



COUNCIL ON  
ISLAMIC EDUCATION

*Teaching About  
Islam and Muslims*  
in the Public School Classroom

*3rd Edition*

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### To the reader:

Muslims pronounce a blessing upon Prophet Muhammad whenever they mention him by name. The Arabic blessing *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ* means “may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him.” Although this formula is not printed within the text of this book, it is intended that it be inserted in any reading by a Muslim.


The section on usage of terms in *Part 2 – Teaching with Sensitivity* is excerpted from the Council on Islamic Education’s curriculum guide *Strategies and Structures for Presenting World History, with Islam and Muslim History as a Case Study*.

Arabic terms associated with Islam, with the exception of names of people and places, and a few other words, have been set in *italic* type. Most of these terms may be found in the *Quick Reference Glossary*.


Dates are given in terms of the common era (C.E.), a convention referring to the common human experience, devoid of specific religious connotations.

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# About Islam and Muslims



## INTRODUCTION

### *What is Islam?*

The term *Islam* derives from the three-letter Arabic root *s-l-m*, which generates words with interrelated meanings, including “surrender,” “submission,” “commitment” and “peace.” Commonly, *Islam* refers to the monotheistic religion revealed to Muhammad ibn (son of) Abdullah between 610 and 632 of the common era. The name *Islam* was instituted by the *Qur’an*, the sacred scripture revealed to Muhammad. For believers, Islam is not a new religion. Rather, it represents the last reiteration of the primordial message of God’s Oneness, a theme found in earlier monotheistic religious traditions.

Though Islam can be described as a religion, it is viewed by its adherents in much broader terms. Beyond belief in specific doctrines and performance of important ritual acts, Islam is practiced as a complete and natural way of life, designed to bring God into the center of one’s consciousness, and thus one’s life. Essentially, by definition Islam is a worldview focused on belief in the One God and commitment to His commandments.

### *What does the term “Allah” mean?*

The Arabic word *Allah* is a contraction of the words “al” and “ilah,” and literally means “The God.” Believers in Islam understand *Allah* to be the proper name for the Creator as found in the *Qur’an*. The name *Allah* is analogous to *Eloh*, a Semitic term found in the divine scriptures revealed to Muhammad’s predecessors Moses and Jesus (may peace be upon them all).

The use of the term *Allah* is not confined to believers in Islam alone — Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also use *Allah* in reference to God, demonstrating thereby that followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism believe in a common monotheistic Creator, a fact that many people are surprised to learn. One reason for this may be that English-speaking persons are accustomed to the term *God*, whereas believers in Islam, regardless of their native language, use the Arabic word *Allah*. This difference in usage may cause people to view the term *Allah* with reticence and uncertainty, preventing them from making the connection between the Arabic name and the accepted English equivalent term. In other words, *Allah* means “God,” like *Dios* and *Dieu* mean “God” in Spanish and French, respectively.

## *Who are Muslims?*

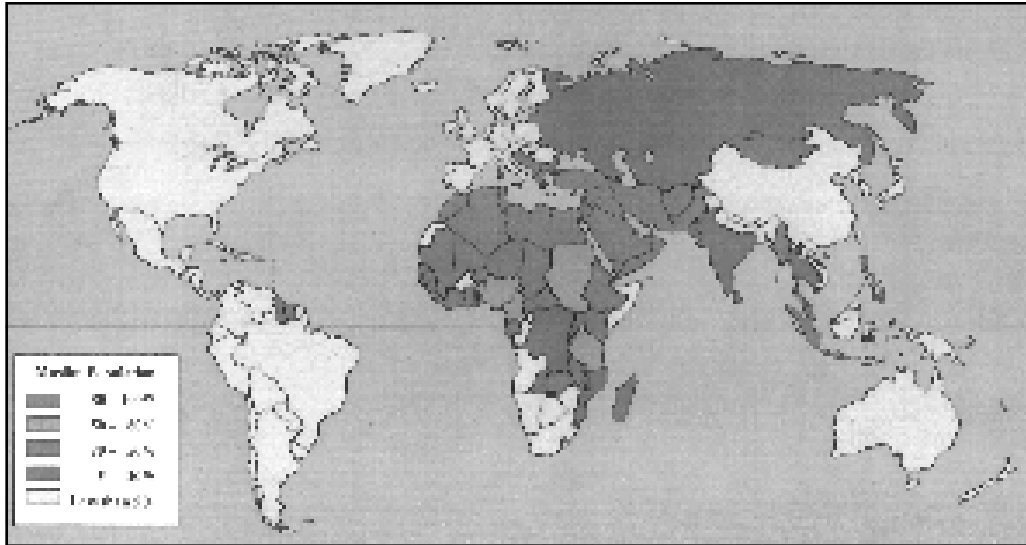
The word *Muslim*, like *Islam*, comes from the three-letter Arabic root *s-l-m*, and literally means “one who willfully submits (to God).” Islam teaches that everything in Creation — microbes, plants, animals, mountains and rivers, planets, and so forth — is “muslim,” testifying to the majesty of the Creator and submitting or committing to His divine laws. Human beings, also, are considered fundamentally “muslim” (submitters to God) in their original spiritual orientation, but being unique creations endowed with abilities of reason, judgement, and choice, they may remain on a God-conscious, righteous path towards divine reward, or may veer away as a consequence of upbringing and life-choices.

More commonly, the term *Muslim* refers to one who believes in the *Shahadah* (the declaration of faith containing the basic creed of Islam) and embraces a lifestyle in accord with Islamic principles and values. Anybody may be or become a Muslim, regardless of gender, race, nationality, color, or social or economic status. A non-Muslim who decides to enter Islam does so by reciting the *Shahadah*, (pronounced *La-Ilaha Ila Allah, Muhammad-un Rasool Allah*) witnessing that “there is no deity but Allah (God), and Muhammad is His Messenger.”

## *Where do Muslims live throughout the world?*

Over 1.2 billion people throughout the world are adherents of Islam. In other words, one out of every five human beings on the planet is a Muslim. Islam is the religion of diverse peoples living in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Central, East, South and Southeast Asia, Japan, Australia, and North and South America. The global spectrum of races, ethnicities and cultures finds representation in the worldwide Muslim community.

While Islam is often associated almost exclusively with the Middle East, Arabs comprise only about 15-18% of all Muslims. Interestingly, the country with the largest population of Muslims (over 160 million) is Indonesia, an island nation in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Muslim peoples of the South Asian subcontinent (living in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) constitute about 25% of all Muslims, while those of Africa comprise close to 20% of the total. Surprisingly to some, there are nearly as many Muslims in China as there are in Iran, Egypt or Turkey (over 50 million). Moreover, Muslims constitute sizeable minorities in many Western European countries, including England (over 2 million), France (over 2 million - about 10% of the French population), and Germany (about 2 million). See the chart on the following page for more details.



*Do Muslims share a single culture?*

Muslims throughout the world share the same essential beliefs, values, and God-centered approach to the world. Furthermore, all Muslims look to the *Qur'an* and the lifestyle and traditions of Prophet Muhammad for guidance in their daily affairs. In this respect, since Muslims the world over try to implement *Qur'anic* and Prophetic guidance, it may be said that Muslims share a common Islamic culture, focusing on shared principles and values. As a result, Muslims typically feel at home among their co-religionists anywhere in the world.

The Worldwide Muslim Population		
Country or Region	Est. Population	Percentage
South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh)	275 million	23%
Africa	200 million	16.7%
Arab Countries	180 million	15%
Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore...)	170 million	14.2%
Central Asia	50 million	4.2%
China	50 million	4.2%
Iran	50 million	4.2%
Turkey	50 million	4.2%
Europe	20 million	1.7%
Afghanistan	15 million	1.3%
North America	6 million	0.5%
South America	3 million	0.25%
Australia	1 million	0.08%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,200,000,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

Sources:  
 Fareed Numan, American Muslim Council, Washington D.C. (1992)  
 Islamic Affairs Dept., Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington D.C.  
 World Almanac (1995)

## *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*

At the same time, the ethnic, regional or material cultures of Muslims vary tremendously across the globe. Muslims exhibit different styles of clothing, different tastes for food and drink, diverse languages, and varying traditions and customs. American Muslims fall within this panorama and are in many ways culturally distinct from Muslims living in other societal contexts. Little League baseball, apple pie, and jazz music are as natural to American Muslims as they are to other Americans. Even so, certain aspects of popular American culture (such as pre-marital relations, consumption of alcohol, and certain styles of dress) do not accord with Islamic principles.

Muslims view the diversity found throughout the *ummah* (worldwide Muslim community) as a natural part of God's plan for humanity and believe it contributes to Islam's continued vitality and universal ethos. Consequently, rather than imposing arbitrary cultural uniformity, diverse cultural practices are encouraged and supported. So long as a given cultural practice or tradition does not violate teachings of Islam as found in the *Qur'an* and traditions of Prophet Muhammad, it is considered legitimate and possibly even beneficial. Using this approach, Muslims throughout history have been able to retain in large part their own distinct cultures, discarding only those elements contrary to the basic moral and ethical principles of Islam.

### *How many Muslims live in the United States?*

An estimated five to six million Muslims live in North America, and of these, two and a half million are Americans who have embraced Islam (i.e. they were not born into the faith). Dr. John R. Weeks, Director of the International Population Center, San Diego State University, a noted demographer and author, states: "There can be no question that the Muslim population in this country is large and is growing at a fairly rapid pace." It is projected that by the turn of the century, Islam will be the second largest religion in the United States. Even today, Muslims outnumber Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ and many other Christian denominations, and almost as many Muslims as Jews call America their home.

The United States Department of Defense reports that there are currently more than 9,000 Muslims on active duty in the U.S. armed services. A number of leading American scientists, physicians, sports figures, and scholars are Muslim. Clearly, Muslims are part of the diverse fabric of the United States, playing a productive role in our society as neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, schoolmates, and friends. Most American Muslims share in the effort to make this nation, as well as the world, a more moral, just and peaceful place in which to live, worship and prosper.

## What is the Muslim community in North America like?

Muslims from various walks of life live in every state of the union. The ten states with the largest Muslim populations, listed in order, are California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas, Ohio, and Maryland. Muslims in these ten states constitute 3.3 million (more than 50%) of the American Muslim population.

There are more than 1,200 *masjids* (mosques) throughout the United States, as well as over 400 Islamic schools (126 full-time), three colleges, 400 associations, an estimated 200,000 businesses, and over 200 publications, journals, and weekly newspapers.

The number of houses of worship serves as one measure of the growth of the Muslim community in the United States. In 1930, there were 19 *masjids* in America. By 1960 there were more than 230; by 1980 over 600; and as noted above, by 1995 over 1,200.

The diversity of Muslims in the United States is a hallmark of the community — virtually every race, ethnicity and culture is represented among American Muslims, making for a unique experience not found anywhere else in the world.

The Muslim Population of North America		
Ethnic Group or Origin	Est. Population	Percentage
African-American	2,100,000	42.0%
South Asian	1,220,000	24.4%
Arab	620,000	12.4%
African	260,000	5.2%
Iranian	180,000	3.6%
Turkic	120,000	2.4%
Southeast Asian	100,000	2.0%
Caucasian	80,000	1.6%
Undetermined	280,000	5.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,000,000</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source:  
Fareed Numan, American Muslim Council, Washington D.C. (1992)

## *What is the history of Islam in America?*

The history of Islam in the New World in some sense precedes that of the United States itself. Some researchers claim that certain artifacts, found in the Mississippi delta and other locales, antedating the European “voyages of discovery,” lend credence to the possibility of Arab or African expeditions into the as-then-uncharted Ocean Sea, as the Atlantic Ocean was commonly known. Arab scientists and astronomers knew the earth to be round long before the concept gained currency in European circles. When it did, European sailing vessels, including those under Christopher Columbus’ command, that crossed the Atlantic in search of an alternate passage to Asia often enlisted Muslim crew members, due to their expertise in maritime navigation. Also, since European explorers, who spoke little Arabic, expected to reach India (hence the term “Indian” for Native Americans) and the Indian Ocean basin (where Arabs were heavily involved in maritime trade and commerce), taking along Arabs/Muslims as translators made sense.

Milestones in American Muslim History	
1500s	Arrival of Hispano-Arab Muslims (Mudejars) from Spain in Spanish-occupied territories of the New World.
1539	Moroccan guide Estephan participated in exploration of Arizona and New Mexico for the viceroy of New Spain.
1717	Arrival of enslaved Africans who professed belief in Allah and Prophet Muhammad and curiously (to their captives) refused to eat pork.
1856	Hajji Ali hired by United States cavalry to experiment in raising camels in Arizona.
1869	A number of Yemenis arrived after the opening of the Suez Canal in Egypt.
1908	Muslim immigrants from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, other Arab lands.
1922	Islamic Association formed in Detroit, Michigan.
1933	Nation of Islam formed.
1934	First building designated as a masjid established in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.
1952	Muslim servicemen allowed to identify their religion as Islam by Federal government.
1963	Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) founded.
1965	El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) assassinated in New York.
1975	Warith Deen Muhammad renounced teachings of Nation of Islam and led large segment of African-American community into mainstream Islam.
1982	Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) formed.
1983	Islamic College founded in Chicago, Illinois.
1991	Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Brooklyn, New York offered the invocation to the United States House of Representatives.
1991	Charles Bilal became the first Muslim mayor of an American city, Kountze, Texas.
1992	Imam Warith Deen Muhammad offered the invocation to the United States Senate.
1993	The first Muslim chaplain is hired by the United States Armed Forces.
1993	Islamic Shura Council, a coalition of four major Muslim organizations, established.

