



— GET TO KNOW ISLAM

A first step

You do not need to learn everything at once. These five readings move from the big picture to the beliefs and practices that shape Muslim life.

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What is Islam?

Islam is a monotheistic faith: Muslims worship one God and seek to live with awareness of Him. Belief, worship, and ethical conduct belong together.

A faith centred on one God

At the centre of Islam is belief in one God, known in Arabic as Allah. Muslims understand God to be the Creator of all things: unique, merciful, and beyond comparison with creation. Worship is directed to God alone.

“Islam” is commonly explained as submission to God. Here, submission means choosing to orient life towards the Creator through trust, gratitude, and responsibility. A person who follows Islam is called a Muslim. These words describe a faith and its followers, not a nationality or ethnicity.

Belief that shapes a life

Muslims believe that God has guided humanity through prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. They regard Muhammad as the final prophet and the Qur’an as God’s revelation to him. Muslims honour the prophets; they do not worship them.

The Islamic understanding of life includes accountability beyond death. What people do matters, including how they treat those with less power, how they use their resources, and whether they keep their promises. Worship and moral responsibility are therefore connected.

How that belief is practised

The five pillars offer a simple starting point: the testimony of faith, regular prayer, obligatory giving, fasting in Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca for those able to undertake it. These practices create recurring space for remembrance, generosity, discipline, and community.

They are not the whole of religious life. Caring for family, dealing honestly with people, seeking knowledge, and acting justly also matter. Qur’an 2:177 brings belief, generosity, prayer, fidelity to promises, and patience into a single picture of righteousness.

One faith, many communities

Muslims live in many societies and speak many languages. Shared foundations coexist with differences in scholarship, law, culture, and lived experience. Sunni and Shia traditions, for example, share central beliefs while differing on important questions of authority and interpretation.

An introductory guide can explain a foundation without pretending that every Muslim interprets every question in the same way. It is also useful to distinguish a religious teaching from the actions of an individual or a government.

You can begin with a question

You do not need prior knowledge to learn about Islam. Begin with the idea of one God, explore the Qur'an, and then look at how belief shapes daily life. Take unfamiliar words one at a time.

This guide explains Islamic beliefs from within the tradition in accessible language. It is an introduction, not a substitute for a full study of history, theology, or individual religious guidance. You are welcome to read at your own pace, whatever your background.

Religion, culture, and the person in front of you

Imagine meeting two Muslim neighbours whose food, clothes, and first languages are different. Those differences need not mean that one is more authentically Muslim. A religious commitment can be expressed within different cultures. Equally, something common in a Muslim-majority society is not automatically a requirement of Islam.

A helpful way to explore a practice is to ask three questions: What source is it connected to? How is that source interpreted? How does this particular person understand it? This avoids treating either a news story or a single encounter as the whole picture.

A useful order for learning

Begin with the central claim about God. Then explore why revelation matters and how Muhammad fits into the story. The practices make more sense when those ideas are in view: prayer is directed to God, fasting is undertaken in worship, and giving expresses responsibility for others.

You do not have to settle every question before reading further. Keep a small distinction between “I understand what this belief means” and “I agree with this belief.” Understanding is a worthwhile first step in its own right.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 112 · Qur'an 2:177 · Qur'an 4:163 · Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 3

One God. A direct relationship.

Tawhid means affirming the oneness of God. In Islam, God has no partner or equal, and every person can turn to Him in prayer.

What Muslims mean by Allah

Allah is the Arabic word for God. In Islamic belief, God is the Creator and sustainer of the universe, not a being within it. Muslims do not understand God as belonging to one nation or people.

The short chapter Al-Ikhlās (Qur'an 112) expresses God's absolute oneness and incomparability. Tawhid, the Arabic term for this central belief, shapes both worship and the way Muslims understand their place in the world.

Mercy and accountability

The Qur'an repeatedly presents God as merciful. Its opening chapter begins with mercy, praise, and the acknowledgement that people need guidance. Muslims can ask for help, express gratitude, and seek forgiveness directly from God.

Mercy does not make actions meaningless. Islamic teaching places hope in forgiveness alongside responsibility for choices. Repentance involves turning away from wrongdoing; where another person has been harmed, their rights also matter.

Worship without an image

God is not represented by a picture or statue in Islamic worship. Muslims may gather in a mosque, but turning to God is not confined to a special building. Personal supplication, called du'a, can be made in a person's own language.

Formal prayer has a shared structure, while personal prayer can express individual concerns. No priest is needed as an intermediary for a person to ask God for guidance or forgiveness. Religious teachers can help with learning without standing between a person and God.

