

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

The Arabic word Islam means voluntary surrender to the will of Allah and obedience to His commands. Allah is an Arabic word, the proper name of God. Muslims prefer to use the word Allah rather than God. A person who freely and consciously accepts the Islamic way of life and sincerely practices it is called a Muslim.

BASIC BELIEFS

TAWHID is the most important Islamic belief. It implies that everything in existence originates from the one and only Creator, who is also the Sustainer and the sole Source of Guidance. This belief should govern all aspects of human life. Recognition of this fundamental truth results in a unified view of existence that rejects any divisions of life into the religious and the secular. Allah is the sole source of Power and Authority and therefore entitled to worship and obedience from mankind. There is no scope for any partnership with the Creator. Tawhid teaches man that Allah is not born, nor is anyone born of Him. He has no son or daughter. Human beings, like the rest of creation, are His subjects.

RISALAH means Prophethood and Messengership. Allah has not left humanity without guidance for the conduct of our affairs. Since the creation of the first human, Allah has revealed His guidance to mankind through His prophets. The prophets who received books from Allah are called messengers. The message of all the prophets and messengers is one and the same. They urged the people of their time to obey and worship Allah alone and none other. Whenever the teachings of a prophet were distorted by people Allah sent another prophet to bring human beings back to the Straight Path. The chain of Risalah began with Adam, included Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Jesus, and ended with Muhammad (peace be upon them all), as the final messenger of Allah to mankind.

The revealed books from Allah are: the Torah (Tawrah), the Psalms (Zabur), the Gospel (Injeel)

and the Qur'an. The Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (p)¹, as the final book of Guidance. Among all these books, it is only the Qur'an that remains unchanged, in its original revealed form.

AKHIRAH means life after death. Belief in Akhirah has a profound impact on the life of a believer. We are all accountable to Allah on the Day of Judgment when we will be judged according to how we lived our lives. One who obeys and worships Allah will be rewarded with a permanent place of happiness and bliss in Paradise (*Jannah*); One who does not do so will be sent to Hell (*Jahannam*), a place of punishment and suffering.

FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Islam has five pillars or basic foundations of action. Acting correctly and sincerely on these foundations transforms a Muslim's life into one that is in harmony with nature and thus in conformity with the will of the Creator. Faithful practice of these duties inspires her to work towards the establishment of justice, equality and righteousness in society, and the eradication of injustice, falsehood and evil.

1. SHAHADAH, the first of the five basic foundations, is the declaration, knowingly and voluntarily, of: *La ilaha illa lahu Muhammadur rasulul lah*. "There is no god except Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"

This declaration is the basis of all actions in Islam, and the other basic duties follow this affirmation.

2. SALAH (compulsory prayer) is offered five times a day. It is a practical demonstration of faith, and keeps a believer in touch with her Creator. The benefits of Salah are far-reaching, long lasting and immeasurable. It develops in a believer the qualities of self-discipline, steadfastness and obedience to the Truth, leading her to be patient, honest and truthful in the affairs of her life.

3. ZAKAH (welfare contribution) is a compulsory payment from a Muslim's annual savings. It can only be spent on helping the poor, the needy, and the oppressed, and for the general upliftment of

society. Zakah is one of the fundamental principles of Islamic economy, which insures an equitable society where everyone has a right to contribute and share.

4. SAWM is the annual obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadan - the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. A Muslim, every day of this month, refrains from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex, from dawn to sunset. Sawm develops a believer's moral and spiritual standard and keeps him away from selfishness, greed, extravagance and other vices. Sawm is an annual training program that increases a Muslim's determination to fulfill his obligation to the Almighty Lord.

5. HAJJ (pilgrimage to the House of Allah) is an annual event, obligatory on those Muslims who can afford to undertake it, at least once in their lifetime. It is a journey to the "House of Allah" (Al-Ka'bah) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Hajj symbolizes the unity of humankind; Muslims from every race and nationality assemble together in equality and fraternity to worship their Lord.

THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an is the final Book of guidance from Allah, sent down to Prophet Muhammad (p) through the angel Gabriel (Jibra'il). Every word of the Qur'an is the word of Allah. The Qur'an is unrivaled in its recording and preservation. Unlike other scriptures that were corrupted with human interpolations and omissions, the Qur'an has remained unchanged even to a letter for over fourteen hundred years. The Qur'an is the last and final revelation to mankind and covers all aspects of human life, and its relation to the life after death.

THE HADITH

The Hadith is the collection of sayings, actions and silent approvals of Prophet Muhammad (p). It explains the Qur'an, and how to practice it. The Hadith were recorded meticulously by the Prophet's companions.

PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Muhammad (peace be upon him), the final messenger of Allah, was born in Mecca, Arabia, in the year 571 CE. His father died before his birth and his mother died when he was only six. He received first revelation from Allah at the age of forty.

The people of Mecca at that time used to worship idols. The prophet (p) invited them to Islam. Some of them accepted and became Muslims, while others rebuked him and turned against him. In the 13th year of his prophethood, Muhammad (p) migrated from Mecca to Madinah.

The Prophet (p) organized the early Muslims and preached the message of Allah with patience and profound wisdom. Eventually Islam was established in the whole of Arabia and was set to make a tremendous contribution to the history and civilization of the world. Prophet Muhammad (p) died in 632 CE at the age of 63. He left behind the Qur'an and his *Sunnah* (way) as the source of guidance for all generations to come.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Marriage is the basis of family life in Islam. It is a solemn yet simple contract between a man and a woman. Marriages are arranged with the consent of the couple, as required by Islamic law. Islam does not allow the free mixing of men and women; nor does it allow sex before marriage. Extra-marital sex is severely punishable. No discrimination is made on the basis of sex. Husband and wife are equal partners of the family and play their part in their respective fields.

DIET

Muslims are encouraged to eat what is good for them. Islamic law requires an animal to be slaughtered while invoking the name of Allah. All varieties of alcoholic drinks are prohibited. Pork and blood are also forbidden.

DRESS

Muslims must cover their bodies properly and de-

cently. When it comes to dressing-up, simplicity and modesty are encouraged. No particular dress is recommended, however, men must cover their body from navel to the knees. Women must cover their whole body except the face and hands. Any dress that is suggestive, transparent, skin-tight or half-naked may send wrong signals to others; signals that are contrary to Islam's teachings. Pure silk and gold are not allowed for men.

SOCIAL MANNERS

Islam teaches decency, humility and good manners. Muslims greet each other by saying: *As-salamu 'Alaikum* (peace be upon you) and the reply is: *Wa'alaikumus salam* (peace be upon you too).

Keeping promises, truthfulness, justice, fair play, helping the poor and needy, respect for parents, teachers and elders, love for children and good relations with neighbors and relatives are the most valued virtues of a Muslim. Islam condemns enmity, back-biting, slander, blasphemy, ridicule, use of offensive names, suspicion and arrogance.

CONCLUSION

Islam comes from the root word 'salaam' meaning peace. When our individual and collective lives are in harmony with nature and with the will of the Creator, peace is inevitable. Islam, as a way of life, is the solution to all problems of the human race, and is the only hope for the present as well as the future. The need is to practice it faithfully.

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ISLAM EXPLAINED

Islam, the religion of over 1.2 billion in the world, provides humankind with a unified view about the purpose of our creation and existence, our ultimate destiny and our place among other creatures. It is a way of life that is in complete conformance with nature, and with reason, logic and science.

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¹ (p) here stands for "peace be upon him"