Later on in American history, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as many as 20% of the slaves brought to the United States from Africa were Muslims (before being forcibly converted to Christianity). Another group of Muslims, Spaniards known as *Mudejars*, established roots in the New World after the conquest of Granada in 1492 and the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain resulting from the Inquisition. The influence of these highly-skilled Hispano-Arab Muslim craftsmen and artists has had far-reaching effects in American architecture and design, which are still in evidence today, especially in the American Southwest.

In the modern era, since the late 1800s, Muslims from all over the world, along with people of other faiths, have immigrated to the U.S. to make a better life for themselves and to contribute their unique talents and sensibilities to the ever-evolving American social matrix. In the last fifty years, a dramatic increase in native-born American Muslims and converts to Islam has taken place as well, providing new generations of Muslims prepared to interact fruitfully with fellow Americans and raise the contributions of the community to higher levels.

## BASIC BELIEFS

### *What are the beliefs of Muslims?*

The central concept in Islam, reflected in the *Shahadah*, is *tawheed*, or Oneness of God. For Muslims, there is but One God who is Lord and Sovereign of Creation, and devotion, allegiance, and obedience must first of all be to Him. This view serves as the foundation from which the basic beliefs of Islam emanate, since God is recognized as *the* Source for all knowledge and understanding. More specifically, the beliefs of Muslims are delineated and described in the *Qur'an* and in the sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. The practice of Islam is based upon belief in One God (*Allah*), creations (whether humanly perceivable or not) of God, prophetic leadership, revealed guidance, and a Day of Judgement. Details are provided below.

### *Is there a Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition?*

Important doctrinal differences exist between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even so, each of the three faiths proceed from a monotheistic worldview interconnected with that of the other two. The three world religions share belief in successive prophets and revealed scriptures — in fact, the three faiths trace their religious history back to the patriarch Abraham, and earlier to the first human, Adam (considered a prophet in Islam), demonstrating a common history and outlook. Thus, for Muslims Islam culminates what can be described as the *Judeo-Christian-Islamic* tradition of monotheism.

## ALLAH

### *How is God viewed in Islam?*

The *Qur'an*, the divinely-revealed scripture of Islam, contains numerous verses describing the nature of God. The role of human beings as creations of God upon the earth and their relationship with God are also discussed extensively in the sacred text.

*"Say: He is God, the One, the Eternal, Absolute. He does not beget, nor is He begotten, and there is none like unto Him." (Qur'an, 112: 1-4)*

*"It is He who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing, and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections that you may give thanks." (Qur'an, 16:78)*

*"No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things." (Qur'an, 6:103)*

Muslims believe that God has no partners or associates who share in His divinity or authority. Muslims also believe that God is transcendent and unlike His creations, and thus has no physical form. Nor is God believed to exist in (or be represented by) any material object. A number of divine attributes or "names," which serve to describe God, are found in the *Qur'an*. Some commonly known attributes include the Most Merciful, the Most Forgiving, the Most High, the Unique, and the Everlasting, among others.

In Islam, human beings, like other creations, are seen as completely unlike God, though they may aspire to exhibit various attributes manifested by God, such as justice or mercy. Furthermore, even while God is believed to be beyond traditional human perception, the *Qur'an* states *"He is with you wherever you may be"* (57:5). For Muslims, God's Oneness heightens the awareness that ultimately all life is bound by Divine Law emanating from a singular source and that life has a meaning and purpose which revolves around the consciousness of God's presence.

Moreover, belief in a singular Creator compels conscientious Muslims to view all humanity as one extended family, and treat others with justice and equity. Respect for the environment and natural resources also follows from the Muslim view of God.

### Basic Beliefs of Muslims

#### Muslims believe in...

<b>Allah</b>	The One God
<b>Angels</b>	(and the world of the Unseen)
<b>Prophets</b>	(and Muhammad as the final prophet)
<b>Divine Scriptures</b>	(and the Qur'an as the final scripture)
<b>Day of Judgement</b>	(and reward in Heaven and punishment in Hell)

## ANGELS

### *How do Muslims view Angels?*

*Mala'ikah*, or Angels, are believed to be among God's many creations, and belief in angels is symbolic of a Muslim's belief in *al-Ghayb*, the world of the unseen (a world of which only God has knowledge). Angels are considered heavenly beings created by God to perform various duties. Angels by nature do not deviate from righteousness, as they do not possess an inherent free will as do human beings.

Some angels are considered more prominent than others. *Jibreel* (Gabriel), for example, is known as the "Angel of Revelation," since he communicated God's revelations and scriptures to various human prophets. He also announced (much to her surprise and incredulity) to Mary, mother of Jesus, that she would bear the Messiah awaited by the Children of Israel. Indeed, *Jibreel* is uniquely described in the *Qur'an* as a Spirit (*ruh*) from God due to his role in bridging the divine and human spheres.

Muslims also believe that each human being is assigned two angels by God—one to keep track of good deeds, and the other to record bad deeds or sins. Tradition holds that these "personal" angels will present the records of one's deeds to each individual as he or she stands before God on the Day of Judgement.

### *Is Satan a "fallen" angel?*

Most commentators of the *Qur'anic* account of Creation do not view Satan as a fallen angel. Rather, he is believed to be one of the *jinn*, a class of God's creation distinct from angels. The *jinn*, like angels, exist in the unseen world, and cannot ordinarily be perceived by human beings. Like humans, however, the *jinn* have been endowed with free will, and thus can choose to act according to God's commands.

When God commanded *Iblis* (the personal name of Satan), a leader among the *jinn*, to bow before Adam in recognition of human eminence among God's creations, he rebelled and was cast out with his followers. *Iblis* asked God for a respite until the Day of Judgement to prove that he could undermine humankind's claim to superiority. A recurrent theme in all of God's revelations to humanity is that of Satan's machinations against humankind. The *Qur'an* repeatedly warns against deviating from the "straight path" by falling prey to Satan's temptations. Satan has no independent source of power over humans—only what they cede to him.

## PROPHETS

### *What is the role of prophets in Islam?*

Muslims believe that God has provided guidance to humanity over the ages through the institution of prophethood. In the Islamic context, prophets are not persons who prophesy (foretell the future); rather they are seen as righteous and truthful messengers selected by God to fulfill the most important mission—calling on people to worship God alone, and teaching them to live righteously, in accordance with God’s commandments. Muslims believe prophets, and the scriptures given to some of them, are the only sure sources of God’s guidance, and that God has chosen, throughout history, thousands of prophets from among all peoples of the earth, culminating with the last prophet, Muhammad.

*“Say: We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us, and in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, to Moses and Jesus and the other prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Allah we have surrendered ourselves.” (Qur’an, 2: 136)*

Thus, in Islam, the prophets are seen as spiritual brothers one to another. Some commonly known figures who are considered prophets in Islam include Noah, Jonah, Abraham, Ishmail, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus. The chain of prophethood ended with Muhammad (570-632 C.E.), who lived 600 years after his predecessor Jesus.

Essentially, prophets give warnings as well as glad tidings to fellow human beings: warnings of punishment in this world and the next for unjust, immoral people who have turned away from God and His natural order, and glad tidings of reward in this world and the next for those who are conscious of God and follow His guidance as revealed to the prophets.

The *Qur’an* mentions twenty-five prophets by name, and tradition indicates that many thousands of prophets were chosen by God throughout human history between the time of Adam and that of Muhammad.

### Some Prophets of Islam

Arabic Name	English Name
Adam	Adam
Nuh	Noah
Ibrahim	Abraham
Isma’il	Ishmael
Is-haq	Isaac
Yacoob	Jacob
Musa	Moses
Haroon	Aaron
Dawood	David
Sulayman	Solomon
Yahya	John
Isa	Jesus
Muhammad	Muhammad

## *Do Muslims believe in Adam & Eve?*

### *How about “Original Sin”?*

Adam and *Hawwa* (the Arabic name for Eve) are believed to be the first human beings, endowed by God with faculties not found in other earthly creatures. Furthermore, the *Qur’an* indicates that the first souls of man and woman originated from a single soul cleft in two, demonstrating the spiritual coequality of men and women.

The blissful Garden in which Adam and Hawwa initially dwelt proved to be a testing ground as well. God had warned the two not to eat of the fruit from a particular tree, yet at the insistence of Iblis (Satan), the two succumbed to temptation. Realizing that they had transgressed against God, the two repented and were ultimately forgiven. Thereafter, God placed the two on earth and multiplied the human race in order to test humanity and give humans the opportunity to demonstrate their highest potential in the face of continued temptation from Satan and his minions.

According to the *Qur’anic* account, both Adam and Eve sinned equally when they disobeyed God’s command to stay clear of the forbidden tree; Eve does not figure as a temptress leading to “man’s downfall.” Furthermore, since God assigns every individual his or her freedom and responsibilities, Muslims do not believe in “Original Sin,” the concept that the sin of Adam is inherited by all humankind. Rather, Muslims believe that each person is personally accountable to God, and will be judged by Him according to their good and bad deeds, independent of those of others.

*“Those who believe and work righteous deeds, from them shall We blot out all evil, and We shall reward them according to the best of their deeds.” (Qur’an, 29: 7)*

## *What is Islam’s view of Jesus?*

Muslims believe that Jesus was a very important prophet of God, and that he was indeed the Messiah awaited by the Jews of ancient Palestine. Like Christians, Muslims believe Jesus’ mission was to reestablish justice among people and rectify deviations that had developed in the religion of the One God. Muslims share with Christians belief in Jesus’ unique birth and various miracles performed by him (by God’s leave).

*“Lo! The angels said: ‘O Mary! Behold, God sends thee the glad tiding, through a word from Him, of a son who shall become known as the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, of great honour in this world and in the life to come, and of those who are drawn near to God.” (Qur’an, 3: 45)*

However, Muslims do not believe in Jesus' divinity, and do not consider Jesus the "Son of God," since to do so would contradict the *Qur'anic* concept of God's Unity (Oneness). Furthermore, since the concept of "Original Sin" does not exist in Islam, Jesus (nor any other prophet or person) does not play a redemptive role in human salvation. In other words, there is no concept of "vicarious atonement" in Islam. Moreover, Muslims do not share the Christian belief in Jesus' crucifixion. According to the *Qur'an*, Jesus was assumed (taken up) to the realm of God to spare him such a fate.

In the *Qur'an*, God's creation of Jesus, who had no father, is likened to His creation of Adam, who had neither father nor mother. Both, fashioned out of earth's elemental components, are viewed as direct manifestations of God's Divine Command "Be!"

## *Who was Muhammad?*

History records that a person by the name Muhammad was born into the tribe of Quraysh in the city of Makkah in 570 C.E. His father, Abdullah, died before his birth. When Muhammad was six years old, his mother, Amina became ill and died. Thus, at a very young age Muhammad experienced the loss of his parents and became an orphan.

For the next few years Muhammad was entrusted to his grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib. When Muhammad was eight years old, his grandfather also passed away. His uncle Abu Talib, a well-respected member of the Quraysh tribe, took responsibility for him. Muhammad grew up to become an honest and trustworthy businessman. Indeed, Muhammad's upright and dependable reputation earned him the designation *al-Amin* ("the Trustworthy One") among his fellow Makkans, and even invited a marriage proposal from Khadijah, a businesswoman in Makkah for whom Muhammad worked.

At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad married Khadijah, a widow who was his elder by fifteen years. Their marriage lasted twenty-five years, until Khadijah's death. Muhammad and Khadijah had six children: two sons died in early childhood, and four daughters lived to bless their household.

While most of his fellow Makkans were polytheists, Muhammad refused to worship the traditional tribal deities and often retreated to meditate and worship the One God of his ancestor, Abraham. At the age of forty, while meditating in the cave of Hira in the mountains above Makkah, Muhammad received the first of many revelations, beginning with the Arabic word *Iqra*, meaning "Read" or "Recite." Soon afterwards, he was commanded to convey the Divine message and thus became the last messenger of God, according to the *Qur'an*.

*"Read, in the name of thy Lord, Who Created—  
Created man, out of a clot (embryo).  
Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,  
He Who taught the use of the pen—  
Taught man that which he knew not." (Qur'an, 96: 1-5)*

Muhammad spent the remaining twenty-three years of his life receiving revelations from God and advocating the message of Islam among the peoples of the Arabian peninsula and working to implement the principles and teachings of Islam in human society. After suffering severe persecution from the polytheistic Makkans for 11 years, he and his fellow Muslims emigrated to Yathrib, a city 200 miles north of Makkah, where he established Islamic rule. The city was renamed *Madinah* (short for *Madinat an-Nabi*, City of the Prophet). In the following years, the message of Islam brought more and more tribes in the Arabian peninsula into the fold, creating a new community based on common religious principles, rather than tribal or other affiliations. Muhammad died in 632 C.E. at the age of 63. His tomb is located adjacent to the *Masjid an-Nabawi* (Prophet's Masjid) in Madinah, Saudi Arabia, in what used to be his quarters next to the original *masjid* of the city.

