

Frequently Asked Questions About Islam

These FAQ's are meant to provide the reader with a brief introduction to the religion of Islam. FAQ's on Buddhism, Hinduism and Judasim are also available.

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Where does the word "Islam" come from?

Islam in Arabic means "surrender" and "submission" to the will and command of Allah. A related meaning of Islam is peace. These two ideas, surrender to the will of Allah and peace- embody the essence of Islamic faith. Another cardinal principle of Islam is the establishment of social justice; elimination of injustice and exploitation and helping those who are poor and oppressed. This is the social content of Islam.

Who is the founder of Islam?

It is the fundamental belief among Muslims that Islam, based on an absolute and uncompromising monotheism, is the original and primordial religion which God (Allah) gave to mankind. It was first given to Adam and then to all subsequent prophets such as Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus down to Prophet Mohammad (who was given the perfected and the final message of Allah). Therefore, Prophet Mohammad is the last prophet of God and after him there will not be any new messenger of God.

Islam as we understand it today is also a historical phenomenon which was founded by Prophet Mohammad. He was born in the city of Mecca in Arabia 570 AD. and died in 632 AD. On the basis of God's express commands and the inspiration he received, he laid the foundations of a religious system, an ethical order, a polity, a culture and a civilization. The message he

brought, though couched in Arabic, is meant for all mankind.

Mohammad occupies the central place in Islam. It was he who developed, in accordance with the commands of Allah, the system of prayer to be followed by Muslims, and he laid down the principles which should govern the conduct of Muslims in diverse areas of life in personal and communal relations and in the governance of the Islamic community. He provided the model which Muslims should emulate in their personal and social life. He was not only a messenger of Allah but he was also a husband, a father, a trader, a military commander, a ruler and a judge.

He was an elect of God but he never claimed any divinity. He insisted he was a human being like all others, subject to laws of life and death like all others. Muslims do not worship Mohammad, and therefore it is wrong to call Muslims Mohammadans in the same way followers of Christ are called Christians and those of Buddha, Buddhists.

What is the Holy Text of Islam?

The Holy Book of Islam is called the Qur'an (Koran) which consists of Allah's revelation to Prophet Mohammad over a period of 23 years. It is the literal word of Allah, not that of the Messenger. It has been arranged in 114 chapters of varying length. Passages from the Qur'an are recited in the performance of many rituals especially in saying the five daily prayers. It is a source of guidance for the Muslims: either it prescribes the law or provides the principle from which a rule of behavior can be deduced. It is the most important source of guidance and of law for Muslims. It contains the narratives of prophets and

peoples in order to proscribe correct behavior.

Besides the Koran, the sayings and the deeds of the Prophet (called Sunnah) constitute the second most important source of law and guidance for Muslims, even though the interpretations of the saying and deeds may vary from sect to sect.

Which country has the most followers of Islam?

88% of Indonesia's 225,000,000 people are Muslim, making it the most populous Islamic country in the world. By comparison, Iran has a population of 65,000,000, Iraq, 23,000,000 and Saudi Arabia, 22,000,000. The Indian Subcontinent (Bangala Desh, India and Pakistan) has the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Each of these three countries has hundreds of millions of Muslims. Before it was divided in 1971, Pakistan was the largest Muslim country in the world.

There are no exact figures about number of Muslims in the world, but the general estimate is that there are more than a billion people who call them Muslims and they constitute more than 20% of the world population.

Are there different sects of Islam?

There are two main sects among Muslims and each main sect has different sub-sects or offshoots. The two main groups are the **Sunnis** (majority) and the **Shias**, (minority).

The Sunnis do not have any clergy or any formal organization to decide matters of faith. No person and no institution has the authority in matters of faith. Among the Sunnis

there are four recognized schools of Shar'ia (called Mazhabs) and a Muslim can follow any one of the four schools.

There are three main religious roles, the Imam (leader of the prayer) but any respectable muslim can lead the prayers; the mufti (who can give an opinion on the laws and rules of Shari'a-) and the Qazi or Kadi who applies the rules of Shari'a , (they are not authoritative and these roles have fallen in their importance). In recent years the world-wide Muslim community sought expert help in clarifying law, and in coping with new situations not covered by the Shar'ia from the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt or the religious scholars and institutions in Saudi Arabia, but their authority is not universally accepted, and they do not have binding power.

The Shias, especially in Iran, have a fairly organized clergy. Imams and Ayatollahs are religious authorities who give definitive answers on the religious questions. They also have authority to innovate and reform laws in a limited sense. Even in this case, the authority to enforce comes from the state rather than from the religious order.

There are actually few doctrinal differences between the Sunnis and Shias. The origin of the divide lay in the question of political succession of the Prophet. When Prophet Muhammad died in 632 A.D. his role as the messenger of Allah ceased since there was to be no messenger or prophet after him.