A useful first reading

Read Al-Fatihah, the opening chapter, alongside Al-Ikhlās. Notice how one introduces praise and the search for guidance, while the other concentrates on God's uniqueness. An English translation conveys an interpretation of the Arabic meaning; comparing translations can help clarify unfamiliar phrasing.

A word you may hear in daily life

You may hear a Muslim say alhamdulillah after good news. It expresses praise and gratitude to God. Such phrases can be ordinary parts of daily speech, as well as deliberate acts of remembrance. Their significance comes from the belief behind them, not from a magical property of the sounds.

Learning the meaning of a familiar expression can make an everyday conversation less distant. Ask what a phrase means to the speaker, while remembering that not every Muslim uses Arabic expressions in the same way.

Questions deserve more than a slogan

How can God be known? Why is there suffering? How do faith and reason relate? These are serious questions with long histories of discussion. An introduction to tawhid identifies the belief; it does not, by itself, settle every argument for that belief.

When exploring an answer, distinguish a scriptural statement, a philosophical argument, and a personal experience. Each works differently. A thoughtful conversation can explain its reasoning without insisting that every question should disappear immediately.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 112 · Qur'an 1 · Qur'an 39:53

Meet the Qur'an.

Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's revelation to Muhammad in Arabic. It invites reflection on God, human life, moral choices, and the world around us.

What kind of book is it?

The Qur'an is Islam's central scripture. Muslims believe it was revealed to Muhammad over a period of about 23 years. It is read, recited, memorised, and studied, and parts of it are recited in daily prayer.

Its 114 chapters are called surahs, and its verses are called ayahs. The chapters are not arranged as a chronological biography. Themes recur across the book: God's mercy, the lives of prophets, social responsibility, worship, and accountability.

Arabic text and translated meaning

For Muslims, the Qur'an itself is the Arabic revelation. A translation is a human rendering of its meaning. Different translators may choose different words for the same passage, especially where an Arabic term carries several related meanings.

Tafsir is explanatory commentary. It can address language, context, connections between passages, and traditions of interpretation. A translation and a commentary are useful in different ways; neither should be confused with the original Arabic text.

Three places to begin

Start with Al-Fatihah (chapter 1), a brief prayer for guidance. Next, read Al-Ikhlās (chapter 112), which focuses on the oneness of God. Then look at 49:13, a verse about humanity's shared origin and diversity.

Read a little, pause, and note your questions. You do not have to read the whole book at once. If a verse seems difficult, read the surrounding passage and consult contextual commentary rather than relying on an isolated quotation.

Read and listen with context

The resources below open Quran.com, where Arabic text, translations, audio recitation, and commentaries are available. It is an independent external service, not part of Get to Know Islam.

Our explanations are original introductory summaries. We link to published translations instead of reproducing an entire translation. We do not present a single English rendering as if it captures every possible nuance.

A small reading practice you can actually try

Set aside five quiet minutes and open chapter 1 in a language you understand. Read it once for its overall movement, then again for the relationship between the speaker and God. Make a note of one unfamiliar word rather than trying to resolve everything at once.

Next, compare another translation of the same passage. A difference in wording can reveal the work of translation. If you find a difficult claim, read the surrounding verses and a commentary; a short extract on social media may leave out the very context you need.

What not to expect from a first reading

You will not encounter a single continuous story in chronological order. The text moves between address, narration, moral teaching, reminders, and reflection. A reader accustomed to a modern textbook may need time to become familiar with that structure.

You also do not need to pretend that every passage is immediately clear. Write down questions about who is speaking, who is addressed, and what a key term means. Those questions can guide careful study with someone able to explain both the text and the limits of their interpretation.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 1 · Qur'an 112 · Qur'an 49:13 · Qur'an 96:1-5 · Quran.com — About the Qur'an

Who was Prophet Muhammad?

Muhammad lived in Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries. Muslims believe he received and conveyed the Qur'an and regard him as the final messenger of God.

Mecca and the beginning of revelation

Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 CE. Islamic tradition describes his first experience of revelation around 610, beginning a mission calling people to the worship of one God.

The earliest revelations are associated with the opening verses of chapter 96. This account of revelation is a statement of Muslim belief and religious tradition. The Qur'an is central to that tradition; later biography and hadith literature provide further accounts of his life.

Migration and community

In 622, Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina. This migration is known as the Hijrah and marks the starting point of the Islamic calendar. In Medina, he led a developing religious and social community.