### *What was Muhammad's role as the last prophet?*

Islam teaches that Muhammad's role as the final prophet of God was to confirm the authentic teachings of previous prophets and to rectify mistakes or innovations that followers of previous monotheistic faith traditions had introduced into the original religion of humankind. Muhammad is also viewed as the conduit for the completion of God's guidance to humanity; the scope of his mission is seen as encompassing all people, rather than a specific region, group or community. Furthermore, his life serves as a perfect model of how to practice Islam fully.

*"We have sent you forth to all humankind, so that you may give them good news and warn them." (Qur'an, 34: 28)*

Muslims believe that the original revelations or scriptures given by God to prophets such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus had been lost or modified over time. Moreover, the ethno-religious concept of a "chosen people" found in Judaism and the doctrines of Trinity and Original Sin found in Christianity are believed to be later developments that grew away from the original practices and scriptures of previous prophets.

Essentially, Muslims view Islam not as a “new” religion, since it embodies the same message and guidance that God revealed to all His messengers, but rather a reestablishment of the “primordial” religion of humankind, centered around recognizing God’s Oneness and adhering to His commands. The view of Islam as having achieved its final form through the scripture given to Muhammad and his own teachings is an important aspect of faith. Consequently, Muhammad is considered the final messenger of God, the “Seal” of the Prophets. Any claimants to prophethood after Muhammad, who died in 632 C.E., are not accepted by Muslims.

*“Muhammad is the father of no man among you.  
He is the Apostle of Allah and the seal of the Prophets.  
Allah has  
knowledge of all  
things.” (Qur’an,  
33: 40)*

*What is the  
“Sunnah” of  
Muhammad?  
What are  
“Hadith”?*

The term *Sunnah* refers to the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad, as distinct from the revelations that comprise the *Qur’an*. It is the second source of Islam after the *Qur’an*, for in the Prophet there is a “beautiful pattern of conduct for any whose hope is in God and the Last Day” (*Qur’an*, 33:21).

**Hadith – Sayings of Prophet Muhammad**

- ❁ “Obey your parents and treat them kindly for if you do so then your own children will be obedient and kind to you.”
- ❁ “Heaven lies under the feet of the mother.”
- ❁ “All children are God’s children and those dearest to God are those who treat His children kindly.”
- ❁ “When three people are together two should not talk secretly, leaving the third alone, since this may grieve him.”
- ❁ “Seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim.”
- ❁ “Exchange presents with one another for they remove ill feelings from the heart.”
- ❁ “Take advantage of five things before five others happen: your youth before you grow old; your health before you fall sick; your money before you become poor; your leisure before you become busy and your life before you die.”
- ❁ “Cleanliness is half of the religion.”
- ❁ “The most perfect in faith amongst Muslim men is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife.”
- ❁ “Powerful is not he who knocks the other down. Indeed powerful is he who controls himself when he is angry.”
- ❁ “If one of you sees something evil he should change it with his hand. If he cannot he should speak out against it, and if he cannot do even that he should at least detest it in his heart.”
- ❁ “Actions are judged according to their intentions, and every person will be judged (in the hereafter) according to what he or she intends.”
- ❁ “The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you His stewards over it.”
- ❁ “Modesty and Faith are joined closely together and if either of them is lost, the other goes also.”
- ❁ “The best richness is the richness of the soul.”
- ❁ “God will show no compassion on the one who has no compassion towards all humankind.”
- ❁ “He who eats his fill while his neighbor goes without food is not a believer.”

When the Prophet's wife Aisha was asked about her husband's character, she stated simply, "It was the *Qur'an*," meaning that his life was the *Qur'an* in application. Based on this premise, the Prophet is considered by all Muslims a guide and role model for living a successful life—one who emulates the Prophet receives God's mercy and forgiveness. Following Muhammad's example contributes to a Muslim's efforts to fulfill obligations to God and gain entrance into Paradise.

One form in which Muhammad's *Sunnah* has been recorded and preserved is the *Hadith* (traditions of the Prophet). *Hadith* are records of the doings and personal sayings of the Prophet. *Hadith* were painstakingly verified and compiled by scholars in various books in the centuries following the Prophet's death. Six collections of *hadith* are considered the most authentic, the most commonly used ones being the volumes titled *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

## *Who were the Sahabah?*

The Makkah of Muhammad's time was a center of polytheistic practices and tribal affiliations dictated power and social relations. Many of the Quraysh opposed the Prophet, since his revolutionary message of social justice and equality undermined their sense of tradition, prosperity and tribal obligation. However, there were some who responded to the Prophet's call to righteousness and belief in the One God. Gradually, the number of Muslims grew. These individuals, who embraced Islam and who were close companions of Prophet Muhammad, are known as *Sahabah*.

Accounts from the lives of the *sahabah* (companions) are important as additional sources for proper behavior and practice. Many of the characteristics exhibited by various companions of the Prophet serve as inspiration to Muslims the world over. For example, the courage of Ali ibn Abi Talib sleeping in the Prophet's stead on the night the Quraysh planned to assassinate him reminds Muslims to challenge hostility or ill-will head-on, and the ingenuity of Salman al-Farsi, who recommended that the Muslims dig a deep trench around Madinah to thwart the forces of the Quraysh during one particular battle encourages Muslims to constantly seek novel solutions to seemingly insurmountable obstacles. And the selfless dedication and piety of Sumayyah bint Khubbat, who was killed by a Qurayshi notable for her newly adopted belief in Islam, thereby becoming the first martyr, is also well-remembered.

## DIVINE SCRIPTURES

### *What is a “divinely revealed” scripture?*

A divinely revealed scripture is a holy book or collection of writings believed to have divine, rather than human, origins. Muslims believe God revealed scriptures to certain prophets to communicate

His commandments and guidance to humanity. For Muslims, belief in the original scriptures revealed to Abraham (Scrolls), Moses (Torah, including the Ten Commandments), David (Psalms) and Jesus (Evangelium or original Gospel) is an essential component of faith. Indeed, one cannot be considered a Muslim unless one believes in these previous scriptures and their historical role in the spiritual development of humankind.

Holy Scriptures of Islam		
Arabic Name	English Name	Prophet who received the scripture
Suhuf	Scrolls	Ibrahim (Abraham)
Tawrah	Torah	Musa (Moses)
Zabur	Psalms	Dawood (David)
Injeel	Evangelium	Isa (Jesus)
Qur'an	Qur'an	Muhammad

### *How were divine scriptures revealed?*

The angel or heavenly Spirit *Jibreel* (Gabriel) is believed to have transmitted divine communication from God to human prophets and personages (such as Mary, mother of Jesus). As such, *Jibreel* figures prominently in the history of scriptural revelation, culminating with the holy book revealed to Muhammad. In 610 C.E., at the age of 40, while in spiritual retreat in the cave of Hira above Makkah, Muhammad was visited by *Jibreel* for the first time. During this encounter, *Jibreel* revealed the first of many divine verses that would eventually comprise the *Qur'an*. Muslims believe God revealed His holy scriptures to the prophets in their native language. For this reason, the Torah was revealed to Moses in Hebrew, while the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic.

### *What is the Qur'an?*

The word *Qur'an* literally means “the reading” or “the recitation,” and refers to the divinely revealed scripture given to Muhammad. Since Muhammad is considered the last prophet of God, the *Qur'an* is believed to be the final revelation from God to humanity.

The *Qur'an* is considered by Muslims to be the literal Speech of God given to Muhammad in the Arabic language. The chapters and verses of the *Qur'an* were revealed throughout Prophet Muhammad's mission, over a span of close to twenty-three years, from 610-632 C.E. Contrary to common misconception, Muhammad is not the author of the *Qur'an*. Rather, he is viewed as the chosen transmitter of the revelation and the ideal implementor of principles and commandments contained therein. The personal sayings or words of Muhammad are known as *hadith*, which are distinct from the divine origin of the content of the *Qur'an*.

As verses of the *Qur'an* were revealed to Muhammad and subsequently repeated by him to companions and other fellow Muslims, they were written down, recited and memorized. The Prophet also typically led the formal worship five times daily, during which he recited the revealed verses according to the procedure that he established. The verses were also recited out loud by designated Muslims in the early dawn hours and prior to the worship times and other important occasions. In short, the *Qur'anic* verses played an immediate and practical role in the spiritual lives of Muslims from the outset. Before he passed away, the Prophet arranged the 114 chapters into the sequence we find in the *Qur'an*. Scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, agree that the *Qur'an* has remained intact and unchanged to the present. The *Qur'an* as a scripture stands unique in this regard.

## *Do translations of the Qur'an exist in other languages?*

Translations of the *Qur'an* exist in many languages throughout the world, including English, Spanish, French, German, Urdu, Chinese, Malay, Vietnamese, and others. It is important to note that while translations are useful as renderings or explanations of the *Qur'an*, only the original Arabic text is considered to be the *Qur'an* itself. As a consequence, Muslims the world over, regardless of their native language, always strive to learn Arabic, so they can read and understand the *Qur'an* in its original form. Muslims also learn Arabic in order to recite the daily formal worship (*salah*) and for greeting one another with traditional expressions. However, while almost all Muslims have some basic familiarity with the Arabic language, not all Muslims speak fluent Arabic.

## *What is the structure and content of the Qur'an?*

The *Qur'an* is comprised of 114 *surahs* (chapters) containing over six thousand *ayahs* (verses). The *surahs* were not arranged according to the sequence in which they were revealed; rather, they were arranged according to the Prophet's instructions, with the longest chapter (*al-Baqarah*, The Cow) near the beginning.

The various *surahs* discuss many of the same events and issues found in the Bible, but in a different fashion. Rather than presenting a sequential account of human spiritual history beginning with Adam and culminating with Muhammad, the *Qur'an's* chapters focus on various important themes and issues. In essence, the *Qur'an* was revealed as a book of guidance. In its own unique style it addresses a variety of subjects such as humans' relationship with God, His unique attributes, accountability and the Day of Judgement, ethics, social justice, politics, the rise and fall of nations, law, the natural world and family issues. The *Qur'an* stresses the development of certain moral and spiritual characteristics, and links these with establishing justice and righteousness in the world. Many of the lessons of the *Qur'an* are given through accounts of past prophets and their missions to their respective people.

Muslims also view the *Qur'an* as providing answers to questions such as: *What are the duties and responsibilities given to me by God? How should I interact with family, friends, colleagues, classmates, clients or customers, as well as other creations of God, even the environment? How should I treat myself as a human being endowed with a free will, the ability to reason and make choices, as well as various innate desires and drives?*

## DAY OF JUDGEMENT

### *What is the Day of Judgement?*

Muslims believe that our essential purpose in this world is to recognize and serve God by implementing His guidance as found in His divine scriptures. The role of prophets culminating with Muhammad has been to serve as role models for righteous behavior and warners of potential punishment for those who fail to heed God's commandments. Islam teaches that human beings are responsible to God for all their words and deeds. The relatively short span of our lives, therefore, constitutes a test.

*"He is the one who created death and life that He may test which of you is best in deeds" (Qur'an, 67:2).*

*"Say: 'Behold my prayer, and (all) acts of my worship, and my living and my dying are for God (alone), the Sustainer of all the worlds.'" (Qur'an, 6:162).*

In the interest of justice and to fulfill God's divine plan, a day will come when the present world will be destroyed and the entire human race will be resurrected and assembled before God for individual judgement. One will either be rewarded with permanent bliss in *Jannah* (Paradise) or be punished with suffering in *Jahannam* (Hell). However, the infinite mercy of God is demonstrated in the Qur'anic statement that those who have even a mustard seed's weight of belief in God will eventually be admitted into Heaven.

## *How is "salvation" viewed by Muslims?*

For Muslims, following the straight path laid down by the prophets and exemplified by the last Prophet, Muhammad, whose message has been preserved since its revelation, is the means of safety and salvation. According to Muslim belief, a person who consciously rejects the prophets and their message is rejecting God, and thereby earns His wrath. Those who have not consciously rejected any prophet will be judged according to their belief in God and their good deeds. Ultimately, the Creator is the sole judge, and Muslims believe that no human being can judge another in spiritual terms. A *hadith* states "A person may appear to be working the deeds of the people of Paradise, while he is among the people of the Fire. And a person may appear to be working the deeds of the people of the Fire, while he is among the people of Paradise."

For Muslims, belief in accountability to God and responsibility for one's own deeds gives one a sense of purpose, and every moment and event in life has religious purport. Thus, awareness of God's presence serves as a deterrent against crime, corruption, immorality and injustice as well as a means of acknowledging the role of God in one's life.

