

Over a fifth of the world's population is Muslim - what does it mean to be a Muslim?

The word Islam means 'peaceful submission to God'. Those who believe in Islam are known as Muslims, or 'those who submit peacefully to God'. Islam is one of the 3 major world religions, or Abrahamic faiths, along with Judaism and Christianity. In order to be a Muslim, one must acknowledge that the prophets of Judaism and Christianity were all prophets sent by God. Whilst Islam accepts the teachings of all these prophets, including Jesus, peace be upon him, its adherents do not believe that God has assumed human form.

The Islamic explanation as to why God has never assumed human form is contained succinctly in the chapter of the Qur'an entitled 'Sincerity':

'Say: He is God, the One and Only;

God, the Eternal, Absolute;

He begets not, nor is He begotten

And none is like Him'

Muslims believe that all the prophets (including Abraham, Moses and Jesus, may peace be upon them all) were all Muslims as they all peacefully submitted to belief in this one unique God.

The point is often incorrectly made that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship a different God. But since Moses spoke Hebrew, Jesus spoke Hebrew and Aramaic and Muhammed spoke Arabic (may peace and blessings be upon them all), they obviously referred to God by a name in their native language. It is instructive at this point to point out that Christians in the Lebanon

refer to God as 'Allah'. Christians and Jews are acknowledged in the Qur'an as 'people of the book' because they have also received God's message in the form of revelation.

Sources of guidance in Islam

In Islam there are two main sources of law (or Sharia) - the Holy Qur'an, believed by Muslims to be the exact word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, 1400 years ago by the Angel Gabriel, and the Sunnah - the systematically reported actions, deeds, sayings and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. These laws provide the framework within which a Muslim lives his or her life.

The basics of Islam and the five pillars of the faith

The principal tenets of Islam include belief in the oneness of God, acknowledgement of the equality of all humans, the innocence of humans at birth and belief in the accountability of our actions before God. Islam is not simply a religion - rather it is a way of living in harmony with all creation and a guidance for mankind teaching not only the nature of human existence but also the best modes of behaviour in every social context. This guidance extends from the origins of the universe to such a level of detail as to include, by way of example, the best way to sleep (the recovery position) how to conduct oneself in a group of people where some speak an additional language which others do not (all should speak in the language understood by all so as not to exclude anyone).

Muslims heed five pillars or practices: (1) the belief that there is one God and that Muhammad, peace be upon him, was his prophet (the Shahada); (2) the five-times-daily prayers (the Salat); (3) the annual month-long fast from sunrise to sunset (Ramadhan); (4) distribution of a purifying tax (Zakat) among the poor; and (5) pilgrimage (Hajj).

Places

In Islam, God requires all Muslims who are physically fit enough and can afford it to undertake a pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca in the Arabian peninsula at least once in their lifetime. Mecca is the

home of the Cube ('Ka'aba') which was a place of worship originally built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham and Ismail, may peace be upon them.

Medina is also highly esteemed by Muslims as it was the city where the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, and his followers sought sanctuary from persecution when Islam was first revealed. Jerusalem is regarded as the third holiest city in Islam and has a particular importance in the Qur'an.

Community profile

There are two main groups of Muslims. Sunni Muslims make up 90% of the world's Muslims. The other main group are the Shi'ite Muslims. Britain's UK 2001 census confirms that, with more than 1.6 million UK Muslims (2.7% of the population), Islam is now this country's second largest faith after Christianity. Britain's Muslims are a diverse and vibrant community forming an essential part of Britain's multi-ethnic and multi-racial society.

Large Muslim communities exist in the West Midlands, West Yorkshire, Bradford, Lancashire, Greater London and in Scotland's central belt.

Important events and dates and their impact upon employees [\[1\]](#) :

Prayer 5 times a day

Muslims are required to pray 5 times a day - before dawn (Fajr), around midday (Zuhr), in the late afternoon (Asr), at sunset (Maghrib) and in the late evening (Isha). These prayers consist of recitation of the Qur'an and last for a few minutes. They can be performed individually or in congregation. However, it is highly recommended that Muslims pray as many of their daily prayers as possible in congregation. Praying in congregation helps Muslims remember that all people are equal in the sight of God no matter their race or status in the society we live in.

Prayers have to be performed in a clean area and the individual must face the direction of

Mecca. Prior to praying, Muslims must perform ablution (or Wudhu) which consists of washing their hands, arms, head, face and feet so that they are in a state of purity when they pray.

Each prayer must be performed within a certain timeframe between the last prayer time and the next prayer time. As such there is a useful degree of flexibility to a certain extent as to when they can be performed.

Jummah - the Friday noon prayer

Friday is a special day for Muslims. Almost all countries in the Muslim world have their weekend on Friday and Saturday as opposed to Saturday and Sunday. Friday is a day for Muslims to join together in worship. This is emphasised by the performance of a special prayer known as *Jummah*. It is obligatory for Muslim men to pray their Friday midday prayer (i.e. the Jummah prayer) in congregation. The Jummah prayer, performed around midday, consists of a sermon in addition to a slightly shorter than normal midday prayer.

