

9 Things You Should Know About Islam

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Christians need to become more aware of Ramadan as well as the other practices and tenets of this fast-growing global religion. As an aid in that effort, here are nine things you should know about Islam.

1. Islam in Arabic is a verbal noun, meaning self-surrender to Allah (literally: “the god) as revealed through the “message and life of his prophet Mohammed.” In the religious sense, Muslim means “anyone or anything that surrenders itself to the true will of God.”

2. The Quran (literally meaning “the recitation”) is the central religious text of Islam, which Muslims believe to be the unedited revelation from Allah verbally revealed through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad while he was in a trance-like state. This “revelation” occurred gradually over a period of approximately 23 years concluding in the year of Mohammed’s death. A number of his companions who knew the Quran by heart decided to collect the book in one volume so that it could be preserved. Quranic chapters are called suras and verses are called ayahs.

3. For a believing Muslim, the Quran occupies the position Christ has for Christians. A Muslim should not handle the text unless they are in a state of ritual purity. Readings are preceded by the phrase “I take refuge with God from Satan, the accursed one,” and followed by “God almighty has spoken truly.” Certain verses are even credited with curative powers (the first sura is claimed to be good for scorpion bites).

4. The first sura of the Quran — considered to be the perfect embodiment of Islam — is repeated in daily prayers and in other occasions. This sura, which consists of seven verses, is the most often recited sura of the Quran:

“All praise belongs to God, Lord of the Universe, the Beneficent, the Merciful and Master of the Day of Judgment, You alone We do worship and from You alone we do seek assistance, guide us to the right path, the path of those to whom You have granted blessings, those who are neither subject to Your anger nor have gone astray.”

This sura is repeated during the five prayers Muslim are required to pray every 24 hours.

5. The basic religious duties of Muslims are known as the Five Pillars:

Shahadah: declaring there is no god except Allah, and Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger

Salat: ritual prayer five times a day. In performing salat, the precise body movements are as important as the mental state. Salat may be performed almost anywhere provided that the Muslim faces the “Qibla,” that is, in the direction of Islam's most sacred mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Zakat: compulsory charity for the poor, assessed at 2.5 percent of capital assets (items such as bank deposits but not possessions such as cars or houses).

Sawm: fasting from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the lunar calendar).

Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if he or she is able; the hajj takes place during the last ten days of the twelfth lunar month.

6. Sharia is the moral code and religious law of Islam. There are two primary sources of sharia law: the precepts set forth in the Quranic verses (ayahs), and the example set by Muhammad in the Sunnah. Sharia classifies behavior into the following types or grades: fard (obligatory), mustahabb (recommended), mubah (neutral), makruh (discouraged), and haraam (forbidden). Every human action belongs in one of these five categories. Today, most Muslim countries adopt only a few aspects of sharia, while a few countries apply the entire code.

7. The Islamic view of the Bible is based on the belief that the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels were revelation from Allah that became distorted or corrupted. Muslims believe that Jesus was a Muslim prophet (a messenger of Allah), and that he was not the son of God. They believe he was never crucified or resurrected, nor indeed died at all. Instead, the Quran claims, “God raised him unto Himself.”

8. Islam is often classified, along with Judaism and Christianity, as one of the three “Abrahamic faiths.” But the Muslim conception of Abraham is radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Islam, Abraham is the prototypical Muslim prophet and that it is in the Quran in which the “religion of Abraham” is to be found. For example, a distinctive of Abraham in the Quran is the report that he and his son Ishmael built the Kaaba in Mecca and established it as a place of worship for Allah. The Abraham of the Quran differs so much from the Abraham of the Bible that it is misleading to claim they refer to the same person.

9. The two main denominations of Islam are Sunni and Shi’ite. Muslims have a similar creed (shahadah) roughly translated as, “There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” The Shi’ite, however, tack on an additional sentence: “Ali is the Friend of Allah. The Successor of the Messenger of Allah And his first Caliph.” Ali was Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the reason these groups are often in opposition to one another (the terms Shia and Shi’ite come from condensing Shiat Ali, “partisans of Ali”). After Muhammad died, the leadership of the Muslim believers (the Ummah) was the responsibility of the Caliph, a type of tribal leader. The Sunnis respect Ali and consider him the fourth Caliph while the Shi’a contends he was cheated out of being first. Sunnis, following the tradition of the period, thought the Caliph should be chosen by the community while Shi’ites believe the office should be passed down only to direct descendants of Muhammad. Around 85 percent of the world’s Muslims are Sunni while only about 15 percent are Shi’a. Iran is predominantly Shi’a while Saudi Arabia, and almost all other Arab countries, are Sunni.