## *What is the Muslim view of the Afterlife?*

Muslims believe that death is not the end of life, but rather a transitory state. After death, life continues in a different form. Various verses in the Qur'an describe Heaven as a place of blissful gardens and rivers, where all of one's desires may be fulfilled, while Hell is described as a place of fire and torment. Some scholars believe that such descriptions are in part allegorical, and serve to provide in human terms a symbol for the experience of the afterlife. Even so, no matter what form they take, physical or ethereal, reward and punishment are considered patently real by Muslims.

*"O my devotees! No fear shall be on you that Day, nor shall you grieve. Tell those who believe in Our signs and surrender themselves: 'Enter the Garden rejoicing, both you and your spouses!' To them will be passed round dishes and goblets of gold; there they will have all that the souls could desire; all that the eyes could delight in; and you shall abide therein forever. Such will be the Garden of which you are made heirs for your good deeds in life." (Qur'an, 43: 68-72)*

“Those who reject Allah, for them will be the Fire of Hell; no term shall be determined for them, that they may die, nor shall its penalty be lightened for them; thus do We reward every ungrateful one.”  
(Qur’an, 35: 36)

## RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS – THE FIVE PILLARS

### What are the major religious obligations in Islam?

Every action performed in obedience to God’s guidance or in order to please Him is considered an act of *ibadah* (worship) in Islam. Thus, helping someone with their homework, greeting a stranger, or even hugging one’s spouse are at the same time acts of worship which earn spiritual reward. However, it is the specific acts of worship commonly termed the “Five Pillars of Islam” that provide the framework for the Muslim’s spiritual life. The observance of these duties is regulated by individual conscience, and consequently, in real life, a spectrum of practice exists among Muslims.

#### The Five Pillars of Islam

Arabic Name	Meaning...
Shahadah	Declaring belief in the One God and His prophets, culminating with the final prophet, Muhammad, and intending to abide by the principles of Islam.
Salat	Worshipping God the Creator five times throughout the day as a way of maintaining God-consciousness and piety.
Zakat	Paying a special "purification" tax, if eligible, out of one's wealth to help the poor and needy.
Sawm	Fasting daily during the Islamic month of Ramadan as a spiritual exercise.
Hajj	Making a pilgrimage to Makkah once in one's lifetime to commemorate the trials of Prophet Abraham and his family in their efforts to reestablish monotheism.

### 1. SHAHADAH – DECLARATION OF FAITH

#### Why is the Shahadah important?

The *shahadah* represents the first pillar of Islam, upon which everything else is based. The *shahadah* is a two-fold declaration or statement—it is a denial of any *thing’s* worthiness for worship save God, and an affirm-ation of Muhammad’s prophethood (and thereby the prophethood of all previous prophets, since Muhammad is considered the last). The *shahadah* states “I bear witness that there is no deity except Allah (God), and that Muhammad is His Servant and Messenger.”



Making the declaration in sincerity formally brings a person into the fold of Islam. Other than repeating the *shahadah* in the presence of at least two Muslim witnesses, no particular ceremony (such as a baptism) is involved.

The *shahadah*, being the central theme of Islam, is repeated in the *adhan* (call to worship) and in the *salah* (formal worship) numerous times throughout each day. This practice serves to remind Muslims of their commitment to God and effort to live righteously.

## 2. SALAH – FORMAL WORSHIP

### What is Salah?

*Salah* or formal ritual worship, is the second pillar of Islam. Muslims are required to perform the formal worship five times daily—at dawn, mid-day, in the afternoon, after sunset, and at night. *Salah* is the foremost act which demonstrates that a Muslim's *shahadah* is not simply lip service, for in the various movements of the worship act a symbolic submission to God can be discerned. Moreover, *salah* reinforces God-consciousness, thereby reducing the likelihood of a Muslim's disobeying God and committing sins, and provides an opportunity to thank God for His blessings and to ask for His forgiveness. *Salah* also provides a respite from the day's



challenges and circumstances, enabling a believer to refresh his or her intimate, personal relationship with God. Typically, after completing the formal worship, Muslims engage in *du'a*, or personal prayer, in which they may thank God for His blessings and pray for good health, prosperity, happiness, assistance in times of distress, or anything one may desire. While *salah* is performed in Arabic, *du'as* may be performed in any language.

The Daily Worship	
Name	Typically Performed...
Fajr	early dawn, prior to sunrise
Dhuhr	shortly after mid-day
Asr	mid-afternoon to early evening
Maghrib	immediately after sunset
Isha	night-time, after dusk has ended

As implied above, the timings for the formal worship are determined by the movement of the sun in the course of the day. When the time for *salah* has arrived, a designated person called the *mueddhin* calls believers to assemble for worship. The call to prayer, performed in Arabic by the *mueddhin*, is called the *adhan*. Upon hearing the *adhan*, Muslims in the vicinity congregate at the nearest *masjid* (mosque). In most Muslim countries, the *adhan* can be heard some distance from the *masjid*, since *mueddhins* often make the call to prayer from the tops of minarets or use loudspeakers. Muslims who do not live near a *masjid* often use a daily worship time table to determine the times for prayer. Such time tables are prepared in advance using astronomical data.



## What does salah involve?

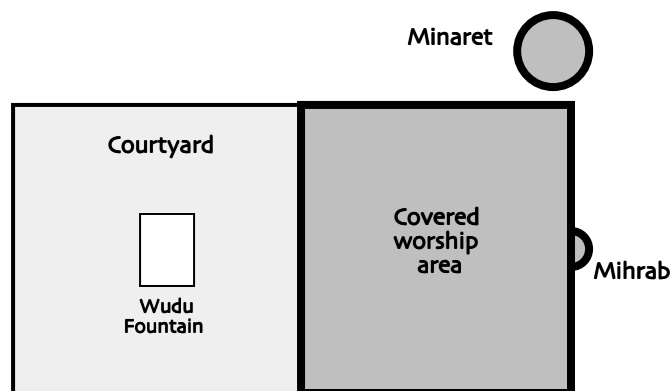
*Salah* is a particular ritual of movement and prayers designed to demonstrate to God a human’s self-understanding of his or her role as a created being. *Salah* is the foremost act of worship. Since *salah* involves various standing, bowing and prostrating positions, there are no pews or chairs in a *masjid*, the Muslim house of worship. Rather, the worship area is typically a simple, carpeted open space oriented towards the city of Makkah, where the *Ka’bah* is located. The length of time required to perform the *salah* depends on the number of *ra’kah*, or “units” of worship involved. For example, the early morning worship involves two units, the evening worship three units, and the other worship times four units. Each unit consists of standing, bowing, and prostrating

(touching the forehead to the ground) twice. During each of the stages or positions, various verses from the *Qur’an* and supplications are recited in Arabic. In the case of congregational worship, an *imam* (leader) is chosen to lead the worshippers, who form rows behind him. The Friday noon worship is the main weekly worship when Muslims are required to pray in larger congregations.

The commonly used term “mosque” is a French word for Muslims’ place of worship. For the sake of accuracy and self-definition, Muslims prefer the more correct Arabic word *masjid*, which means “place of prostration.”

Adhan – The Call to Worship	
Arabic Phrase	Meaning...
Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!	God is Greatest! God is Greatest!
Ash-hadu-an La Ilaha ila Allah! Ash-hadu-an La Ilaha ila Allah!	I bear witness that there is no deity but the One God! I bear witness that there is no deity but the One God!
Ash-hadu An-na Muhammad-an Rasul-Allah! Ash-hadu An-na Muhammad-an Rasul-Allah!	I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God! I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God!
Haya Alas-Salah! Haya Alas-Salah!	Come to worship! Come to worship!
Haya Alal-Falah! Haya Alal-Falah!	Come to success! Come to success!
Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!	God is Greatest!
La Ilaha ila Allah!	There is no deity but the One God!

While praying in a *masjid* with fellow Muslims is recommended, usually Muslims worship wherever they may be—at work, at school, even at Disneyland, since a *hadith* states “*The whole earth is a masjid.*” The only requirement for a location used for worship is that it must be clean, dignified and provides sufficient space for the worship movements.



Major features of a Masjid

Muslims, regardless of where they live in the world, face towards the *Ka'bah* in Makkah during the formal worship. The *Ka'bah*, built by Abraham and his elder son Ishma'il, is considered to be the first house of worship dedicated to the One God, and therefore serves as a spiritual focal point for Muslims. Contrary to one misconception, Muslims do not worship the *Ka'bah* while performing the *salah*. Simply, Muslims face *towards* the building as an act of unity, demonstrating a worldwide connection between all members of the *ummah* (Muslim community). Interestingly, since sunrise and sunset (and thus the worship times) move across the face of the earth, there is never a moment when someone isn't praying toward the *Ka'bah*.

No special attire is required of Muslims for performance of formal prayer, since Muslims are expected to offer the worship as part of their daily schedule, taking into consideration their professional environment or other situational factors. The only conditions for clothing are that they be clean and conform to standards of modesty.

## *What is said in the Muslim formal worship?*

Muslims begin the *salah* by facing Makkah, and then raising their hands to their ears and proclaiming "*Allahu Akbar*" ("God is Greatest"). Worshippers proceed with a variety of movements and statements. An important component is the recitation of verses from the *Qur'an* during the standing position of the worship act. Worshippers may recite any verses from the *Qur'an* which they choose, following recitation of *Al-Fatihah*, the opening chapter of the scripture. This particular chapter is recited in each of the five daily worship times, since it embodies the core of the Islamic message. Due to its significance, it is also often recited to begin special programs, gatherings, or events.

### *Surah al-Fatihah (The Opening)*

*"Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds  
Most Gracious, Most Merciful  
Master of the Day of Judgement  
Thee do we worship, and thine aid we seek  
Show us the straight way,  
The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Mercy  
Of those who do not earn Thine anger, nor go astray."* (Qur'an, 1:1-7)

Muslims recite verses from the *Qur'an* by memory during prayer. These verses address themes and concepts that Muslims should ponder and learn from. Some themes include God's majesty, God's infinite wisdom and love for mankind, reward and punishment, justice and equality, among others.

Although it may sound like singing to some, the recitation of verses from the *Qur'an* is not subject to arbitrary intonations by individual reciters or worship leaders; in fact, reciters adhere to formalized principles and methods for reciting. Oral recitation of the *Qur'an* helps Muslims concentrate on the meaning of the words. Moreover, the beauty of the recitation often soothes and inspires believers.

### 3. SAWM – FASTING

#### *What is Sawm?*

The *Qur'an* enjoins Muslims to fast as a means of demonstrating commitment to God in the face of temptation and difficulty. *Sawm*, fasting for a period ranging from dawn to sunset, teaches Muslims self-restraint, patience, endurance, and obedience to God. Moreover, it puts into perspective the plight of those unable to obtain regular nourishing meals. When fasting, Muslims often discover a calm, inner peace which helps them become even closer to God.

In physical terms, fasting means not eating any foods, drinking any beverages (including water), or engaging in marital sexual relations from dawn to sunset. On the spiritual and moral level, it means struggling to develop self-restraint, God-consciousness and piety. Muslim strive in this month to curb all detrimental desires and negative or uncharitable thoughts, and to nurture love, patience, unselfishness and social consciousness.

*“O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you, as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may learn self-restraint.” (Qur'an, 2:183)*

#### *When do Muslims fast?*

*Ramadan* is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is a sacred month for Muslims because the first verses of the *Qur'an* were revealed to Muhammad in *Ramadan* 610 C.E. The *Qur'an* instructs Muslims to fast from dawn to sunset during *Ramadan*. Conscientious Muslims often fast a given number of additional days throughout the year in emulation of Prophet Muhammad, for the sake of enhancing personal piety. Muslims may also fast to atone for lapses in spiritual devotion.

Since *sawm* can be physically demanding, those who are unable to fast, such as pregnant or nursing women, elderly people, sick or injured individuals, are exempt. In place of fasting, these Muslims must make up missed fasting days at a later date. If this is not possible, they must instead arrange for the feeding of two persons for each day of fasting missed.

## What does fasting entail?

During *Ramadan*, the entire family arises early in the morning (before dawn) to have a meal called *suhoor*. A variety of traditional and regional foods are prepared to nourish Muslims before beginning the day's fast. After the meal, Muslims offer the pre-dawn *salah* and may read a while from the *Qur'an* before returning to sleep or preparing for the day ahead. During the day, the occasional hunger pangs and bouts of thirst remind Muslims of God and His bounty, which are often taken for granted. When sunset arrives, Muslims break the fast by partaking of the *Iftar* meal.

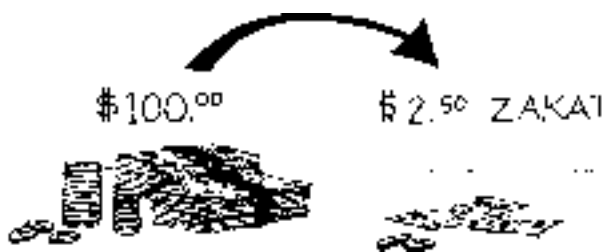
In keeping with the tradition of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims break the fast with dates and other fruits and appetizers, and then offer the evening worship. Some time later, Muslims have dinner, usually in the company of extended family and friends.