Ramadhan

Ramadhan is a celebratory month for Muslims as it was the month during which the Qur'an was revealed by God via the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet, peace be upon him. It is marked by a period of fasting (from dawn to sunset each day). God says in the Quran, (2-183): 'O you who believe, fasting is prescribed on you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you may become self-restrained.'

During Ramadhan Muslims try to eat a meal called 'suhur' just before dawn. They will then abstain from food and drink until sunset. At sunset, most Muslims will break their fast with dates or water, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, before having a proper meal later. The feeling of community and brother/sisterhood is increased exponentially during Ramadhan with Muslims inviting each other to open their fasts and eat together. It is customary in the Middle East (and in some parts of the UK) for restaurant owners and street vendors to give food away to those who have been fasting - indeed acts of charity are particularly encouraged at this time of year. Once the fast is opened, Muslims pray the Maghrib (sunset) prayer and later congregate in the Mosque for special evening prayers known

as Taraweeh (see below).

Although fasting during the month of Ramadan is obligatory for all Muslims, those who are physically or mentally unwell are excused, as are those who are under twelve years old, the very old, those who are pregnant, breast-feeding, menstruating, or travelling. However, if an adult does not fast for any of these reasons they should try to make up the fast at a later date, or make a charitable donation to the poor instead.

This month is a time of increased spiritual awareness for Muslims and fasting is a method of learning self-restraint and gratitude because the fasting person should abstain not only from food but also from evil thoughts and deeds as well. As the Prophet, peace be upon him, said 'If one does not abandon falsehood in words and deeds, God has no need for his abandoning of his food and drink.'

Indeed there are many good reasons for fasting, including:

- Obeying God.
- Learning self-discipline.
- Becoming spiritually stronger.
- Appreciating God's gifts to us.
- Sharing the sufferings of the poor and developing sympathy for them.
- Realising the value of charity & generosity.
- Sharing fellowship with other Muslims.
- Giving thanks for the revelation of the Holy Qur'an, which was first revealed in the month of Ramadan.

As mentioned earlier, the Holy Qur'an was revealed during the month of Ramadhan and one of the most rewarding acts of worship for a Muslim during this month is the praying of the Taraweeh prayers. Taraweeh prayers are prayed in congregation in the Mosque in the evening. The Qur'an consists of 30 chapters and the Taraweeh prayers involve the recitation by the Imam of the Mosque of all 30 over the whole month of Ramadhan.

Laylat-ul-Qadr

This translates as the 'Night of Decree' and falls within the last 10 days of Ramadhan. It is the night on which the Qur'an was first revealed and is the most blessed night of the whole year for Muslims. Muslims are encouraged to worship through the night and devote themselves to prayer and remembrance of God.

The significance to a Muslim of fasting during Ramadhan and Laylat-ul-Qadr can be explained by this saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him:

'He who fasts during Ramadan with faith and seeks his reward from God will have his past sins forgiven; he who prays during the night in Ramadhan with faith and seeks his reward from God will have his past sins forgiven; and he who passes Laylat-ul-Qadr in prayer with faith and seeks his reward from God will have his past sins forgiven.'

To learn more about Ramadan please see this short interactive guide on the Guardian website:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,5860,837833,00.html>

As Muslims follow the lunar calendar, the time of year that each Ramadhan falls moves back by around 11 days each successive year. Some Muslims have informal arrangements to leave an hour early because they are working through lunch (this allows them to open the fast at home with family) others utilise a proportion of their annual leave to devote themselves to worship (specifically in the last 10 nights) in this sacred month.

Eid ul-Fitr

The month of Ramadhan ends with the festival of Eid ul-Fitr. This is marked by the attendance at Mosque for a special morning prayer followed by visits to family and friends for celebratory meals and the giving of gifts much like Christmas day for Christians.

Hajj

As mentioned earlier, this is a pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims who are able to do so must perform once in their lifetime. It usually takes around 2-3weeks. Obviously the ability to secure a block period of holiday for a Muslim wishing to undertake the Hajj is of significant concern for a Muslim employee. Whilst there is no limit on the number of times a Muslim can perform Hajj the vast majority of Muslims will only attempt to undertake this journey once or possibly a few times in their lifetime.

To learn more about Hajj please see this short interactive guide on the Guardian website:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,5860,875224,00.html>

Eid-ul-Adha

This is the festival of sacrifice commemorating the Prophet Abraham's being asked by God to sacrifice his son. It marks the completion of the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims spend this time at home with their families.

Other important dates

Al Hijra marks the New Year for Muslims.

Halal food, drink and prohibition of alcohol

Muslims are only permitted to eat meat that has been slaughtered in accordance with certain conditions stipulated in Islamic law. Halal meat is widely available and indeed we have catered for internal events with Halal meat. It should also be pointed out that the consumption of pork and alcohol is also forbidden for Muslims.

[1] We have set out in this section the major events and practices within the Muslim world but would make the point that over 1/5th of the world's population is Muslim and as a result of this large number of followers there is some diversity of practice both in terms of level of adherence to the listed practices and celebration of other practices not listed here.