The Prophet was also the head of the Muslim community and a ruler of the rapidly expanding state he had established in Medina. The question arose as to who would succeed the Prophet in his worldly or political role. The senior companions of the prophet elected his closest companion Abu Bakar Siddiq to be the first Calif or successor (**Khalifa** in Arabic) of the Muslim

community. The people of Medina committed their allegiance to him , including Ali ibn Talib, the Prophet's cousin and beloved companion who was also married to the Prophet's favorite daughter Fatima. Ali and his descendents are regarded by the Shias as the rightful Spiritual Guides of the Muslim community. All others were usurpers according to them. The Sunnis, on the other hand, regard all the four Caliphs as the "Rightly Guided Successors". This is one of the most contentious issues between the Sunnis and Shias.

The people who supported Ali and later the claims of his descendent are Shias. The word Shia in Arabic means "supporters" and they were, at the time of the first succession, known as the "Shias of Ali". Ali, who is also much adored by the Sunnis themselves and held in high esteem, as are all the members of the prophet's family, was bypassed two more times when succession took place. He was elected at the fourth occasion of succession in 656 A.D. but was assassinated in 661 A.D. Though it started as a political dispute, it later acquired enough momentum to spread to other areas of life and manifestations of religion. The martyrdom of Hussain in 680 became the central motif and the crucial event in the Shia religious life and rituals. The vast majority of Sunnis and Shias recognize each other's legitimacy. Shias remain an influential minority in the world of Islam but in some countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Iran they form a majority. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is the Shia version of Islam that is in power.

What do Muslims believe?

In accordance with its absolute commitment to monotheism, the first and the absolute requirement of Islam is to profess, assert and believe in the Shahada-the first article of faith:

(1)THERE IS NO GOD BUT AL-

LAH, AND MOHAMMAD IS HIS PROPHET." If one believes and utters this before witnesses one can claim to be a Muslim. Besides, the affirmation of faith, a Muslim is required to fulfill 4 basic obligations: (2) performing five daily prayers, (3) fasting during the month of Ramadan , (4) paying the Alms tax (Zakat) on one's wealth and assets, and (5) performing , if one can afford it, at least once in life the Hajj- the pilgrimage to the Kabba and the Grand Mosque in Makkah in a specific month of the Islamic lunar calendar. This affirmation of faith and four obligations are known collectively as **THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM**

What are the holy places of Islam?

For Muslims, there are three holy places. In the order of their importance they are;

1. The "KABBA" in the Center of the Grand Mosque, situated in the city of Makkah (Mecca). Its importance for the Muslims cannot be exaggerated. Every part of it is sacred to the entire Islamic world. Muslims face it in their daily prayers and it is the Center Piece in the performance of the Hajj pilgrimage. The Kabba, the cube-shaped building draped in black covering, is the First House of God established by Prophet Abraham. Mecca is also the birth place of Prophet Mohammad.

2. Medina in the northeast of Makkah is the city which gave refuge to the Prophet and his companions when they had to leave the city of his birth as political persecution became life threatening. It is the place where Mohammad established and began to develop the first Muslim community and the Islamic political order. It also contains the Prophet's Mosque, the second most important mosque for the Muslims. The Prophet is also buried in the mosque.

3. The third holy place for Muslims is the mosque Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock in the city of AL Quds – otherwise known as Jerusalem. In his spiritual journey known as the Meraj (ascension) the Prophet prayed at the Al-Aqsa and from the Dome of the Rock he ascended to the Heavens where he was in the presence of the Almighty. Until Allah commanded Muslims to face Kabbah in their daily prayers, the early followers used to pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Thus Jerusalem has become important to all three monotheistic faiths Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Where do Muslims worship?

A Muslim can worship- saying his prayers (salat)- at any place which is clean, faces the direction of Kabbah, and follows a procedure which Prophet Mohammad prescribed. It is also important not to face any statue or painting representing any human or animal figure- as idol worship is strictly prohibited in Islam. It is preferable that a Muslim pray in the company of fellow Muslims, at the appointed time in a place of worship called a Masjid or mosque.

A mosque occupies an important place in a Muslim community. In addition to a place of prayer it can also be used as a madrasa (a school) or a meeting place for any acceptable social purpose, such as discussion of community affairs, a wedding, settlement of conflict between individuals by negotiation or conciliation. A mosque has become a symbol of the Muslim community and it has also become a vehicle for the expression of artistic genius of Muslims.

Who leads prayer in Islam?

Such prayers are led by an Imam- who can be an appointed person for that specific purpose or any Muslim who commands the respect of his brethren. Every Muslim commu-

nity is required to set up a mosque to be used for all the required prayers. But one can also pray individually- except for the Friday noon prayer which is a congregational prayer- just as the Christians have their Sunday prayers and the Jews their Sabbath.

How does a Muslim worship?

There are five obligatory prayers held at different times of the day; before sunrise, early afternoon, late afternoon, immediately after sunset and before midnight. On Friday, the early noon prayer is offered as a congregational prayer, preceded by a sermon delivered by the Imam- the leader of the prayer. The Friday prayer has been considered very important and even those who do not perform daily prayers gather for this occasion. The procedure involves set postures of standing, bowing and prostrations and ends in a sitting position and at each stage certain Quranic passages or prescribed prayers are recited.

Do Muslims have any special dietary practices?