After the night worship is offered, Muslims offer a special form of formal worship called *Tarawih*. Each night of *Ramadan*, Muslims perform up to twenty units of the *tarawih salah*, during which about one-thirtieth of the *Qur'an* is recited. In the course of the month, this enables the entirety of the *Qur'an* (over 6,000 verses) to be heard by believers joined in worship, reinforcing the message contained therein.

## 4. ZAKAH – MANDATORY ALMSGIVING TAX

### What is Zakah?

*Zakah* is an act of worship in which eligible Muslims pay a specified amount of money (about 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth) as a tax to be used to assist poor and needy persons in society. The annual payment of *zakah* "purifies" one's income and wealth by reminding Muslims that their possessions are in reality a trust and a test from God, to be used not only for personal benefit, but for the benefit of others as well.



In the present era, no centralized authority collects *zakah* funds. Rather, *zakah* monies are collected by local *masjids* and institutions throughout the world. According to Islamic Law, these monies may not be used for *masjid* administration, to pay salaries of general institutional staff, or for other items covered in a general budget. *Zakah* funds may only be used for distribution to several categories of legitimate recipients (homeless, orphans, etc.) and for the administrative apparatus that makes this service possible.

## *What is the purpose of Zakah?*

*Zakah* helps to establish economic justice, by maintaining a minimal standard of living for the least fortunate members of society. Furthermore, for those with sufficient wealth to qualify, paying the *zakah* is a means of earning spiritual reward from God and divine reimbursement in the Hereafter. Conversely, neglecting to pay *zakah* is a grievous sin.

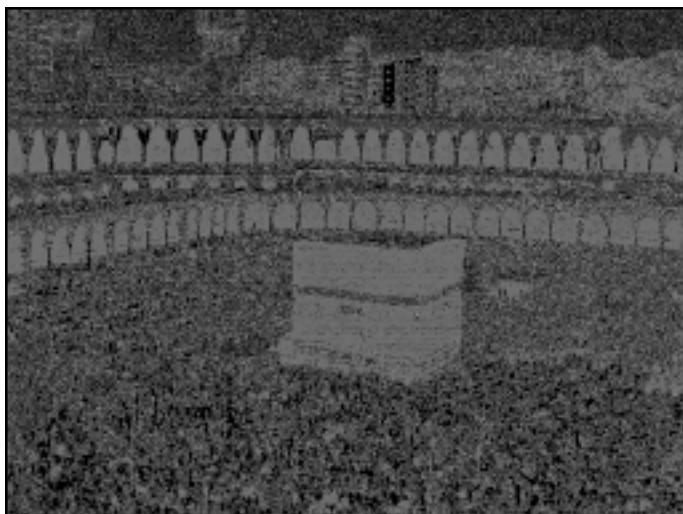
## 5. HAJJ – PILGRIMAGE TO MAKKAH

Muslims are required to perform the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to do so. *Hajj* is a time of turning away from the world in order to turn towards God and sincerely seek His forgiveness for past sins and errors. The rites of the *Hajj* commemorate the trials and sacrifices of Prophet Abraham, his wife Hajar, and their son Prophet Ishma'il. The city of Makkah, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, is the site of the pilgrimage because the *Ka'bah*, which was built by Abraham and Ishma'il as the first "house of worship" dedicated to the One God is located there. The *Hajj* takes place over several days in the early part of twelfth month in the Islamic calendar, called *Dhul-Hijjah*.

## *Who must perform the Hajj?*

Every year, over two million Muslims from all over the world, comprising the largest annual international gathering on earth, perform the *Hajj* rites. Being one of the pillars of Islam, the *Hajj* is required of every Muslim who is financially capable and whose health permits making the journey. Those without sufficient finances need not feel forsaken, since according to the *Qur'an*, God does not burden a person beyond his or her ability. Other acts of piety and worship ensure favorable

judgement on the Last Day for such persons. A Muslim whose physical condition may not permit travel and performance of the *Hajj* rites instead may pay the way for another to do so, thereby earning a similar reward.



Upon approaching the holy land, pilgrims enter a state of consecration (solemn dedication) known as *ihram*, and don the *ihram* attire, comprised of several sheets of white, unstitched, seamless cloth. Donning the *ihram* symbolizes for a Muslim the leaving behind of the material world for the sake of God, and also reminds him or her of their mortality, since the white cloth evokes the image of the death shroud Muslims use to wrap the deceased. The collective sea of white created by millions of pilgrims also serves to reinforce Islam's egalitarian and universal ethos, reminding Muslims that all people are created as spiritual equals, and that only faith in God and righteousness in this life differentiates one from another.

## *What is the Ka'bah?*

The *Ka'bah* is an empty cube-shaped brick structure measuring about forty feet per side, located in the city of Makkah, in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, the English word "cube" comes from *Ka'bah*. Muslims believe the *Kab'ah* to be the original house of God on earth, rebuilt over the ages as a reminder of humankind's original monotheistic orientation. The foundation of the present structure was constructed by Prophets Abraham and Ishma'il over four thousand years ago, in an age steeped in polytheism.

By the time of Prophet Muhammad, polytheism had once again reasserted itself and the tribes of Arabia had transformed the House of God into a repository for over three hundred tribal and regional idols and deities. After achieving success in proclaiming the message of Islam and gaining control of Makkah in 630 C.E., the Prophet removed all of the idols, rededicating the *Ka'bah* as a place for the worship of the One God.

Over the centuries, the *Masjid al-Haram* (sacred *masjid*) structure surrounding the *Ka'bah* has been renovated and expanded to accommodate increasing numbers of Muslim pilgrims and visitors. The *Ka'bah*, made of large bricks, has remained virtually unchanged. In order to preserve the structure and adorn it, the *Ka'bah* is covered by a black cloth, replaced annually, containing various phrases and verses from the *Qur'an* embroidered in gold and white thread.

Housed in one corner of the *Ka'bah's* foundation is the Black Stone. This stone is believed to be a meteor sent from the Heavens as a sign to Abraham of God's pleasure and blessings. While constructing the *Ka'bah*, Abraham placed this token of God's affection into the developing structure. Many pilgrims touch or kiss the Black Stone during their circumambulations around the *Ka'bah*, though doing so is not required, nor does it serve any particular religious purpose. Contrary to one misconception, the Black Stone is not an idol or a representation of Allah.

## THE MUSLIM SOCIETY

### THE SHARI'AH – ISLAMIC LAW

#### *What are the sources of religious authority in Islam?*

There are two basic sources of authority in Islam. The first is the Speech of God embodied in the *Qur'an*. The second source of authority is the *Sunnah*, the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad.

Shi'ah Muslims have a third authority for religion beside the above two authorities recognized by all Muslims. The teachings and writings of a number of early charismatic leaders called *Imams* descended from the Prophet's son-in-law Ali are an additional source for Shi'ahs, since they believe these descendants are infallible and consider their words and explanations nearly as authoritative as the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

Muslim scholars use these sources in order to understand the principles of *Shari'ah* (Islamic Law) contained in them, and to develop legal opinions on existent as well as novel situations. The authentic sources also serve as criteria for differentiating between religiously-based actions or opinions and those resulting from other factors, such as culture, social status or circumstance. For example, some women in Muslim societies wear veils covering the face, yet to do so is not a requirement of the *Shari'ah*. In fact, Islamic Law requires that women cover all parts of the body *except* the hands, face and feet. The practice of veiling the face, therefore, cannot be attributed to Islam (though Muslim women may do it out of a sense of religiosity). Indeed many have surmised that such practice was adopted by Muslims after exposure to Byzantine Christian society, in which upper-class women wore face veils and remained secluded from the public.

#### *What is Shari'ah?*

The term *Shari'ah* is an Arabic word which means “the path” or literally “the way to a watering place.” *Shari'ah* is commonly used to mean divinely-revealed “Islamic Law,” which plays a central role in the lives of Muslims throughout the world. *Fiqh* is an Arabic term referring to the body of scholarship and jurisprudence developed over the centuries to interpret and implement the *Shari'ah*. Scholars recognize four main sources for developing *Shari'ah* and applying it to human situations: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah*, *Ijma* (consensus among Muslim scholars and jurists), and *Qiyas* (making deductions by analogy or precedent).

## How was Shari'ah developed?

Within a hundred years of Prophet Muhammad's death, there began a great intellectual and scholarly movement among Muslims. The process of collecting, verifying, and codifying the *hadith* (sayings) of Prophet Muhammad had developed into a science of its own. Teachers and students of the *Qur'an* had begun writing *tafsirs*, or commentaries in order to explain the meanings of its verses.

In this era of conscientious effort and study, four schools (among many) of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, rose to prominence. These schools, while all using the same sources for deducing laws and making judgments, varied in their interpretations on different issues. Due to varying social structures, cultures, and lifestyles of Muslims worldwide, these four schools gained popularity to different degrees in different parts of the world. A fifth school of jurisprudence (*Jafari*) arose among Shi'ah Muslims, providing legal guidance for Muslims in Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon and other places with significant populations of Shi'ahs.

### Schools of Thought in Islam

Name	Founder	Commonly followed in...
<b>Hanafi</b>	Abu Hanifah (d. 767)	Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Jordan, Syria
<b>Hanbali</b>	Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855)	Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries
<b>Jafari</b>	Jafar as-Saadiq (d. 765)	Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Gulf countries
<b>Maliki</b>	Malik ibn Anas (d. 795)	North African countries, Bahrain
<b>Shafi'i</b>	Muhammad ash-Shafi (d. 820)	East Africa, Yemen, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen

## What is the role of Shari'ah today?

In terms of personal practice and fulfillment of religious obligations, Muslims around the world continue to look to these schools for guidance on issues of a legal nature. Muslim scholars continue to use principles of *fiqh* to deduce new approaches to life in the modern world that remain authentic to the injunctions of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

On a societal level, in some Muslim countries *Shari'ah* is implemented as the basis for the judicial system and for regulating collective affairs of citizens. Other countries implement a hybrid of *Shari'ah* and civil law, first developed in these countries when colonized by European nations, while some others do not implement *Shari'ah* at all.

Muslims living as minorities in countries such as the United States abide by the civil laws of the land. However, because of the importance of *Shari'ah* in enabling the practice of Islam as a complete way of life, Muslims may express a desire for implementation of *Shari'ah* for themselves. Interestingly, in England, Muslims have established a religious parliament that works with the British government to enable implementation of Muslim personal laws, which deal with matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other issues.

## LEADERSHIP AND RELATED ISSUES

### *Is there a priesthood or clergy in Islam?*

The use of the terms “priesthood” or “clergy” to describe Muslim religious leaders is inappropriate. In Islam, religious leaders or scholars are not ordained persons, nor do they belong to any kind of leadership hierarchy. Rather, they are simply individual Muslims who have acquired more religious knowledge than the average believer. Universities and specialized academies around the world, mainly in Muslim countries, provide relevant curricula for those interested in the various religious fields.

Different terms are used to refer to different types of scholars or leaders. An *alim* is one who has studied the *Qur'an*, *hadith*, and other texts extensively. A *faqih* is one qualified to make judgments based on the *Shari'ah*. A *hafiz* is one who has memorized the entirety of the *Qur'an*, while a *qari* specializes in reciting the *Qur'an* in a formal melodic manner. The term *shaykh* is an honorific title applied to respected learned men, elders or leaders, and in Sufism it takes on an added dimension of meaning as the *shaykh* is viewed as a spiritual master or guide for other believers. The term *imam* among Sunni Muslims designates a leader of the five daily prayers, and is used generically to refer to any religious leader who teaches courses, offers sermons, officiates marriages, and performs other duties. Within the Shi'ah tradition, the term *Ayatollah* (lit. “sign of God”) is used as an honorific title for highly learned and pious religious authorities, and *Imam* designates a person with supreme religious authority.

While such persons play valuable religious and social roles within the community, it is important to note that they do not in any way serve as spiritual *intercessors* between individual Muslims and God.



## *What do the terms “Sunni” and “Shi’ah” mean?*

At the time of Prophet Muhammad, the terms “Sunni” and “Shi’ah” did not exist — they developed later in Muslim history. After the Prophet passed away, Muslims were left to determine who should rightfully succeed him as the political leader (*khalifah*) of the Muslim community. Many were of the belief that a leader could be selected among any of the righteous and pious Muslims who demonstrated leadership abilities. This has come to be known as the majority viewpoint, designated “Sunni” in reference to these Muslims’ reliance on the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* of Muhammad as the sources of religious doctrine and practice.

Others believed that the position had been conferred upon Ali ibn Abu Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, by the Prophet. In the ensuing years, this difference of opinion was perpetuated, as the *Shi’ah* (“supporters” or “partisans” of Ali) continued to hold that authority belonged to Ali and his immediate descendants, even while historically, leadership was exercised by various dynasties such as those of the Umayyads and Abbasids.

Ali and eleven successive descendants are given the title *Imam* by Shi’ahs and they are considered the rightful, designated successors of Prophet Muhammad. The Arabic term “imam” literally means “leader” or “model,” and is commonly used to refer to the leader of formal congregational worship. Shi’ah Muslims use the term more reverentially, since the Imams are believed to be sinless and to have knowledge of things unknown to others. Furthermore, the teachings of the Imams are given weight similar to that of the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* as a source for correct belief and practice.

