

Understanding Islam

In order to understand Islam's place in history, it is important to understand the nature and characteristics of the religion.

The Islamic Faith

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is an Abrahamic religion—that is, it traces its history back to Abraham. Islam holds that the Jewish and Christian scriptures—the Old and New Testaments, as they are known in Christianity—are holy books. However, just as Christianity claims to supersede Judaism, Islam claims to supersede both Christianity and Judaism. The Islamic faith holds that the Qur'an, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is God's ultimate and unadulterated Word. Muslims do not consider Muhammad to be divine, but they consider him the final prophet in a long line of men chosen by God to reveal His will. Muslims often call Muhammad the Seal of the Prophets.

Muslims believe that Islam is the true faith, which has been revealed by God many times before through other prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but that the faith had been changed and corrupted, until Muhammad revealed it once again through the Qur'an. Muhammad is neither the center of Islamic worship (God is the center of worship) nor do Muslims consider Muhammad the founder of the religion (since they consider it the eternal and universal religion from God). The word *Islam* comes from the Arabic word for submission, since submission to God is an important aspect of the faith. Individual followers of Islam are called Muslims. Another term for Muslims that has been used by non-Muslims in the past is Mohammedans (older history books sometimes use this term), but Muslims consider this term offensive, since they worship God, not Muhammad.

Not all Arabs are Muslims and not all Muslims are Arabs. Islam was introduced to the Arabs by Muhammad, but in the course of the Islamic conquests Islam was spread to many other peoples. Persians, Turks, Berbers, and members of many other ethnic groups embraced Islam. At the same time, no ethnic group is uniformly Muslim. Many Arabs are Christians, and some are also Jews. In the end, it is important to remember that Islam is a belief system, not an ethnicity.

Holy Texts

Like in other religions, Islamic beliefs and practices are dictated through holy texts. The first and most important is the Qur'an. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God as communicated to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. The Qur'an is made up of 114 chapters (suras).

If a question is not answered by consulting the Qur'an, a Muslim is to next consult the Sunnah, the practices and ideas taught by Muhammad himself. The main source for such information are Hadith, acts or sayings of Muhammad collected in various books (somewhat similar to the gospels of Jesus for Christians). Since it is important that Hadith be accurate tales of Muhammad, and not later legend, Islamic

scholars over the centuries came up with ways to judge whether a Hadith is authentic or not. The transmission of a Hadith must have a document line of descent going back to a reliable person who witnessed the words or actions of Muhammad.

The Five Pillars of Islam

There are five basic requirements of all Muslims, known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

The first pillar is *shahadah*, a creed that all Muslims are required to say. The shahadah states: “There is no God but Allah (no god except God alone), and Muhammad is His messenger.”

The second pillar is *salat*—prayer. Prayers are to be performed five times a day and are to be composed of verses from the Qur'an.

The third pillar is *zakat*—almsgiving. Muslims are required to give to the poor, as wealth is considered a gift from God that should be shared with other people.

The fourth pillar is *sawm*—fasting. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are supposed to fast from dawn to dusk (unless it poses a threat to their health).

The final pillar is the *hajj*—pilgrimage. Every able-bodied Muslim who can afford it must make the pilgrimage to Mecca once.