held to be the third sacred city of Islam for its spiritual and historical significance: it is the city from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven in a dream (the **mi’raj**), and the site where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son.

Although Islam began in Arabia, there are Muslim communities throughout the world, from Mexico to the Philippines, with historically large populations in Africa, Southeastern Europe, and Central and Southern Asia. More Muslims actually live east of Saudi Arabia than in the Middle East, the largest predominantly Muslim country being Indonesia. Consequently, not all Muslims are Arab— but very many are Persian, African, European, and Asian.* All Muslims are encouraged to study Arabic, however, as the Quran is only rightly understood in that language of revelation. In North America, many Muslims are from recent or second-generation immigrant groups, but at least half of U.S. Muslims are African-American Muslims,

who have either converted or 'reverted' over the generations to the orthodox Muslim identity of their African forebears.** Indeed, Islam is now the largest and fastest-growing religious group after Christianity in the United States. There are an estimated seven million Muslims in the U.S.

Islamic civilizations through the centuries have flourished with the highest levels of science and medicine, art and architecture, music and literature. Islamic philosophy and history have contributed invaluablely to Western culture and learning. And even though Islamic powers have entered into war and conflict with non-Muslim states and communities throughout history, most notably during the Crusades, it is significant that Islam has also nurtured one of the greatest traditions of religious tolerance.

With between 5- 7 million U.S. adherents, Islam is now the largest and fastest-growing religious group after Christianity in the United States.

It is important to remember that any religion is at risk of being exploited by extremists among its followers. Muslims have no more propensity toward fanaticism or violence in the name of the faith they strive to follow than do Christians, Jews, or any others. As this nation becomes increasingly diverse, as Christians and Americans who value freedom, we must not succumb to the tendency to stereotype and scapegoat the other— especially another religion and all its followers— for the actions of some. We should learn as much as we can about those of other faiths to know when what one claims to do in the name of God, no God would rightfully condone.

* It is also important to recognize that not all Arabs are Muslims. Arab Christian communities have remained a vital presence in the Middle East since Christianity's origins.

** The vast majority of African American Muslims identify as Sunni Muslims and should be distinguished from the Nation of Islam, which though it shares some historical origins differs vastly in theology and community life and is generally considered non-orthodox by most Muslims.

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RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON ISLAM

- Ali, Ahmed, trans. *Al-Quran. A Contemporary Translation*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984.
- Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000.
- Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. New York: Macmillan, 1985.
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- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. *The Muslims of America*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991.
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- Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. 3 vols. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.
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- Speight, R. Marston. *God is One: The Way of Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Friendship Press, 2001.
- Turner, Richard Brent Turner. *Islam in the African-American Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997.
- Williams, John Alden, ed. *The Word of Islam*. Austin: The Univ. of Texas Press, 1994.

SELECTED WEB LINKS ON ISLAM

On Islam, Islam in America, and Islamic Studies

- American Museum of Islamic Heritage, <http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Dell/8383>
- Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown Univ., <http://www.cmcu.net>
- Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu>
- Faith Communities Today, research data on American religious groups, <http://fact.hartsem.edu>
- Islaam, intro. to Islam, <http://www.islaam.com>
- Islamic Studies resources, SUNY Buffalo Muslim Stud. Assn, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/sa/muslim/isl/isl.html>
- Islamic Studies resources, Univ. of Georgia, Prof. Alan Godlas, <http://www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas>
- Islamic Studies resources, USC Muslim Stud. Assn, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA>
- Shi'a, intro. to Shi'ah Islam, <http://www2.mozcom.com/~habib/islamstu.htm>
- Tolerance in Islam, an historical lecture on the subject, <http://users.erols.com/gmqm/toleran1.html>
- Pluralism Project, Harvard University, <http://www.pluralism.org>
- U.S. State Dept. page on Islam in America, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/islam>

Muslim Community Organizations

- Islamic Assembly of North America, <http://www.iananet.org>
- Islamic Society of North America, <http://www.isna.net>
- Muslim community links, <http://www.islamicity.org>
- Muslim Students' Association of U.S. and Canada, <http://www.msa-natl.org/national>

Islamic Public Affairs Organizations

- American Muslim Alliance, <http://www.amaweb.org>
- American Muslim Council, <http://www.amconline.org>
- Council on American-Islamic Relations, <http://cair-net.org>
- Minaret of Freedom Institute, <http://www.minaret.org>
- Muslim Public Affairs Council, <http://www.mpac.org>