Shi’ahs also believe that the twelfth and final Imam, born in 868 C.E., continues to live, albeit in a miraculous state of occultation (concealment from human view). The Hidden Imam is believed to enact God’s plan in the world and provide continued guidance on behalf of the first Imam Ali.

## *What is Sufism?*

Sufism is a branch of Islam that deals with the purification and perfection of character towards the ultimate aim of love and closeness to God. Prophet Muhammad, when asked about the perfection of character replied, “It is to worship God as if one sees Him and if one does not see Him, to know that He sees you.” Sufism is rooted within the body of Islamic revelations and tradition. Just as the Muslim must purify the external self in preparation for worship, so, too, must the believer strive to reach a state of inner of purity in worship and approach his Lord.

Through the practice of Sufism the Muslim learns to purify the self of all vices such as envy, anger, deceit, pride, arrogance, love of praise, greed, stinginess, and disregard of the poor and needy. Similarly, it teaches one to adorn oneself with the perfect attributes of tolerances, discipline, contentment, repentance, forgiveness, compassion, loving kindness, sincerity, self-restraint, piety, reliance on and remembrance of God, watchfulness and many, many others. A famous Muslim scholar of the 14th century, Ibn Taymiya, describes the Sufi as follows, "The Sufi is a person who purifies the self from anything which distracts from the remembrance of God."

The history of Islam is replete with the phenomenal influence of Sufis and Sufism on all aspects of life: spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and political. The most prominent figures in literature, e.g. Rumi, Jami, Saadi, and Attar, to name but a few, were all Sufis. The spread of Islam throughout Africa, Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent, Malaysia and the Far East was accomplished through the work of many great Sufi saints. The resistance to Russian imperialist expansion into Chechnya and Daghestan was conducted successfully for forty years by Sufis under the leadership of Shaykh Shamil. The sultans of the Ottoman Empire all had Sufi advisors. Even the organization of the Franciscan monastic order was patterned on the rules of a Sufi order with whom St. Francis had been in contact in the Holy Land. The list of examples is really endless.

### *Are there saints in Islam?*

Saintly personages have played an important role in the history of Islam. Every religious tradition finds its most perfect expression in the life and teachings of its founder and its companions and then in those who came later who most perfectly realize and embody the message and its way. Indeed the most perfect flowering of Islam can be seen in the lives of its saints. Prophet Muhammad is the pattern and perfection of all saintly qualities. Following him in rank are his Companions. Their successors, in turn, attained to the next most perfect realization of saintly perfection. Though fewer in number with each passing generation, saints continued to arise and exert their influence throughout the course of Islamic history up to and including the present day. Within each century it has been the duty of a particular saint to renew and revive the religion of Islam, to rid of any accretions of error or deviations from the true path that are the inevitable consequences of human fallibility. These saints have always been men and women of vast learning, impeccable character, and selfless devotion to the religion. The love of saints and the seeking of their guidance and prayers has always been a part of the religious attitude of Muslims, from the time of Prophet Muhammad to the present. Indeed the injunction of the Prophet to "seek knowledge even unto China" has been understood in part as an order to seek the guidance of the rightly guided wherever they may be.

## What does Islam say about representations of holy figures?

Muslims have avoided making pictures or representations of any of the prophets, or even the Companions of Prophet Muhammad, lest the revered person represented visually become an object of worship. Muslims, in general, are extremely wary of any practices which might lead to ascribing divinity to anyone or anything as a partner to God. Bearing this in mind, however, Muslims have been ordered in the *Qur'an* to recite the praises of, and send blessings upon, Prophet Muhammad as the servant of God. Further, Muslims have generally considered artistic representations of God's creations to be a form of either pride or foolish disrespect. Thus, traditional Muslim artists and artisans generally avoided realistic depictions and of known figures, and instead developed very beautiful geometric styles of artistic expressions, especially in all forms of architectural crafts like ceramics, woodwork, and stone masonry as well as carpet weaving and calligraphy, to name but a few. Traditional books on zoology and biology and other materials contained stylized depictions for educational purposes.

## MARKING TIME

### What kind of calendar do Muslims use?

The *hijrah* (migration of Prophet Muhammad from Makkah to Madinah in 622 C.E.), marks the starting point of the Islamic calendar, comprised of twelve lunar months. Each lunar month begins when the new moon's crescent becomes visible every 29 or 30 days. Muslims use such a *Hijri* calendar for various religious obligations such as fasting during *Ramadan*, celebrating the two *Eid* holidays, and performing the *Hajj*.

#### The Islamic Lunar Calendar

Name of Month	Meaning...
Muharram	"The sacred month."
Safar	"The month which is void."
Rabi al-Awwal	"The first spring."
Rabi ath-Thani	"The second spring."
Jumada al-Awwal	"The first month of dryness."
Jumada ath-Thani	"The second month of dryness."
Rajab	"The revered month."
Shaban	"The month of division."
Ramadan	"The month of great heat."
Shawwal	"The month of hunting."
Dhul Qadah	"The month of rest."
Dhul Hijjah	"The month of pilgrimage."

Since the lunar year is about eleven days shorter than the solar year, dates in the Islamic calendar "move forward" eleven days every year in relation to the commonly-used Gregorian calendar. Consequently, over a period of about thirty-six years, the events in the Islamic calendar cycle through the various seasons. In this way, Islamic events do not acquire specific seasonal connotations, and Muslims around the world have the opportunity to experience these events under varying environmental conditions.

### *What does the crescent and star symbolize?*

Often Islam is associated with a symbol of the crescent moon and a star. This symbolism may be related to the fact that the lunar calendar plays a significant role in Islam. Some historical sources posit that the symbol was appropriated from the Byzantines when Muslim forces defeated them in the late seventh century. In any case, the crescent and star icon does not constitute an official symbol in Islam, though it adorns many countries' flags, currency, masjids and other structures.

### *What is the holy day of Muslims?*

Muslims' special day is Friday. On this day, the mid-day formal worship is replaced by a special congregational worship called *Salat al-Jum'ah* (Friday prayer). This worship is preceded by the *khutbah*, a short weekly address given by the *imam* (worship leader). After the worship is completed, Muslims often enjoy lunch with each other and socialize. In Muslim countries, many Muslims do not work on the day of *Jum'ah*. Despite its importance as a day of congregation, *Jum'ah* is not a "sabbath" day, since Muslims are not obliged to observe a "day of rest" for fear of punishment.

Muslims attend their local *masjids* on other days as well. On weekends, many *masjids* or Islamic Centers hold classes or events designed to teach young Muslim children or new Muslims about their faith. Special guest speakers are often invited to address the community, and various meetings and conferences are held.

### *What are some important dates in the Islamic year?*

There are a number of important dates in the Islamic calendar. Some of them are described below:

The first day of the month of *Muharram* announces the new *hijri* year, and the tenth of this month is known as *Ashurah*. Muslims believe the tenth of *Muharram* to be the day when Moses led his people out of Egyptian bondage. It is also the date on which the Prophet's grandson Husayn and his family were killed by the forces of Yazid, the second Umayyad ruler, who, it is believed, usurped rightful leadership of the Muslim community from Husayn. All Muslims, but especially Shi'ahs, mourn this tragic event.

*Laylat al-Qadr*, or the “Night of Power,” is one of the last ten nights of the month of *Ramadan*. It is significant as the night on which in 610 C.E. Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations of the *Qur’an*. Muslims commemorate this night, believed to fall on the 27th of *Ramadan*, by offering additional prayers and supplications late into the night. It is said the blessings for praying on this night are greater than those received for praying for a thousand months.

The 27th of the month of *Rajab* is the date for *Laylat al-Miraj*. On this date Muslims recall Prophet Muhammad’s miraculous journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and thence to Heaven atop the heavenly steed known as *Buraq*. According to tradition, during this Night Journey and Ascension, which took place in 619 C.E., Muhammad received instructions for instituting the *salah*, or formal worship. Islam’s connection with previous monotheistic religious traditions was also reiterated, as the Prophet met all of his predecessors during his experience.

## *What holidays do Muslims celebrate?*

There are two major holidays in Islam:

*Eid al-Fitr* takes place on the 1st of Shawwal, the tenth month of the Islamic lunar year, at the conclusion of Ramadan, the month of fasting. The holiday celebration begins early in the morning with a special congregational worship. The *Eid* prayers are often held in a specially designated gathering place, such as a park or convention center, meant to accommodate large numbers of Muslims from several local *masjids*.

After the prayer, the *imam* (worship leader) delivers a short *khutbah* (sermon or address). Then everyone rises to their feet to greet and hug one another. The rest of the festival’s observances are held among family and friends, and include visits, shared meals, new clothes, gifts for young children, and lots of sweets. In Muslim countries, festivities are often in evidence for three or more days. In order to share the spirit of the occasion with all members of society, Muslims pay a special nominal charity tax which is used to purchase food, clothing and gifts for needy persons.

*Eid al-Adha* takes place on the tenth of *Dhul-Hijjah* (the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar), after the majority of *Hajj* rituals are completed by pilgrims. Around the world, Muslims share in the spirit of the *Hajj* by observing the *Eid* festivities in their own localities. The day’s observances are similar to those of *Eid al-Fitr*, with the addition of a special sacrifice—Muslims commemorate Prophet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his elder son Ishma’il when God commanded him to do so as a test of his commitment. Since God miraculously provided a lamb to Abraham which took the place of his son, Muslims recall the event by sacrificing animals such as lambs, goats, sheep, cows or camels. The sacrifice may be performed any time after the *Eid* morning prayers until the evening of the twelfth of *Dhul-Hijjah*. The meat of the sacrificed animals is distributed to the poor or needy, and portions are kept for one’s own family and friends during this time of extra charity and hospitality.

## *Do Muslims celebrate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad?*

The birth of Prophet Muhammad is commemorated with the festivities of the *Mawlid an-Nabi* (Prophet's Birthday) on the twelfth of the month of *Rabi al-Awwal*. Most Muslims take the opportunity to study more about the Prophet and his deeds, since Muslims consider him to be the best example of how one should lead his or her life. While the Prophet's birth date is an important event recognized by Muslims, it is not an official religious holiday like *Eid al-Fitr* or *Eid al-Adha*.

## GENDER AND FAMILY ISSUES

### *What does Islam say about the equality of men and women?*

According to Islam, men and women are spiritually equal beings created from a common origin. All of the religious obligations in Islam are incumbent upon both women and men, such as daily worship, fasting, performing the *Hajj*, etc. God's mercy and forgiveness apply equally to men and women. The following *Qur'anic* verse, arguably the first gender-equity statement in any major scripture, illustrates this point:

*“For Muslim men and Muslim women,  
For believing men and believing women,  
For devout men and devout women,  
For true men and true women,  
For men and women who are patient and constant,  
For men and women who humble themselves,  
For men and women who give in charity,  
For men and women who fast,  
For men and women who guard their chastity,  
And for men and women who engage much in God's praise,  
For them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.”  
(Qur'an, 33:35)*

As a consequence of physiological, psychological and other distinguishing factors embodied in men and women by the Creator, the rights, responsibilities, and roles of men and women are believed to naturally differ. Muslims believe that God has assigned the responsibility of providing financially for the family to men, and the important responsibility of fostering a God-conscious and righteous family to women. Such roles do not preclude women from having careers and earning income or men from helping to raise a family. Rather they provide a general framework for Muslim society, designed to reinforce the concept of a nuclear family unit.

The guidelines for men and women's roles are also meant to ensure dignified and proper relations between people of the opposite sex. Minimal mixing of the sexes in Muslim societies should not be construed to imply inequality or confinement. Rather, such measures are designed to protect individuals from unsolicited attention, inappropriate sexual attraction, adultery and fornication, and possibly even forms of violence such as rape.

### *What are the rights of women in Islam?*

In the seventh century, a revolution in women's rights occurred due to the message of the *Qur'an* and its directives for forging a just and righteous society. In pre-Islamic Arabia as in other places in the world, women were considered little more than chattel, with no independent rights of their own. The *Qur'an* specifies the natural and inherent rights of women as well as men, and enjoins people to act in line with God's teachings of justice and equity. Some of the rights of women elaborated in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* include the right to own and inherit property, the right to obtain an education, the right to contract marriage and seek divorce, the right to retain one's family name upon marriage, the right to vote and express opinions on societal affairs, and the right to be supported financially by male relatives (husband, father, brother, etc.).

Such rights were unheard of in the seventh century, yet were implemented to varying degrees in Muslim civilization throughout the last fourteen hundred years. It is also important to recognize that only in the last two centuries have such rights been available to women in Western societies. Clearly, common stereotypes regarding women's rights must be carefully considered, and the current practice of Muslims in various countries and regions must be examined within the context of history and with in light of the sources of Islam in order to ascertain the degree to which Muslim women are able to exercise their rights today. Prevailing cultural factors must also be taken into account.