His life included teaching, family relationships, agreements, conflict, and responsibilities of leadership. A careful study considers these events in their seventh-century setting and distinguishes sources from later retellings. He died in Medina in 632.

How Muslims relate to him

Muslims understand Muhammad as a human messenger, not a divine being. They seek to learn from his example, called the Sunnah, in worship and conduct. Hadith are reports of his words, actions, or approvals.

Hadith collections include evaluations of transmission, and scholars discuss authenticity and interpretation. A report should be identified and assessed in its context rather than presented as an unattributed inspirational quote.

Beginning with the message

For a first introduction, start with his call to worship God and with the ethical responsibilities taught in the Qur'an. The five pillars give another concise entry point into the practice associated with his teaching.

This overview does not attempt a full biography. Our sources distinguish the Qur'an, a Sunni hadith collection, and a modern historical reference. A qualified human review of this introductory text is still pending.

Biography, reported teachings, and interpretation

Three kinds of reading often appear together: a biography tracing events, a hadith reporting words or actions, and a commentary explaining their meaning. They are connected, but they are not the same. A timeline helps place an event; a report needs attention to its transmission; an interpretation needs reasons and context.

For a first reading, keep the broad sequence in view: Mecca, the beginning of revelation, migration to Medina, and the growth of a community. When a difficult episode raises questions, look for a fuller account rather than assuming an isolated sentence settles its meaning.

Learning through character

Muslims look to Muhammad's example in worship and in relationships. One reported teaching in Sahih Muslim 2594a praises gentleness. This offers a concrete theme to explore: how should a person speak, disagree, teach, or correct someone without needless harshness?

That theme does not replace historical study or remove difficult questions. It provides one starting point for understanding why Muslims see the Prophet's example as relevant beyond the events of his own lifetime.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 96:1-5 · Qur'an 33:40 · Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 3 · PBS — Life of Muhammad timeline · Sahih Muslim 2594a

Faith, put into practice.

The five pillars are the testimony of faith, prayer, obligatory giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. They connect belief with repeated acts of worship and responsibility.

01 • Shahadah — the testimony of faith

The shahadah affirms that there is no deity worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is His messenger. It expresses the central commitment of Muslim faith.

Its significance is more than repeating words: it is an affirmation of belief. Learning what it means can be part of exploring Islam without any pressure to make a declaration.

02 • Salah — regular prayer

Salah is formal worship offered at five daily prayer times. It includes recitation and bodily movements such as standing, bowing, and prostrating, with accommodations for a person's ability.

Its recurring rhythm interrupts daily activity with remembrance of God. Personal supplication, or du'a, can also be made outside these formal prayers.

03 • Zakat — obligatory giving

Zakat is a religious obligation on qualifying wealth, subject to conditions and designated categories of recipients. It expresses responsibility for others through a structured form of giving.

It differs from sadaqah, which is voluntary charity. Calculating zakat requires attention to the kind of wealth and applicable conditions; this introduction is not a personal calculation guide.

04 • Sawm — fasting in Ramadan

During Ramadan, eligible Muslims fast from dawn to sunset, refraining from food, drink, and sexual relations during fasting hours. The practice is connected with God-consciousness, self-restraint, and generosity.

Exemptions and accommodations are part of the tradition. Qur'an 2:185 explicitly addresses illness and travel. Individual circumstances require appropriate religious guidance.

05 • Hajj — pilgrimage

Hajj is pilgrimage to Mecca at a specific time in the Islamic year. It is an obligation once in a lifetime for Muslims who have the necessary ability and means.

The shared rites bring people of different backgrounds into a common act of worship. Hajj differs from ‘umrah, a pilgrimage that can be performed at other times.

One framework, different circumstances

The pillars are often introduced in a neat list. Lived practice involves time, ability, resources, and learning. Pilgrimage has conditions of ability; giving has rules about qualifying wealth; fasting includes recognised accommodations. A short overview should not be used to judge someone whose circumstances you do not know.

It is also useful to distinguish the shared importance of a practice from differences in its detailed rules. A person learning to pray or calculate zakat needs instruction appropriate to their tradition and circumstances, beyond a general introduction.

Practices are connected to purposes

Consider the relationships these practices develop. Prayer brings attention back to God. Giving puts resources into circulation for others. Fasting requires restraint. Pilgrimage gathers people into shared rites. None is merely a way of displaying an identity.

These purposes do not replace the practices or their detailed teachings. They help a newcomer understand why a believer might value a rhythm that, from the outside, initially looks like a list of obligations.

Sources & further reading: Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 3 • Qur’an 2:183 • Qur’an 2:185



Keep exploring

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