

Islam

WHO IS GOD?

Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning that Muslims believe in one God, who is totally and completely unlimited and self-sufficient. In fact, belief in God as the only deity worthy of human worship is the central teaching of Islam. God provides guidance, and shows humankind the way it should go to fulfill its role in God's perfectly ordered creation. God is the creator, and all creation relies on God for its existence. God is the source of order in the universe, and will bring those who follow God's will to heaven. God is a God of justice, and will punish those who do not choose to comply with God's will.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Muslims believe that God created the universe with a single command: Be. It was God's will for the universe to be created, God said Be, and the universe came into existence. The universe was created in perfect order, and everything has its own purpose, pattern, and place, given to it by God, who is ruler of all. Only God is unlimited and self-sufficient, so creation, even with its God-created order, is limited, and, therefore, relies on God for its existence. Thus, the created world reflects the unity and perfection of God, but does not fully represent that unity and perfection. Humankind is the noblest piece of creation, and the rest of creation is in the service of humankind. Adam is considered the first man.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Everything which God created has a purpose, pattern, and place in the universe: to proclaim God's will-that is, all things should show that there is only one, all-powerful God who created all things. Humankind's purpose in creation is to be obedient to God's Will, showing that Will to be perfect and worthy of obedience. Unlike the rest of creation, humankind has the choice of whether or not to obey God's Will. Therefore, although humans are the noblest of all creation, they often obey their own will and desires rather than submitting to God's. Throughout history, God has sent many prophets to call humankind back to its proper place and role in creation. Muslims recognize the Jewish and Christian figures of Noah, Moses, and Jesus as some of these prophets. The Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet who calls humankind to submission to God's Will. If anyone turns away from his or her pride, asks forgiveness for disobeying God, and accepts the truth of God's Will, he or she is immediately pardoned, and returns to the pure and perfect (sinless) state in which all people are born.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

The Qur'an (also spelled Koran) is the name of Islam's sacred text and source of all religious authority. Muslims believe that the Qur'an (which means "recitation" in Arabic) was revealed orally to the Prophet Muhammad by God, through the angel Gabriel, over a period of twenty-three years. Muhammad memorized what he heard, and publicly transmitted the Qur'an in Arabic. Muhammad was illiterate his whole life and could neither read nor write. His companions, who knew how to read and write, transcribed the Qur'an onto parchment and stone tablets to preserve it in writing as well as by memory. In addition, many of the companions of Muhammad memorized the entirety of the Qur'an

during the lifetime of the Prophet. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the ultimate source for truth and inspiration. The Qur'an explains God's creation of the world, and is the source of Islamic law. It also contains vivid descriptions of heaven and hell to encourage Muslims to obey God's Will so that they can be taken by God into heaven and not to hell. There are 114 surahs (chapters), each with the designation of Makkan or Madinan, depending on where Muhammad received the revelation (Mecca or Medina).

The Qur'an was written in Arabic, and Muslims believe that Arabic is the only language in which its perfection can be fully understood, although several modern Muslim leaders have authorized English translations. The translation of the text verbatim is not possible because there is not a one to one correspondence of Arabic words with English words or words in any other language. Therefore translations of the Qur'an are only translations of the meanings contained in it. Such translations exist for many languages, including English, French, German, and Spanish and many more. In most cases the Arabic text is included because Muslims, no matter what they live, aspire to learn Arabic and read the Qur'an as it was revealed to Muhammad.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

For Muslims, the most essential part of their faith is turning to God and submitting to God's Will. Islam teaches people to be faithful to God through prayer, through concern and charity for others, and by living a moral life based on the teachings of the Qur'an. A Muslim must perform five sacred duties to show his or her devotion to God. These are known as the five pillars of Islam. The pillars are:

1. The shahadah (profession of faith). At least once in life, and by default many times a day, a Muslim must say "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is His prophet."
2. Prayer. A Muslim must pray five times a day. Prayers are said with other believers in a mosque—the name for a house of worship in Islam, or alone wherever they may be when prayer time arrives. Once a week, on Fridays at just past noon, the prayer must be performed in congregation in the mosque. Prayers are always said facing Mecca, which is the city where the Muslims believe the first house of worship to God was built. It is in the center of this city that the building known as the Ka'ba still stands, and the focal point that all Muslims face during prayer. Muslims face that same point from all locations in the world to show unity amongst the Muslims in worshipping God alone.
3. The zakat. Meaning "purification" in Arabic, the zakat is money that a Muslim must give to the poor. It consists of 2.5% of a Muslim's excess wealth given out once a year to the poor of one's local community.
4. Fasting. To fast, a Muslim must go without food, drink and marital relations intentionally from dawn to sunset in order to remember that God gives life, and that one must rely on God for all things. Muslims fast during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. This month is called Ramadan, and during this month, Muslims do not eat, drink or have marital relations while the sun is up: they may return to these normal activities only after sundown and before sunrise during the night.
5. Hajj. The Hajj, meaning "pilgrimage" in Arabic, is an annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Once in his or her lifetime, "provided he or she can afford it," every Muslim is to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. It was in that city that Abraham left his wife Hagar and his son Ismael. It was also the city in which they built the Ka'ba. The pilgrimage is to that city and to the surrounding areas where Abraham and his son Ismael were tested by God in the sacrifice of Ismael and tempted by Satan to disobey God's Will. The pilgrimage signifies this sacrifice and Muslims make the pilgrimage following the footsteps of Abraham and his son Ismael performing the rites symbolizing that intended sacrifice and shunning of Satan