### *How do Muslims view marriage and divorce?*

Marriage is highly encouraged in Islam, as families are seen as the cornerstone of Muslim society. Men and women are enjoined by the *Qur'an* and the guidance of Prophet Muhammad to live with mutual love, respect, and affection. For example, a well-known *hadith* instructs Muslim men that "*the best among among you is he who is kindest to his wife.*"

In Islam, marriage is a relationship based upon a legal contract agreed upon by the persons getting married. The marriage ceremony itself is very simple. A religious scholar, *imam* or learned person within the community performs the ceremony in the presence of at least two Muslim witnesses. After the bride and groom have signed the marriage contract and a gift for the bride has been agreed upon, the couple may state their vows in front of family and friends. Often, at weddings, the *imam* gives a short marriage sermon as well. After the marriage bond has been declared, it is customary for the groom and his family to host a *walimah* (marriage feast) for friends, relatives, and community members.

Divorce is highly discouraged in Islam. While permissible, it is viewed as a last resort after stages of time for reevaluation have passed and all attempts at reconciliation have been made. Both men and women can seek divorce in Islam, and contrary to one popular misconception, men may not instantaneously pronounce a divorce by stating “I divorce thee” three times. After a divorce, a woman must wait for a period of three months, called *iddah*, before remarrying, in order to ensure that she is not pregnant by her previous husband. While modern DNA technology may render such a practice obsolete by identifying the father of a newly conceived child, the *iddah* serves the additional purpose of maintaining the dignity of women and the sanctity of marriage.

### *Are arranged marriages an Islamic tradition?*

Islam requires that both the prospective bride and groom must consent to marry each other. Islam does not condone the compelling of individuals to marry. In this sense, arranged marriages are not an Islamic practice. However, in many Muslim cultures, marriages often result when a prospective bride and groom are introduced to each other through relatives or mutual friends, though nothing precludes two eligible people who know each other to decide to marry (this is often the case among older Muslims). Typically, the eligible persons are given an opportunity to talk with each other and gauge their compatibility. If the prospective bride and groom agree to the match, the two families jointly make wedding preparations after formalizing the bond through an engagement ceremony. These types of “introduced” marriages are more “Islamic” than traditional arranged marriages.

There is no specific age at which either men or women must be married. Much depends on factors such as schooling, career, and other life circumstances. However, because marriage is seen as a solidifying force in a Muslim society, Muslims who reach eligible age (typically from early to mid-twenties) are encouraged to get married. Beyond the individual benefit of finding a life-companion, marriage is seen as a protection from illicit sexual behavior.

*“Among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Verily in that are signs for people who reflect.” (Qur’an, 30:21)*

*“Women are garments (protective clothing) for men and men are garments for women.” (Qur’an, 2:187)*

## *How do Muslims view dating and mixing of the sexes?*

Dating as it is commonly understood in western society is not permitted in Islam. For Muslims, physical interaction, an almost inevitable component of dating, is only permissible within the bonds of marriage. While Muslims often find themselves in mixed environments in American society, and may participate in certain coeducational group activities, as a general rule they opt to observe a degree of segregation.

Naturally, the proper and productive functioning of society requires the talents and contributions of all its citizens, male and female. Therefore, Islam provides guidelines for etiquette and behavior in order to enable full participation of men and women while at the same time fostering righteous societies. Some guidelines pertain to appropriate forms of interaction across gender, while others pertain to kinds of clothing men and women should wear in the interest of modesty. By observing such guidelines, women and men are able to interact productively in society, minimizing potential for sexual harassment, uninvited attention, disrespect, or acts of violence fostered by provocative dress or conduct.

## *How are birth and childhood viewed in Islam?*

In accordance with tradition, soon after birth the father of the child whispers the *adhan* (call to prayer) in the ears of the newborn. This act, signifies that the child has been born into a community centered around prayer and worship of the Creator.

Also in accordance with the tradition, a ritual known as *aqiqah* is conducted for both male and female newborns among many Muslims. The birth-hair of the newborn is shaved off to signify a new phase of life outside the womb. The *aqiqah* is usually performed on the seventh day after birth, though it may be done later. In addition, a goat or lamb is typically sacrificed for a feast of thanksgiving. During the feast, family and friends pray that God blesses the child with good health, happiness, and protects her or him from all physical harm and evil influences.

## *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*

After birth or in early childhood, male children are circumcised in accordance with the *Sunnah*. The circumcision may be seen as a symbolic act, performed in homage to the great sacrifices to which Prophet Abraham and his son were committed. Circumcision may also reiterate Muslims' view of Islam as a continual message unfolded through history, since the practice is found among Jews, descendants of the followers of the earlier prophet Moses. Circumcision is not obligatory upon adult converts, since it is not a strict requirement of *Shari'ah*.

In certain regions of the world, female circumcision is a cultural tradition, practiced by a small number of Christians, Muslims and tribal animists. Such practices violate the integrity of human beings and the are contrary to the most basic teachings of Islam, and find no sanction in Islamic Law.

The *Qur'an* repeatedly reminds readers that "those who know" are not the same as "those who know not," and a *hadith* of Prophet Muhammad states that seeking knowledge is an obligation for both men and women. Consequently, most Muslim parents tend to be very involved in their children's education. Teachers are highly respected and are seen as allies in cultivating knowledge and in presenting positive role models for students. It is not uncommon to find Muslim parents helping their children learn their lessons, encouraging them to excel, and rewarding them for good grades. Even when children are performing well in their studies, many Muslim parents want to meet with teachers, and if their child is not performing up to standards, parents usually side with educators in trying to encourage students to improve.

Naturally, religious education is very important to Muslims. At an early age, children begin memorizing the short verses of the *Qur'an*, especially *al-Fatihah*, the opening chapter. In some Muslim cultures, around the age of four, a *Bismillah* ceremony is held to signify a child's readiness to begin learning to read the *Qur'an* in Arabic. This tradition, while not a part of the *Sunnah*, is very common among Muslims of the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia) and Central Asia. Some time later, when the child has completed his or her first full reading of the entire *Qur'an*, an *Ameen* ceremony is held. The *Ameen*, like the *Bismillah* event, is not a religious obligation and is a tradition among some Muslims meant to celebrate a child's reading of the *Qur'an*.

## LIFE AND DEATH

### *What is Islam's view on reproductive issues?*

Naturally, the course one's life takes is affected by the choices one has and the options one may exercise. Consequently, Muslim scholars have provided a number of responses to various long-standing and contemporary reproductive issues to help Muslims make responsible and appropriate life decisions.

Islam encourages Muslims to have children, yet teaches that parents must plan wisely and responsibly to ensure children have a decent standard of living devoid of undue hardship. Thus, Islam permits birth control, so long as both the mother and father are aware of its use, and so long as the forms used are reversible and/or temporary. Condoms, diaphragms, intra-uterine devices, and the pill may be used, in contrast to tubal ligation or vasectomy, which in most cases would not be acceptable. Medical means of birth control that do not prevent conception but rather affect a fertilized ovum are not acceptable as well. The so-called "morning-after" or "abortion pill" falls into this category.

According to the majority of scholars, abortion is not permitted in Islam, except when a mother's life might be at risk if she were to continue her pregnancy, in which case the actual life of the mother takes precedence over the potential life of the unborn child. In the absence of such complication, the fetus represents potential life from the moment of conception, and therefore its right to life under the *Shari'ah* must be protected. Islam's views can be attributed to several *Qur'anic* verses, including "Do not slay your children because of poverty — We will provide for you and for them." (6:151). In Muslim societies, the government has a responsibility to assist low-income families, thereby minimizing the perceived need for abortions.

Surrogate parenting involves a woman bearing the child of another woman unable to do so. This practice is not an option for Muslims, since the child of a couple is carried by another individual outside the framework of a marriage contract between a man and woman. The ultimate emotional and social ramifications for the individuals as well as society at large are considered too great for surrogacy to be acceptable in Muslim societies. Women unable to bear children are rewarded by God for exhibiting patience and forbearance in this life, and have the hope of fulfilling their most profound wishes in what is considered the real, eternal life of the Hereafter.

Fertilization with the sperm of a non-husband is a grievous crime and sin under the *Shari'ah*. Reproduction is only legitimate within the confines of the marriage bond, involving the genetic material of the married individuals.

## *How does Islam view homosexuality?*

The *Qur'an* forbids homosexuality:

*“Of all the creatures in the world, will you approach males and abandon those whom God created for you as mates?” (26:165).*

By analogy, the above verse applies equally to females. While Muslims may condemn acts of homosexuality, the *Shari'ah* requires that the basic rights of life and safety of all human beings must be protected. Thus, Muslims may not accost or treat proclaimed homosexuals unjustly.

## *What does Islam say about suicide and euthanasia?*

According to Islam, all life is sacred. Deliberate and calculated suicide is considered a total lack of faith in God. To kill oneself is just as forbidden as to commit murder, and is a sign of ungratitude towards God. Muslims believe that God tests people in this life, yet does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear. To persevere in times of distress and to call upon God for comfort and strength is an important element in the Muslim lifestyle and worldview. Ultimately, Muslims are to call upon God's infinite Mercy and seek an appropriate solution to life's dilemmas.

*“And most certainly shall We try by means of danger, and hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of lives and of (labour's) fruits. But give glad tidings unto those who are patient in adversity.” (Qur'an, 2:155).*

Euthanasia, the practice of terminating someone's life to end their perceived suffering, is not permissible in Islam (cases where the physical body is being kept alive through artificial means are another matter). Muslims believe that all things are ultimately according to God's decree, and pain and suffering must be dealt with through prayer and repentance. Moreover, only God determines the time and manner of one's death, and to “preempt” God is seen as a rejection of God's divine Wisdom and plan. Muslims also believe that the suffering of righteous believers in this life will be compensated by immeasurable happiness and reward in the Afterlife.

## *How do Muslims deal with death?*

Muslims believe that life and death are in God's hands, and that God appoints a time for each person to pass from this existence into the next. Muslims are reminded regularly that death is inevitable and that the actions of this life determine one's status in the Hereafter. When a person dies, his or her relatives are urged to be patient and accepting of God's decree. It is permissible to cry and express grief at the death of a loved one, though excessive lamentation is discouraged. Though grieving may never fully end, the period of outward mourning typically lasts no more than three days.

*"Every human being is bound to taste death; and We test you (all) through the bad and the good (things of life) by way of trial: and unto Us you all must return." (Qur'an, 21:35).*

As soon as possible after death, the body of the deceased person is washed and wrapped in plain white linen and placed in a simple wooden coffin (if one is necessary). The body is then taken to the cemetery, where it may be carried by community members on a bier to the gravesite. Before burial, a special congregational worship service is offered, and prayers are made for God's mercy upon the deceased. For Muslims, burial represents human beings' return to the most elemental state, since we were fashioned from earth by the Creator. Thus cremation, preservation of the body, interment in above-ground mausoleums, or other methods are not allowed in Islam.

The affairs of the deceased may be handled via a will or testament. The *Qur'an* prescribes specific means for disbursing of inheritance to spouses, children and relatives. Many scholars have indicated that organ donation is permissible in Islam, and is considered a profound charitable act.

When a married man dies, his wife must not remarry until at least four months and ten days have passed. This period of waiting, known as *iddah*, allows her to determine whether she may be pregnant with her deceased husband's child, which would affect issues of inheritance, lineage, and related matters. Even in an age of sophisticated DNA technology, in which the identity of parents can be ascertained quite accurately, the waiting period serves to honor the deceased husband and preserve the dignity of the marriage bond.

## DAILY LIFE

### *What is the Islamic concept of worship?*

The regular performance of acts of worship, such as *salah* (formal worship) and *sawm* (fasting), is essential for acknowledging God's authority in one's life and for spiritual growth. While these acts involve specific practices and statements, Islam does not teach blind, ritualistic imitation. Muslims believe that God does not want from His servants absent-minded movement of the tongue and body—rather, He wants attention of the heart and sincere actions. Consequently, the *neeyah*, or intention that one has before fulfilling a particular obligation, counts a great deal. Indeed, a hadith states that “*Actions are judged according to their intentions.*”

Interestingly, the Arabic word *ibadah* means “worship” as well as “service.” Thus, to worship God means not only to love and exalt Him but also to serve Him by living in accord with His guidance in every aspect of life, to enjoy goodness among people and forbid wrong-doing and oppression, to practice charity and justice, and to serve Him by serving humanity.

*“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day and the Angels and the Scripture and the Messengers; to spend of your wealth, out of love for him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, and for those who ask, and for freeing slaves; to observe prayer and give charity; to fulfill the contracts that you have made, to be firm and patient in pain and in adversity, and time of stress: such are those who are sincere. Such are the God-conscious.” (Qur’an, 2:177)*

### *What dietary regulations must Muslims observe?*

A general rule of *Shari’ah* is that anything that is not expressly *haram* (forbidden) or that doesn't lead to *haram* acts is considered *halal* (permissible). This principle applies to foodstuffs as well. In the *Qur’an*, very few items are expressly forbidden, namely the flesh of swine, blood, meat of carcasses, meat of predatory animals, and meat of animals slaughtered in the name of anything other than the One God. When Muslims slaughter animals for consumption, they pronounce the name of God during the act, symbolizing recognition of His bounty and His role as Creator of all things. Such blessed meat is termed *halal*, a designation similar to “kosher” used by Jews. In fact, the *Qur’an* states that meat from the *Ahl al-Kitab*, or “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews) is permissible for Muslims to eat. Such legal provisions serve to reiterate the common monotheistic bond of the three Abrahamic religions. At the same time, many Muslims do not eat meat from commercial sources, since rules for slaughtering animals in Islam differ from those current in America.

