

Islam

World Religions

Official Name: Islam

Key Figure in History: Muhammad (A.D. 570-632)

Date of Its Establishment: A.D. 622

Adherents: Worldwide: Estimated 1 billion; 69 percent live in South and Southeast Asia; 27 percent in Africa; 4 percent other; United States: Estimated 5 to 8 million

What is Islam?

Islam is the world's youngest major world religion. It claims to be the restoration of original monotheism and truth and thus supersedes both Judaism and Christianity. It stresses submission to Allah, the Arabic name for God, and conformity to the "five pillars" or disciplines of that religion as essential for salvation. From its inception, Islam was an aggressively missionary-oriented religion. Within one century of its formation, often using military force, Islam had spread across the Middle East, most of North Africa, and as far east as India. While God is, in the understanding of most Muslims, unknowable personally, His will is believed to be perfectly revealed in the holy book, the Qur'an. The Qur'an is to be followed completely and its teachings form a complete guide for life and society.

Who Was Muhammad?

Muhammad is believed by Muslims to be the last and greatest prophet of God—"the seal of the prophets." It was through him that the Qur'an was dictated, thus according him the supreme place among the seers of God. A native of Mecca, Muhammad was forced to flee that city in A.D. 622 after preaching vigorously against the paganism of the city. Having secured his leadership in Medina, and with several military victories to his credit, Muhammad returned in triumph to Mecca in A.D. 630. There, he established Islam as the religion of all Arabia.

What Is the Qur'an?

The Qur'an is the sacred book of Islam and the perfect word of God for the Muslim. It is claimed that the Qur'an was dictated in Arabic by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad and were God's precise words. As such, it had preexisted from eternity in heaven with God as the "Mother of the Book" and was in that form uncreated and coeternal with God. Islam teaches that it contains the total and perfect revelation and will of God. The Qur'an is about four-fifths the length of the New Testament and is divided into 114 "surahs" or chapters. While Islam respects the Torah, the psalms of David and the four Gospels, the Qur'an stands alone in its authority and absoluteness. It is believed to be most perfectly understood in Arabic and it is a religious obligation to seek to read and quote it in the original language.

What Are the Five Pillars of Islam?

They are the framework for the Muslim's life and discipline. Successful and satisfactory adherence to the pillars satisfies the will of Allah. They form the basis for the Muslim's hope for salvation along with faith and belief in Allah's existence, the authority of Muhammad as a prophet, and the finality and perfection of the Qur'an.

The five pillars are:

1. The Confession of Faith or *Shahada*: It is the declaration that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. Sincerity in the voicing of the confession is necessary for it to be valid. It must be held until death and repudiation of the *Shahada* nullifies hope for salvation.

2. Prayer or *Salat*: Five times a day, preceded by ceremonial washing, the Muslim is required to pray facing Mecca. Specific formulas, recited from the Qur'an (in Arabic), along with prostrations are included. Prayer is, in this sense, an expression of submission to the will of Allah. While most of Islam has no hierarchical priesthood, prayers are led in mosques by respected lay leaders. The five times of prayer are before sunrise, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and prior to sleep.

3. Almsgiving or *Zakat*: The Qur'an teaches the giving of two and one-half percent of one's capital wealth to the poor and/or for the propagation of Islam. By doing so, the Muslims' remaining wealth is purified.

4. The Fast or *Sawm*: During the course of the lunar month of Ramadan, a fast is to be observed by every Muslim from sunrise to sunset. Nothing is to pass over the lips during this time, and they should refrain from sexual relations. After sunset, feasting and other celebrations often occur. The daylight hours are set aside for self-purification. The month is used to remember the giving of the Qur'an to Muhammad.

5. Pilgrimage or *Hajj*: All Muslims who are economically and physically able are required to journey as a pilgrim to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The pilgrim's required simple dress stresses the notion of equality before God. Another element of the Hajj is the mandatory walk of each pilgrim seven times around the Kaabah—the shrine of the black rock, the holiest site of Islam. Muhammad taught that the Kaabah was the original place of worship for Adam and later for Abraham. The Kaabah is thus venerated as the site of true religion, the absolute monotheism of Islam.

The Doctrines of Islam

God: He is numerically and absolutely one. God is beyond the understanding of man so that only His will may be revealed and known. He is confessed as the "merciful and compassionate one."

Sin: The most serious sin that can be ascribed to people is that of "shirk" or considering God as more than one. Original sin is viewed as a "lapse" by Adam. The fallen nature of humankind is not endorsed by Islam. Humankind is considered weak and forgetful but not as fallen.

Angels: Islam affirms the reality of angels as messengers and agents of God. Evil spirits or *Jinn* also exist. Satan is a fallen angel. Angels perform important functions for God both now and at the end of time.

Final Judgment: The world will be judged at the end of time by God. The good deeds and obedience of all people to the five pillars and the Qur'an will serve as the basis of judgment.

Salvation: It is determined by faith, as defined by Islam, as well as by compiling good deeds primarily in conformity to the five pillars.