Islamic law provides elaborate rules about dietary practices and prohibitions. Muslims are prohibited from eating pig meat and wild animals. All intoxicants are prohibited. These in the terminology of Shari'a are Haram- violating this rule is a cardinal sin. Only when a person is starving and might die can such rules be broken without committing a sin. It is also Haram to eat the flesh of an animal or a fowl which dies of natural causes. Only animal flesh hunted or slaughtered in a manner prescribed by Shari'a can be consumed. The required method of slaughter is that animal is killed in the name of Allah (and those which are slaughtered in the name of idols are Haram) and the blood of the animal is drained. Drinking of blood is prohibited. All marine animals are Halal – an Islamic term

for what is permissible.

What are some Islamic rituals?

Like all other cultures and religions, Islam also has its own rites of passage for Muslims. Most rites for birth, wedding and death- are provided in the sayings and the reported acts of the Prophet- which in Islamic terminology are known as **Sunnah**. The essence of these rites is emphasis on simplicity, dignity and adherence to the core values of Islam- thanking and remembering Allah.

Birth The birth of a child is celebrated with simple rites: whispering the Azan – the call to the prayer – in the ears of the new born; shaving the hair of the infant; and sacrificing a goat and giving the 1/3 of the meat for the poor and needy.

Marriage Marriage is an important and blessed institution in Islam: it is a contract between man and woman which must be entered with mutual consent and without any coercion- especially on the woman. It is the duty of the individual who performs and records the marriage, in front of witnesses, to ascertain that the woman freely consents to the marriage.

Death Ceremonies regarding death closely adhere to the basic principle that it is Allah who gives life and takes it away. Therefore excessive sorrow and wailing are discouraged and fortitude and acceptance of Allah's Will are urged. The basic principle is that the dead be buried as early as possible, preferably within 24 hours of death.

As Islam spread beyond tribal Arabia and spread to other older and different civilizations, Islamic rituals and rites had to find a modus vivendi with pre-Islamic traditions and practices. Many of these practices which were not in sharp conflict with the fundamental principles of Islam were adapted and re-

tained. Thus the world of Islam presents a great deal of variety in its rituals. For example, weddings across the world of Islam will have common features, mainly derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, but they are overlaid with the particular cultural heritage of that country. Marriages in Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Morocco and Turkey have similar core elements but exhibit different cultural features and trappings.

What are special holy days in Islam?

Muslims have two main Special days. They are called **Eid-al Fitr** which comes after the end of the fasting month Ramadan and **Eid Al Azha** celebrated after the Hajj pilgrimage. Both begin with the special prayers in mosques. The latter **Eid** also involves sacrificing of goats or cows whose meat is distributed in accordance with recommended portions: one-third for the self and family, one-third for relatives, friends and neighbors and third for the poor and needy.

The Eid Al Azha actually commemorates an event associated with prophet Abraham who was commanded by God to sacrifice something dearest to him and Abraham decided to sacrifice his son, Ismael and at the last moment God replaced a lamb for his son.

The whole month of Ramadan is considered by all Muslims holy. They fast during the day and spend the night in special prayers- called Tarawih. During the last 10 days of Ramadan there is one night (possibly 27th night) which has special significance- it is called the Lailat-ul-Qadr (The Night of Power) when Allah showers His mercy on the worshippers.

Shias celebrate two festivals of Eids along with Sunnis. However, Shias also commemorate with great intensity and passion the martyrdom of

Imam Hussain, the second grandson of the Prophet, who was killed by Yazid- the usurper of power in the 7th century at a place called Karbala (in modern day Iraq). This tragic event occurred during the first 10 days of Muharram- the first month of the Islamic Calendar. Hence the month is a period of mourning for the Shias. The Sunnis' observance of the tragedy is much more subdued.

What happens after death?

There are few details of what happens to the soul in the Quran itself, except that Allah will resurrect the body and there will be a day of Judgment when everyone is called upon to account for his deeds and be punished or rewarded accordingly. There is Heaven or Paradise for the virtuous and those who were pardoned by Allah; the guilty ones will have to suffer punishment in Hell.

Are there any similarities between Islam and other religions?

Islam, Muslims believe, is the continuation of and completion and perfection of the Monotheism of which Judaism and Christianity were earlier versions. Their message has been superseded by the message which prophet Mohammad - the last Prophet of Allah- brought. Muslims recognize the Old Testament and the Bible as the words of God. However, they believe that they have been tampered with and distorted. They do not exist in the form in which they were revealed to Moses and Jesus, who, the Muslims recognize, were the messengers and prophets of God. Therefore, the basic common element in these three religions is the belief in One Omnipotent God/ Allah.

Islam recognizes Jesus but rejects the Principle of Trinity and the Idea of Christ as the son of God; The concept of the trinity is in absolute

contradiction to the fundamental principle of the Oneness of Godhood and its indivisibility. The Qur'an also confirms the virgin birth of Christ. Many of the stories about Moses mentioned in the Old Testament are similar to those found in the Koran. Muslims are required to show respect to Jesus and Moses and to all other prophets as they were true prophets of Allah.