Aside from certain foodstuffs, substances which are detrimental to human health or livelihood are also prohibited. Chief among these is alcohol, since it alters one's mental state and impairs one's abilities for reasoning and judgement, affects one's moral compass, and interferes with the proper functioning of the biological senses. Along these lines, and considering their powerful addictive qualities, so-called recreational drugs such as cocaine, heroine, and marijuana are prohibited in Islam as well. The societal ramifications of alcohol and drug abuse in terms of automobile accidents, conflict and divorce, and crime and violence are well-documented, affirming for Muslims Islam's wisdom regarding even casual use of such substances.

Mild stimulants such as caffeine found in chocolate, coffee, tea and soft drinks do not have direly adverse effects, and therefore such foods and drinks are permissible, so long as one does not feel addicted to them. Some scholars view smoking as *haram*, due to its addictive nature and clearly detrimental effects upon a person's health and well-being.

## *What is the dress code for Muslims?*

The *Quran*, *Sunnah* and the consensus of Muslim scholars provide a general Islamic dress code that applies to both men and women. In practice, Muslim peoples have integrated the Islamic dress code with their own local cultures, customs and geographical conditions, resulting in great varieties of Muslim dress from region to region.

From the Islamic perspective, clothes are meant for cover and simple adornment, not for demonstration of social status or attraction of the opposite sex. In other words, guidelines for dress are meant to prevent men and women from being objects of desire and temptation. Islamic dress is based on a few guidelines: clothes should be loose fitting, such that the shape of the body is not highlighted; clothes should not be transparent or sheer; clothes should cover certain prescribed parts of the body—for men, minimally the body from the navel to the knee (though it is extremely rare to see a male in a Muslim setting who isn't covered from ankle to neck), and for women, everything except for face, hands and feet. Muslim women who cover according to these guidelines are said to be in *hijab*. The term is also used commonly to describe the head covering or scarf worn by many Muslim women. A Muslim woman who covers her hair does so out of a sense of religious obligation, piety and modesty, and to be clearly recognized as a Muslim woman.

As indicated above, the dress code is interpreted according to cultural setting. In Muslim countries, people often dress in traditional attire. Men may be seen wearing a long tunic-like garment (*thawb* or *jelabiyah*) that extends to the feet, or a shorter shirt-like garment that extends below the hips. Many Muslim men also wear a religious or cultural cap or head dress, such as a *kefiyah*, *kufi* or *fez*. The traditional Muslim woman's dress varies greatly from culture to culture: the full-length chador is popular in the Gulf states and Iran, long coat-like garments are typical of Syria and Jordan, colorful long dresses and turbans can be seen in West Africa, and wrapped saris are common in India. It is also not uncommon in some Muslim countries to see Muslim men and women wearing Western styles. In the United States, immigrant Muslims can be seen in varying traditional clothing, whereas native-born or second and third generation Muslim men and women typically wear Western styles of clothing adapted to the Islamic requirements of covering.

Considering the greater degree of covering required of women, due to pronounced physical differences between men and women, men have a particular responsibility to avert their eyes and treat women with dignity and respect.

*"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity: this will be most conducive to their purity- verily, God is aware of all that we do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms (in public) beyond what may (decently) be apparent thereof; let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms." (Qur'an, 24: 30-31)*

## CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

### *What is the "Nation of Islam"?*

The Nation of Islam was founded in the 1930s by Elijah Poole, who later became widely known as Elijah Muhammad. The organization was formed to address the civil rights concerns of African-Americans in the United States, and advocated complete segregation from "white" society. In order to rally the support of African-Americans seeking an alternative to traditional approaches to long-standing injustices, the Nation used terminology borrowed from the religion of Islam, and simultaneously developed an elaborate mythology to support its claims of black racial superiority.

After the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, his son Warith Deen Muhammad renounced the race-based teachings of the Nation. He and his followers then joined the mainstream community of Muslims. The Nation was later revived by Louis Farrakhan. Today, according to a study by Numan and Associates (Washington D.C.) there are less than 10,000 followers of Farrakhan.

Because the Nation holds that Elijah Muhammad was a prophet of God and that his mentor W.D. Fard was God Incarnate, the Nation cannot be considered a branch or subset of Islam by mainstream Muslims. Such beliefs are contrary to the basic doctrines and tenets of Islam as defined in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Furthermore, the race-based orientation of the Nation contradicts the universalist outlook advocated by worldwide Islam.

### *Who are “Black Muslims?”*

The term “Black Muslim” has been used to describe a follower of the Nation of Islam, though it is considered a confusing misnomer by mainstream Muslims, since Islam is practiced by people of every race and ethnicity. For Muslims the term “Black Muslim” is no more valid than “White Muslim.” So-called “Black Muslims” are not to be confused with Muslims (followers of universal Islam) of African-American or African origin.

### *Who was Malcolm X?*

Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little in 1925), was a very energetic and controversial spokesperson for the Nation of Islam during the 1960s. After becoming disillusioned with the organization and its leader Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X renounced affiliation with the group and set about to clarify his knowledge of Islam as practiced worldwide. He traveled to Makkah, Saudi Arabia to perform the *Hajj*, the journey that all Muslims aspire to make at least once in their lives. Upon his return, he took the name El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, and began developing a new organization to further the cause of African-Americans in the U.S. without the racial trappings of the Nation. Malcolm began telling audiences about his remarkable experiences in the holy land and transformation from someone who believed in the superiority of blacks to someone who believed in the universal equality of all human beings irrespective of race, a cornerstone of mainstream Islam.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1964 while making an address at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. Unfortunately, his death occurred before his new-found ideas and views gained currency and attention, leaving him with an unwarranted stigma among segments of American society because many have remained fixated on his previous nationalist orientation.

## *How do Muslims view people of other faiths?*

Because Muslims accept that Jesus and the Biblical prophets were indeed true Prophets of God, Muslims identify a great deal with teachings found in Christianity and Judaism. Most scholars of religion agree that Judaism, Christianity and Islam share a common monotheistic heritage and world view. The similarities between the three faiths are in many ways greater than the differences. In recognition of this, some scholars call the three religions the “Abrahamic” faiths, since all three trace their history back to the patriarch Abraham.

While cherishing the similarities, Islam holds that by the time of Prophet Muhammad, Rabbinic Judaism and the Christian Church had forgotten, misinterpreted and modified the original teachings of the ancient prophets, including Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. Muslims believe that within Judaism monotheism had been compromised with the raising of the opinions and interpretations of rabbis to the same level of authority as God’s word. In addition the concept of a chosen race or group of people is seen as a misapplication of God’s ancient covenant with Abraham, since God promised to bless all of his progeny. For Muslims, righteousness is the only criterion for a special relationship to God. Within the Christian Church, monotheism was compromised by raising Jesus to the level of God and making him part of the Trinity. Consequently, God selected another prophet to complete the prophetic teachings and reestablish the purity of the primordial monotheistic faith centered solely around worship of the One God.

Despite these criticisms of Judaism and Christianity, Islam advocates positive relations and designates Christians and Jews as *Ahl al-Kitab*, or “People of the Book,” recognizing the divinely revealed origin of the two faith traditions. Historically, Muslims accepted Jews and Christians as *dhimmis*, or protected communities within the Islamic state, allowing them complete freedom to practice their religion and enforce their own religious laws. Moreover, the *Shari’ah* states that injuring non-Muslims, damaging their religious sites or otherwise violating their rights as citizens of the state are strictly forbidden. This protected status was conferred on Hindus, Buddhists and Zoroastrians as well in the course of history. Today, principles of *Shari’ah* remain in effect regarding harmonious and constructive relations between Muslims and people of other faiths.

## *What is Jihad?*

The Arabic word *jihad* means “struggle” or “exertion” and refers to any spiritual, moral or physical struggle. Upon returning from a battle, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “*We are returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad—jihad against the self.*” For Muslims, *jihad* means struggle in the cause of God, which can take many forms. In the personal sphere, efforts such as obtaining an education, trying to quit smoking, or controlling one’s temper are forms of *jihad*.

*Jihad* as a military action is justified in two cases: struggle to defend oneself, or others, from aggression and struggle for freedom of religion and justice. The *Qur’an* says “*Tumult and oppression are worse than killing*” (2:217), and therefore must be thwarted. Human beings as responsible agents of God on earth are compelled to exert themselves to protect the oppressed and strive to create righteous societies.

Systematic, forced conversion to Islam is a historical myth. Muslims defeated hostile forces (Byzantines and Persians for example) and gained control of new lands where Islamic rule was established, yet non-Muslim inhabitants were not forced to become Muslims. Islam clearly condemns such actions: “*There is no compulsion in religion*” (*Qur’an*, 2:256). For various reasons, and in the course of time, many non-Muslims did find the message of Islam appealing, however, and converted to Islam, resulting ultimately in the transformation of society at all levels.

Because *jihad* is a highly nuanced concept, and because the term stems from an Arabic root meaning “struggle,” the term “holy war” is an inappropriate rendering or definition.

## *Does Islam promote violence and terrorism?*

Contrary to popular misconception, Islam does not condone terrorism. Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly-guided *Khalifahs* (caliphs) prohibited the killing of civilians and non-combatants in the course of warfare. The *Qur’an* says, “*Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love the aggressors*” (2:190). Moreover, the *Qur’an* indicates that taking one life unjustly is like taking the life of all humanity, providing a strong moral deterrent to indiscriminate bloodshed. Besides prohibiting the killing of non-combatants, the *Qur’an* and the Prophet also prohibited the torturing of prisoners and the senseless destruction of crops, animals and property.

Struggle against injustice and oppression is a key, distinctive concept in Islam. Through the ages, the concept of righteous struggle has inspired Muslim peoples and movements to stand up against wrong and oppression, as in the case of the wars of independence against colonialism. African-Americans, in recent decades, have been drawn to Islam, in part, because of its activist stance.

## *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*

While some Muslim extremists may perpetrate acts of terrorism, this does not diminish the legitimacy of righteous struggle against oppression and injustice experienced by Muslims in many parts of the world (often at the hands of so-called Muslim leaders). Indeed, such persons actually violate the teachings of Islam.

*“O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is the closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do.” (Qur’an, 5:8).*

In any case, there can be no such thing as “Islamic terrorism,” despite the fact that such terms have become a popular oxymoron. The adjective “Islamic” cannot be applied to what some misguided Muslims do. See the section on *Teaching with Sensitivity* for more on inappropriate usage of various terms.

### *What is “Islamic Fundamentalism”?*

Historically, the term “fundamentalist” was originally applied to those Christians who took the Bible as literal scripture, as opposed to allegorical truth, among other implications. Muslims, on the other hand, have always considered the *Qur’an* to be the literal Speech of God. Moreover, there are no degrees of belief regarding the basic doctrines of faith.

Nowadays, the term “fundamentalist” is used to describe any adherent of the major world religions who holds that faith is a model for modern life and plays a role in political, economic or social matters. Furthermore, in terms of Islam, it is often applied to those Muslims, better termed “extremists” who use unjustified means to achieve particular political goals. A further problem is that the term is often wantonly and pejoratively used in the media to describe Muslims who base their views and actions on a particularly religious worldview. In such cases, sincere, practicing Muslims who perform the daily worship, avoid alcohol, or wear *hijab* are labelled inappropriately, even though their behavior may be normative.

Thus, “Islamic Fundamentalism” is a confusing misnomer, resulting in broad generalizations and misunderstanding.

## *What is Islam's view on human rights and social justice?*

According to Islam, human beings are the noblest creations of God, endowed with consciousness and freedom of choice. The *Qur'an* states that God has made human beings His trustees or stewards on the earth. Muslims see this world as God's field, and human beings as the farmers and caretakers. Muslims believe humanity's ultimate task is to build a world that reflects the will of God. Thus, Islam is balanced in its concern for salvation in the Hereafter as well as peace and justice in the present world. Islam places great emphasis on social justice for all people. Muslims consider it an obligation to oppose all who exploit, oppress, discriminate, and deal unjustly with people.

*"O you who believe, be upholders of justice, witnesses for God even if it be against yourselves." (Qur'an, 4: 135)*

Muslims understand the goal of Islam to be the spiritual upliftment of the individual and productive development of society. The ultimate consequence of rejecting God and His guidance is a selfish, pleasure-seeking, corrupt, and unjust society. Conversely, the natural consequence of obedience to God's laws and living according to His guidance is a society of peace, equality, freedom from want, dignity for all, and justice.



*As-salaam Alaykum — "Peace Be Unto You"*  
The Muslim Greeting, in Diwani Calligraphic Style