

Islam

Islam is followed by approximately one-fifth of the world's population and is the fastest growing religion in the world. The word "Islam" comes from the same root as "salaam", the word for peace. Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad. As he was meditating one day he was visited by the angel Gabriel who commissioned him to "read the words of God" or in other words speak the revelations of God. This is the divine origin of the Qur'an. Islam contains many different schools of thought that have developed over fourteen centuries but the most prominent two are: Sunni and Shia. Today the Sunni tradition is believed to contain 85-90 percent of all Muslims with the Shia tradition composing most of the rest. The differences between the two can be simplified as the difference in approaches to leadership. The Sunni believe that the people should be led by consensus while the Shia believe that the leader of Islam must be a descendant of the Prophet.

Core Beliefs: Muslims believe that God has periodically chosen human beings to reveal His message to the world. The Qur'an refers to many prophets such as Abraham, Noah, David, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. The Qur'an claims that Muhammad was the last prophet. The Qur'an is the most important authority in Islam and was passed down for forty years after Muhammad through the oral tradition until his inspired words were written. These written words have been preserved until today with no changes. There are five pillar truths that Islam is built upon:

1. **Shehada (Allah is the One and Only God):** He is the beginning and end of everything and beyond human description. Believers are commanded to bear witness of God and confess Muhammad is His messenger.
2. **Zakat (religious alms):** Paying of a percentage of one's income to take care of the poor and needy and maintain the religious community. It is paid at the end of Ramadan.
3. **Siyam (fasting during Ramadan):** Muslims fast, from food and drink, from dawn to sunset during Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. Each night the fast is broken with a feast.
4. **Hajj (The Pilgrimage):** Traveling to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime is required of all who have the physical and financial ability to make the trip.
5. **Salat (prayers):** Muslims are required to offer individual prayers five times a day: at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night.

More info: <https://www.mei.edu/bassiouni/intro-to-islam#2>

Practices and Rituals: During ritual prayers Muslims often pray shoulder to shoulder symbolizing equality. Before praying shoes are removed and "wudu", ritual washing, is performed. Faces, hands, arms, and feet are washed with clean running water to prepare them for what is viewed as an appointment with God. The practices of gathering to worship and for the pilgrimage to Mecca are important practices that involve these rituals and help believers stand together in the holiest of places on equal ground regardless of wealth or status.

More info: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2016/11/23/february-12-2016-wudu-islamic-washing-prayer/29054/>

Places of Worship: Muslims worship in buildings called Mosques. Mosques can be large and elaborate or very simple. Most's Mosques share some common features such as: "Sahn" a courtyard with fountains of water where ritual washing take place, "minaret" a tower where a leader calls worshipers to prayer, "Mihrab" an empty arch that points the way to Mecca, "Minbar" a pulpit where the prayer is lead and sermons are given.

More info: <https://www.uri.org/kids/world-religions/muslim-spaces>

Leadership and Clergy: Muslim leaders are called "Imams" and lead believers in prayer. They also teach about the Qur'an and perform other duties such as counseling families and youth. Within the Shia tradition there are believed to be 12 Imams who are the spiritual and political successors to the prophet Muhammad.

More info: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/imam>

Holy Days and Festivals: In addition to the pilgrimage and Ramadan Muslims observe the following holidays throughout the year: "Id al-Fitr" or the Little Feast marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan, "Ra's al-Sannah" a New Years festival, "Mawlid an-Nabi" the prophet Muhammad's birthday, and "Lailat al Isra' wa al-Mi'raj" the festival celebrating Muhammad's miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem to heaven and back.

Symbols and Icons: There are no images in Muslim mosques but beautiful calligraphy and the written word is the symbol of their faith.

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