from tempting them into disobeying God's Will.

Everything reflects the unity and power of God-the individual, and communities. Therefore, submitting to the Will of God means a Muslim must work for the good of the community. Serving the poor and disadvantaged is central to Islamic faith, because it allows a Muslim to grow in generosity of heart, so that self-concern and vanity will not get in the way of his or her submission to God.

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

There are an estimated 1,164,622,000 Muslims in the world today (Source: The 2000 World Almanac). It is one of the fastest growing religions, in terms of its increasing percentage of the world's population. Just in this century, Islam has gone from having about 12 percent of the world's population as adherents, to having almost 25 percent of the world's population as adherents. Although Islam was founded in Arabia, and is still practiced primarily in the region now known as the Middle East, its presence extends all over the world.

In general, Islam has not changed in over 1400 years. However, during its history, political differences have split the Muslims into two distinct groups, the Sunnis and the Shi'a. Sunnis are the followers of the Way (the way of the Prophet) and Shi'as are supporters of 'Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. Initially, the split was political in nature, having to do with the succession of leadership after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The group that came to be known as the Sunnis argued that the best and most qualified man amongst the Muslims should be chosen through a majority vote. The group who later became known as the Shi'a argued that succession should go to 'Ali the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who they believe was given that right by the Prophet. They also believe that leadership of Islam should stay within the family of the Prophet. Several ideological differences have further divided the Sunni and Shi'a, but most are still centered around the issue of leadership. Today, about 90% of all Muslims are Sunni, with the remaining 10% being Shi'a.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

Although Islam has no symbol doctrinally associated with it, such as the cross in Christianity and the star of David in Judaism, the symbol of the crescent moon (hلال in Arabic) and star is now widely used to symbolize Islam. This symbol has no religious significance in Islam and Muslims do not hold the crescent and star to be in any way holy or sacred.

The 411 on the founding of Islam

Who: Islam was revealed through various prophets, and came to completion in the revelation given by Allah (the word for God in Arabic) to the Prophet Muhammad, who lived from 570-632 CE (Common Era, formerly AD, from Anno Domini, or year of our Lord).

What: The word "Islam" comes from the Arabic word which means "surrender". People who practice Islam are called Muslims, which means "one who submits (surrenders) to God".

When: Muhammad ibn Abdullah lived from 570-632 CE. He was born in the city of Mecca, thought to

have been founded by Ishmael, Abraham's son through Hagar. When he was in his 40s, Muhammad was called upon by God to deliver His final guidance and message, the Qur'an, to mankind. Thus he assumed the title of Prophet Muhammad, and began working to bring about the Ummah Muslimah, the community of submitters to God. He received revelation while in meditation in the cave of Hira, through the angel Gabriel.

Where: Though Muhammad was born in Mecca, he and his followers, who were mostly family, were forced to leave Mecca in what became known as the hijrah, or flight. The Muslim calendar is dated from this event, and years are followed by the initials AH (anno hijrah, year of hijrah). Muhammad fled to the city of Medina, where he was welcomed and eventually installed as ruler. He truly began bringing about the Ummah Muslimah in Medina, which became the seat of power for the Islamic empire.

Islam is practiced all over the world today, in the Middle East, Western and Northern Africa, Turkey, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and South Asia (Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim country).

WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Check out these great links:

- * www.IslamiCity.com
- * www.islamway.com
- * www.islaam.com
- * www.islamworld.net

Books:

What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims, by Suzanne Haneef.

Teach Yourself World Faiths: Islam, by Ruqaiyyah Maqsood.

A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam, by I.A. Ibrahim.

Sources:

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Robert J. Moore's Islam section at The Geography of Religion Web site.

(<http://people.morehead-st.edu/fs/t.pitts/credits.htm>)

Dian Alyan, Islamic Networks Group

(<http://www.ing.org>)

Shahid Bolsen, Islamic Assembly of North America

(<http://www.iananet.org>)

Dr. Timothy Tennent, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary