

Islam - Background And Beliefs Of Islam

The Islamic faith has served as the foundation for the moral and spiritual development of many generations of people. The word *Islam* literally means *submission to Allah* (Higab 1983). Islam is a monotheistic religion. Any person who makes a pledge to submit to Allah is referred to as a Muslim. Muslims display their Islamic beliefs through everyday practices, guided chiefly by the teachings in the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the holy book that serves as the blueprint for the life that Muslims believe Allah prescribed. The Qur'an, along with the Sunnah, and the Hadith, practices and traditions of the prophet Muhammed, provides guidance and direction for daily living. Each person is obliged to live his or her life in accordance with these traditions and practices (Al-Hali and Khan 1993). The Prophet Mohammed is believed to be the one true prophet who received the word of God in the seventh century as recorded in the sacred writings of the Qur'an. The religion of Islam has less formal structure than does Judaism or Christianity; there are no rabbis, priests, or ministers, for example. The imam of a mosque, the closest parallel to these roles, is considered to be more like a teacher than a leader or mediator. The other chief divergence between Islam and Judeo-Christian religions lies in the six articles of faith and the five pillars of Islam listed below. In addition to worshipping Allah (God), the practicing Muslim must pray five times a day, fast yearly during Ramadan, contribute to the poor, and make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime. Due to the nature of these practices, Islam tends to be more visible, more daily, and more ritualized than other religions may appear to be (El-Amin 1991).

The Six Articles of Faith represent the necessary beliefs that undergird the religion of Islam. These beliefs support the core of Islamic faith. They are:

1. Belief in the Oneness of God (Allah). This view stems from the belief that God is one being, and there are no other creators but God. Muslims believe in various prophets who were sent divine messages from God, but they worship only one God.
2. Belief in the Holy Book. This concept pertains to Muslims' belief in the Holy Qur'an. This book serves as the blueprint for a way of life. Muslims believe that it contains all of the necessary elements for a productive life here on earth.
3. Belief in the angels. This is the belief that angels are messengers sent from God. However, they should not be worshipped by humans and should only be viewed as messengers from God.
4. Belief in the Prophet. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last prophet sent by Allah. However, Muslims also believe that other persons such as Abraham and Jesus are prophets.
5. Belief in the day of judgment. This stems from the Islamic belief that there is life after death and that one's actions as an earthly being shall be judged by the Creator (Allah).
6. Belief in predestination. Muslims believe that Allah predestines one's life in reference to good versus evil.

The Five Pillars of Faith represent the fundamental practices necessary to incorporating Islam into a way of life. The five pillars are:

1. Worship of Allah (God). This basic pillar incorporates the other four. To acknowledge Allah is to adhere to the messages sent to Muhammad as the Holy Word.
2. Prayer. This pillar is viewed as one of the most fundamental practices of Islam. Muslims believe that praying five times a day serves as a daily vow of submission to Allah. Prior to prayer, cleansing is done (i.e., washing of hands/body) as a sign of purifying one's self in preparation for giving praise to Allah.

3. Fasting. This Islamic principle serves as Muslims' vow of abstinence from food, drink, or sexual behavior for a period of time. This serves as a test of one's willingness to submit to Allah.
4. Zakat. This principle refers to the donating of a portion of one's property/income to various areas of need within the Muslim community. These may include donations to the poor and maintenance of public facilities.
5. Pilgrimage. When possible, this pillar is viewed as a sacred voyage back to the holy city of Mecca. It is believed that Mecca is the city where the Prophet Muhammad received his revelation from Allah. It is at this time when all Muslims can come together to pay homage to Allah.

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Islam - Gender Relations

Relationships between men and women vary slightly by country of origin and governmental regulations but are nonetheless for all Muslims guided by Islamic law and practice, as specified in the Qur'an. The Qur'an sets the ideals that describe the relationship between men and women. It states, "[A]nd for women are rights over men similar to those of men over women" (2:226). This Surah (Qur'anic passage) supports the act of mutual submission of women and men to each other. The interpretation of this teaching varies. The independence and

rights of women were originally supported by the prophet Muhammed, but Muslim scholars and governments have interpreted these rights in a variety of ways. History also notes that Muhammed began the practice of taking multiple wives and the obligatory veiling of women in public. Polygamy has fallen out of general practice and acceptance in most parts of the Muslim world but the obligatory veiling of women—called *hijab*—has remained. This veiling or hijab is practiced to some degree by virtually all Muslim women around the world. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, hijab is interpreted and regulated by the government as a total covering with black cloth of a woman's face, head, and body. In other countries, such as Iran, hijab is interpreted as a head covering with modest clothing to cover the body. The hijab is an identifying characteristic of Muslim women that renders them more visible in societies such as the United States, where head covering is not routinely practiced. Unfortunately, some Muslim women have experienced harassment or refusal of employment because of this visible requirement to cover their head or person.

Traditionally women and men are not free to date or intermingle, so the choice of a spouse is a more deliberate process. The vast majority of marriages are arranged marriages; that is, parents or guardians select appropriate mates for their offspring and bring them together for matrimony. The amount of choice and acceptance of these potential partners varies by culture and sometimes by class and educational status. Important characteristics in choosing a worthy mate are faith and chastity as demonstrated in this Surah (Qur'an 33:35): "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward."

As in most religions and cultures, marriage in Islam is a legal contract promoting love and harmony as well as procreation between a woman and a man (Higab 1983). This concept of commitment is strongly rooted in the Qur'an. The Qur'an gives a detailed account of the marital relationship and the responsibilities of each partner. Accordingly, it is stated that Allah believes that men and women are

equal with no one person having precedence over the other. Nevertheless, it is believed that there are different functions of wives and husbands in regards to marriage. Note this Surah from the Qur'an (4:34): "Men are protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given them more physical strength than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in the husband's absence what Allah have them guard." Therefore, in Islam, the concept of marriage is viewed as a partnership with each person complementing the other (Lemu 1978). This means that the obedience required from Muslim women complements the role of the husband as the provider of the family. In other words, as long as the husband adheres to the proper Islamic teachings regarding his family, the woman's loyalty is supposed to be maintained.

Additionally, some basic fundamental ideas are recognized as central to a Muslim marriage (Sakr 1991). The family is recognized as the foundation of Islamic society. Husbands and wives are expected to produce offspring and maintain close relations with extended family members. Individuals are strongly encouraged to marry, and there is pressure on all single men and women to marry as soon as possible. Connected with this notion that Allah has established a mate for each individual. It is understood that these two persons should live together harmoniously in pursuit of a productive life. Premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse is prohibited. Men and women are expected to enter marriage in a virginal state and remain faithful. Marriage is regarded as an aspect of the Islamic faith that should be fulfilled with various benefits to the individuals involved (i.e., earthly and heavenly). Central is the custom that a groom provide a dowry (sum of money) to the bride or her family prior to marriage as a sign of commitment to the family. This dowry varies with cultures and traditions but is fairly universal in practice. Wives should expect to be supported by their husbands financially and are not expected to work outside of the home. In return, husbands can expect procreative and sexual access to their wives. When a couple marries, marriage should be publicized with a *waleemah* (reception) offered in celebration of the new marriage. Marriages should be celebrated publicly to announce to the world the beginning of a sacred commitment.

From an ecological perspective, Muslims believe that the marital dyad is crucial to the survival of the ecology of the family and the community. It is believed that these systems (i.e., family and community) are dependent upon the unity that is maintained in Muslim marriages (Sakr 1991). Additionally, the extended kinship established through marriage creates an even larger network that should enhance marital quality (Ninji 1993). Thus, the Islamic view of marriage identifies this institution as the central element of Muslim communities.

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Islam - Family Relations

In addition to the responsibilities that men and women have in marriage, parenthood is central to Muslim identity and faith. As an Islamic parent, it is necessary to follow certain criteria when rearing children. These include maintaining an Islamic environment, especially in the home, and adhering to Islamic teachings regarding dress, diet, and prayer that are essential components of a household. The couple must educate the children with the understanding

that Allah's teachings are the only acceptable principles for practicing a proper way of life. Providing religious education is the core responsibility of the parents. Often the father also takes on this more formally with older children, especially males. Parents must also serve as examples of the correct way of life according to Allah, and they must establish a sense of open communication among family members. The couple is expected to expose children to other Muslim families and children. This is especially important in countries in which Islam is only one of multiple practicing religions.

The role of motherhood is highly esteemed. Women as mothers are at the center of the family (Sherif 1999). The duties of motherhood are highly respected and considered a major responsibility and privilege of womanhood. Traditionally, the Muslim family is an extended rather than nuclear unit. The Qur'an supports respect for parents and elders and the necessary interdependence and mutual responsibility of young and old for the good of everyone. Extended family members offer guidance on childrearing and marriage and also provide support and mediation in times of need. Extended family participation and support is a welcome and common part of daily life.

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Islam - Conclusion

Muslim individuals and families live around the world in many different countries and practice their faith in similar ways. Cultural variations such as type of dress and rituals for weddings may vary, but fundamentally Muslims are governed by the same principles found in the Qur'an. Of note is the fact that in the year 2000, the number of Muslims surpassed the number of Christians in the world. This may mean that Islam will be more visible in years to come in Western cultures. Insights and information about religions and practices can be a helpful way to facilitate more visibility and understanding.

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