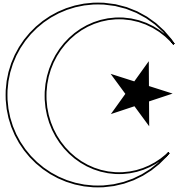


# ISLĀM: A PRIMER



The crescent and star symbol is a reminder that each month of the Islāmic calendar begins with the sighting of the crescent moon—itsself a reminder to the Prophet of his faith in God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth.

## ORIGINS

Islām means “making peace” by submitting to the will of God. A Muslim is a person who submits to God, the source of peace.

- Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islām, was born in the Arabian city of Mecca in 570 CE. He grew up to be a deeply spiritual man and at the age of 40 received the first divine revelations which would continue for twenty-three years.
- In 621, Muḥammad had a profound mystical experience: the *Miʿrāj*, (a Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, then up to the Seventh Heaven and into the very presence of God and back again).
- In 622, Muḥammad responded to increased persecution with the *Hijrah* (the Migration). He and his followers moved north to Yathrib, which was renamed al-Medīnah (the City) or, Madīnatu'n-Nabī (The City of the Prophet) in his honor. In 630, Muḥammad returned to Mecca in triumph. He died in 632.
- Leadership of Islām passed to a series of Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abū-Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthman, and Alī.
- Islām continued to spread into Europe and throughout Asia. Today, Islām includes people of many races and nationalities, with Arabs in the minority.

- Muslims have been in the Americas since at least 1539. In the US, the first formal Islāmic prayer group was formed in 1900 in North Dakota. The first mosque was built in 1934 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

## BELIEFS

- Muslims believe that there is but One God—unique and incomparable—whom they call by the Arabic word, *Allāb* (The God). The Qurʾān contains “Ninety-Nine Names of God”—descriptions like “the Merciful,” “the Compassionate,” and “the Patient.” They believe God has complete authority over human destiny; on the Last Day (the Day of Judgment) everyone will be called to account for their deeds and will be sent to eternal life in the Garden or the Fire (Paradise or Hell).
- Muslims trace their spiritual heritage from Abraham through his eldest son, Ishmael. They pray facing Mecca, the site of the *Kaʿbah*—an ancient stone sanctuary and place of pilgrimage which they believe Abraham himself built at God’s command. Muslims believe



“love  
your  
neighbor  
as  
yourself”



God has sent humanity many prophets—including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—but that Muḥammad is the “Seal,” the final voice in this chain. (Muslims customarily add “Peace be upon him” when they mention the name of any prophet.) Muslims believe that Muḥammad did not inaugurate a new religion, but a revitalized the truth God had revealed through each previous prophet. Thus, according to Islām, the Qurʾān summarizes, reconfirms, and supersedes all previous holy scripture. Muslims believe in angels as God’s heavenly servants, one of whom—*Jibrīl*—recited the Qurʾān to Muḥammad.

- According to a famous story known as the *Ḥadīth of Gabriel*, the religion of Islām has three inseparable dimensions: *islām* (submission, demonstrated through five narrative practices), *īmān* (faith, defined as belief in six core concepts), and *iḥsān* (behaving in all things as though one sees God, because one knows that God sees us). This third dimension, an active form of the same root which gives us the Arabic word for “beauty,” implies that “doing what is beautiful” should be the Muslim’s guiding principle in all things.

- Literally, *jihād* means effort, or striving. According to the Prophet, the *Greater Jihād* is the effort to improve one’s own spiritual life and to work for the good for society. The *Lesser Jihād* (armed defense of the faith) is justifiable only as a last resort in very particular, extreme circumstances, after all other efforts have been taken in full. This understanding of *jihād* (to which most Muslims subscribe) is consonant with Islam’s teachings on peace, mercy, and forgiveness.

- After the death of Muḥammad, Islām split into two major factions which agree in most matters of doctrine and practice, but differ on issues of authority. Sunnī Muslims (85%) believe that authority rests in community consensus. They believe Muḥammad died without appointing a successor; therefore, the community’s election of Abū-Bakr as first caliph was legitimate. The Shīʿah minority believes Muḥammad designated his son-in-law, Alī, to succeed him, and that authentic leadership and infallible authority lie in a heredi-

tary succession of *Imāms*. They believe the last of these did not die, but was “hidden” by God and will return. This split was sealed in 680 CE, by the martyrdom of Husayn (son of Alī and grandson of the Prophet) and his followers at Karbala, Persia.

## ★ WRITINGS

- Al-Qurʾān means “the recital”. Muslims believe the Qurʾān to be the very words of God, revealed to humanity through the prophet Muḥammad. Family and followers collected these recitations — which were authenticated, and then codified as a single volume of sacred scripture under Caliph ʿUthmān in 650 CE. The Qurʾān contains a total of 114 *sūras* (chapters) of rhymed prose. After the first one, which is short, suras are arranged from longest to shortest. Their names and verse numbers are part of the revelation. Because the Qurʾān was received in Arabic, this language is sacred to Islām; translations of the Qurʾān lack the authority of the original.

- The *Ḥadīth* — the record of the prophet Muḥammad’s *sunna* (his own sayings and deeds, rather than divine revelation received by him)—is the second authority only to the Qurʾān. This body of literature also was collected by the prophet’s followers and eventually was authenticated and given written form.

- From earliest times, Muslim scholars have produced a vast quantity of literature on Islāmic law, philosophy, and theology. Sufis — Islām’s mystics — have composed much of Islām’s popular devotional writings.

## ★ PRACTICE

- Islām has Five Pillars, or obligatory practices: witness, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage.

- *Shahādah* (testimony) is recitation of the formula, “I bear witness that there is no God but God, and Muḥammad is the messenger of God.”

- *Ṣalāt* is formal prayer five times a day, involving ritual cleansing and a set pattern of postures and texts.

- *Zakat* (purification) requires return of 2½% of one's annual wealth to the community for those in need.

- *Ṣawm* (fasting): abstinence from all food, drink, and sexual relations between sunrise and sundown during the month of Ramaḍān (a reminder of their solidarity with those whose hunger and thirst is not by choice).

- *Hajj* refers to pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca during the twelfth month of the Islāmic year, and is expected as least once in the lifetime of all who are physically and financially able. (The ritual lasts several days. All pilgrims wear simple white garments and participate in a prescribed series of devotional acts.)

- A Muslim place for worship is called a *masjid* (mosque). It may have a *minaret* (tower) from which the call to prayer is chanted. A mosque may be a special building, or a room within some other building. Shoes must be removed before entering; women must cover their heads with a scarf. Often, there are separate areas for women and men.

- The mosque's exterior may be quite simple or ornately decorated by designs and calligraphy. Its austere interior promotes tranquility. It is devoid of furniture, and the floor is covered with carpets and prayer mats. The walls may be adorned with Qur'ān verses, the *Shabāḍah*, or the name of God written in Arabic calligraphy, or even a poster containing the entire Qur'ān written in tiny script. Every mosque has a *miḥrāb*—a niche in the wall pointing toward Mecca, the direction of prayer.

- Muslims may come to the mosque for any of the five obligatory daily prayer times, or may perform them wherever they happen to be. They may also stop at the mosque for private individual prayer at any time. *Jum'ah* (congregational worship) is held on Fridays at noon. This includes a *khuṭbah* (sermon) as well as *ṣalāt*.

- *Shari'ah* (literally, the broad path that leads to water) is understood to be Divine Law based on the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth*. *Shari'ah* is interpreted by legal reasoning (*fiqh*), which defines what is *ḥalāl* (permissible) and *ḥarām* (prohibited) in all aspects of life: politics, economics, dress, family, diet, etc. Accordingly, for example, It is *ḥarām* to eat pork, drink alcohol, or to engage in usury (collecting of interest). For many Muslim women, the injunction to guard one's modesty (which applies to men as well) implies the necessity for wearing long sleeved, ankle-length garments and a *ḥijāb* (head-covering) in public.

## ORGANIZATION

- Islām sees no need for and intermediary between humanity and God, and so, no need for clergy; anyone may lead community prayer. However, some congregations do hire an Imām—a scholar trained in Islām—to lead the daily prayers, deliver the weekly sermon, teach, advise, etc.

- Muslim congregations may call their meeting place an Islamic Center to underscore the variety of activities in houses.

- In the United States, Mosques and Islamic Centers are supported by voluntary contributions and fund-raising events, and are administered by an elected board.

- In the United States, several national organizations—such as the Islāmic Circle of North America (Jamaica, NY)—offer support and publish materials helpful to local communities.

## SOCIAL ACTION

- Social action is essential for achieving Islām's goal of a just, ethical society. To narrow the gap between rich and poor, Islām calls for two forms of charitable giving. The *zakāt*, a primary religious obligation, mandates the donation of two-and-a-half per cent of one's annual disposable income to those in need. *Sadaqah* refers to giving beyond this legal re-

quirement. Islām's two major holiday celebrations include the collection of an offering on behalf of the needy and the distribution of food to the hungry.

- A steadily growing network of US Islamic charitable institutions strives to alleviate human suffering. Some distribute clothing, food, and referral information to the destitute. Others work on environmental issues and provide free medical examinations to the needy. Still others address human rights and racial-profiling issues.

## HOLIDAYS

- Islām uses a non-adjusting lunar calendar which numbers the years from the migration to Medina. Holidays shift through the solar seasons. The two major holidays are:

- *°du'l-Fiṭr* marks the breaking of the fast of *Ramaḍān* by giving charity to the needy, additional mid-morning prayer, visits with friends and family, and exchanging gifts.

- *°du'l-Adḥā* is the festival of sacrifice at the conclusion of the *Hajj*. It commemorates the willingness of the prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ishmael in obedience to God's command. Animals (usually a lamb) are sacrificed, and part of the meat is offered to the needy. The day includes special prayer, family gatherings, gift-giving, and rejoicing.

- Other holidays include:

- *Laylatu'l-Qadr* (Night of Power) marks the beginning of divine revelation to Muḥammad.

- Islamic New Year, Muḥammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem (*al-Isrā*) and his Ascension into heaven (*al-Mir'āj*) are also celebrated.

- Shī'ah Muslims observe *'Ashūrā'*—the anniversary of the martyrdom of Husayn—with a ten-day festival in the first month of the Islāmic year.

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