



Pre-Islamic Arabia, c. 600 CE.

## An Introduction to Islam

- Islam, which is typically translated as "submission to Allah" (Qur'an, Surah 3, verse 19), is derived from the Arabic word salam, which means "peace." When Muslims greet one another, they will do so by saying "Assalamu Alaikum," which means "peace be upon you."
- Most Arabs are Muslims, but most Muslims are not Arab.
- Worldwide, there are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims. Islam is the dominant religion throughout large portions of Asia and Africa, with the largest Muslim populations living in Indonesia (170.3 million), Pakistan (136 million), Bangladesh (106 million), and India (103 million).
- Islam is the second largest, and fastest growing, of the three major monotheistic religions, the others being Christianity and Judaism.

- A Muslim is someone who believes that there is no god but Allah,<sup>1</sup> Muhammad (PBUH) is his messenger, and the Qur'an is the word of Allah. (As well as abiding by the five pillars of Islam). The Qur'an is Allah's word, as revealed to the prophet Muhammad (570-632 C.E.) through the angel Gabriel.
- Muslims believe that Jesus is the Messiah (Al-Masih). However, Jesus being referred to as the Messiah in the Qur'an is different from the way Christians think of the Messiah in the Bible. According to Islam, there are many prophets, including Noah (Nuh), Jesus (Isa), Abraham (Ibrahim), and Moses (Musa).

M. A. Abdel Haleem writes in the introduction of *The Qur'an: A New Translation*:

The Qur'an

clearly defines its relationship with earlier scriptures by saying: 'He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people' (3: 3-4). Indeed it urges the Christians and the Jews to practise their religion (5: 68, 45, 47). They are given the honorific title of 'People of the Book', and the Qur'an appeals to what is common between them: 'Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords"' (3: 64).

The Qur'an forbids arguing with the People of the Book except in the best way and urges the Muslims to say: 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one [and the same]' (29: 46). God addresses Muslims, Jews, and Christians with the following: 'We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about' (5: 48). The Qur'an allows Muslims to eat the food of the People of the Book and marry their women (5: 5). These are explicit statements which Muslims involved in interfaith dialogue rely upon.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arabic for "The God."

- The five pillars of Islam are:

**Shahada:** to declare one's belief in Allah and the prophetic role of Muhammad;

**Salat:** to pray five times every day (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening);

**Zakat:** to give charity to those in need;

**Sawm:** to fast from food, water, and other bodily pleasures during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan;

**Haj:** [to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if this is physically and economically possible.](#)

- Muslims worship Allah directly. Religious leaders do not have any divine characteristics; people and objects are not considered holy. It is, in fact, sacrilegious to worship anything or anyone outside of Allah.
- Women and men dress modestly out of reverence for Allah. Muslim women are not more submissive than other women.
- In many cases Muslim women have been treated better than in other cultures. For example, women in Islam were given the right to vote about 1,400 years ago, centuries before their Christian sisters. Of course, like many other cultures, patriarchal culture can corrupt Muslim culture.<sup>2</sup>
- There are two main sects of Islam: Sunni and Shiite. One of their main differences is in their beliefs about who were the leaders following the death of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>3</sup>

*Sunni*, from the Arabic word for "tradition," accepted the succession of Muhammad's elected successors. The majority of Muslims in the world today are Sunnis.

*Shi'ah*, from the Arabic word for "faction," believe that leaders must be descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. The government of Iran is populated by folks professing Shi'ah Islam. A sizable community of Shi'ah Muslims also live in Iraq and Syria.

---

<sup>2</sup> It was Khadijah bint Khuwaylid who proposed marriage to the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>3</sup> Sects (Sunni and Shiite) in Islam are not allowed. Islam does not endorse divisions within the religion. In the Quran it is stated that we should not divide ourselves and break the religion into sects. "As for those who divide Their religion and break up into sects, thou hast no part in them in the least: Their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did." [Al-Qur'an 6:159]

- The Hijri calendar (Islamic calendar) is a lunar calendar (354-355 days) which begins its count from the Islamic New Year in which Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Yathrib (now Medina) in 622 CE. In the West, this era is commonly denoted as AH (Latin: Anno Hegirae, 'in the year of the Hijra').
  - There are two major holidays in Islam: Eid al Adha is at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca and Eid al Fitr is at the end of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month of the lunar calendar when it was thought that the Prophet Muhammad received the Qur'an.

What year is it?

Gregorian Calendar	Hijri Calendar	Hebrew Calendar
2024 AD/CE	1445 AH	AM 5784

- Islam is very family-oriented. The primary means of transmitting the religion is through the family. Therefore parents, both mothers and fathers, take on a big responsibility when raising children. This family orientation also translates into a community-oriented way of life that can greatly conflict with Western notions of individuality.