Marriage: Muslims uphold marriage as honorable and condemn adultery. While many Muslim marriages are monogamous, Islamic states allow as many as four wives. Men consider a woman as less than an equal, and while a man has the right to divorce his wife, the wife has no similar power (see Surah 2:228; 4:34). Nonetheless, the female has a right to own and dispose of property. Modesty in dress is encouraged for both men and women.

War: The term *jihad* or “struggle” is often considered as both external and internal, both a physical and spiritual struggle. The enemies of Islam or “idolaters,” states the Qur’an, may be slain “wherever you find them” (Surah 9:5.) (See Surah 47:4.) Paradise is promised for those who die fighting in the cause of Islam (see Surah 3:195; 2:244). Moderate Muslims emphasize the spiritual dimension of *jihad* and not its political element.

Diet and Food: Muslim dietary codes forbid the eating of pork and the use of intoxicating drinks. Other meats may be eaten from animals slaughtered by devout Muslims. Healthy diet and lifestyle are encouraged.

Answering Muslim Objections to Christianity

Christians and Jews are acknowledged as “people of the book,” although their failure to conform to the confession of Islam labels them as unbelievers. Following are several questions that Muslims have about Christianity.

Is the Trinity a belief in three gods? Christians are monotheistic and believe that God is one. But both in His work in accomplishing salvation through the Person of Jesus Christ and through biblical study it has become clear that His oneness in fact comprises three Persons— Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and the third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. Mary is not part of the Godhead. The notion of God, who is three-in-one, is part of both the mystery and greatness of God. God is in essence one while in Persons three. This truth helps us understand God as truly personal and having the capacity to relate to other persons. As well, Christians confirm the holiness, sovereignty, and greatness of God.

How can Jesus be the Son of God? Scripture affirms that Jesus was conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary. It does not in any way claim that Jesus was directly God the Father’s biological and physical son. It rejects the notion of the Arabic word for son *walad*, meaning physical son, for the word *ibin*, which is the title of relationship. Jesus is the Son in a symbolic manner designating that He was God the Word who became man in order to save humankind from its sin. The virgin birth was supernatural as God the Holy Spirit conceived in Mary, without physical relations, Jesus the Messiah. In this manner even the Qur’an affirms the miraculous birth of Christ (see Surah 19:16-21). Jesus was in this sense “God’s unique Son.” During His earthly ministry He carried out the will of the Father. Notably the Qur’an affirms Jesus’ supernatural birth, life of miracles, His compassion, and ascension to heaven. (see Surah 19:16-21,29-31; 3:37-47, 5:110.)

How could Jesus have died on the cross, especially if He’s God’s Son? The testimony of history and of the *Injil* or the four Gospels is that Jesus died on the cross. If it is understood that God is love, and that humankind is lost in sin, then is it

not likely that God would have provided a sacrifice for sin? Jesus is God's sacrifice for all the sins of the world and is a bridge from a holy God to fallen and sinful humans.

This truth is revealed in the *Injil*—John 3:16. Even the Qur'an states in Surah 3:55 that "Allah said: O Isa [Jesus], I am going to terminate [to put to death] the period of your stay (on earth) and cause you to ascend unto Me."¹ What other way could this concept have any meaning apart from Jesus' death for sin and His subsequent resurrection?

Muslims believe that God took Jesus from the cross and substituted Judas in His place, or at least someone who looked like Jesus. He was then taken to heaven where He is alive and from where one day He will return.

Answering Muslims' Questions to Christians about Islam

What do you think about the prophet Muhammad? Muhammad was apparently a well-meaning man who sought to oppose paganism and evil in his day. While he succeeded in uniting the Arabian peninsula and upheld several important virtues, we do not believe he received a fresh revelation from God. Jesus Christ fulfilled not only the final prophetic role from God, but He is the Savior of the world and God the Son. While Islam believes that some Bible passages refer to Muhammad (see Deut. 18:18-19; John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7), that is clearly not the meaning of the texts. Other passages may help in understanding and interpreting the previous texts (see Matthew 21:11; Luke 24:19; John 6:14; 7:40; Acts 1:8-16; 7:37).

What is your opinion of the Qur'an? It is a greatly valued book for the Muslim. It is not received or believed to be a divine book by the Christian. The statements of the Qur'an are accepted only where they agree with the Bible.

What is your opinion about the five pillars? Salvation is from God and comes only through the saving work of Jesus Christ. When we put our faith in Him, we will be saved (see John 3:16-21,31-36).

Witnessing to Muslims

1. Be courteous and loving.
2. Reflect interest in their beliefs. Allow them time to articulate their views.
3. Be acquainted with their basic beliefs.
4. Be willing to examine passages of the Qur'an concerning their beliefs.
5. Stick to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith but also take time to respond to all sincere questions.
6. Point out the centrality of the Person and work of Jesus Christ for salvation.
7. Stress that because of Jesus, His cross, and resurrection, one may have the full assurance of salvation, both now and for eternity (see 1 John 5:13).
8. Share the plan of salvation with the Muslim. Point out that salvation is a gift and not to be earned.
9. Pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Trust Him to provide wisdom and grace.
10. Be willing to become a friend and a personal evangelist to Muslims.

1. *The Holy Qur'an*, translated by M.H. Shakir (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc.).

--Phil Roberts, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary