



— GET TO KNOW ISLAM

30 questions people ask about Islam

Who is Allah? Do Muslims believe in Jesus? Why do Muslims pray five times a day? Thirty short answers, each with sources you can check.

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Contents

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Is Islam only for Arabs? | 16 What is a mosque, and what happens there? |
| 2 What is the difference between Islam and Muslim? | 17 What is an imam? |
| 3 Who is Allah? | 18 Can I visit a mosque if I'm not Muslim? |
| 4 Do Muslims worship Muhammad? | 19 Why do Muslims pray five times a day? |
| 5 Do Muslims believe in Jesus? | 20 Why do Muslims wash before prayer? |
| 6 Is Islam a new religion? | 21 What is the purpose of Ramadan? |
| 7 How many prophets does Islam recognise? | 22 What is Eid? |
| 8 Who is Abraham in Islam? | 23 How much do Muslims give to charity? |
| 9 Do Muslims believe in angels? | 24 What does halal mean, and why avoid pork and alcohol? |
| 10 What do Muslims believe happens after death? | 25 What is the Ka'bah? Do Muslims worship it? |
| 11 What do Muslims believe about heaven and hell? | 26 Can I read the Qur'an if I'm not Muslim? |
| 12 Do Muslims believe in original sin? | 27 What is a hadith, and how do Muslims know if it is reliable? |
| 13 How many Muslims are there, and where do they live? | 28 Why do Muslims say "peace be upon him" after the Prophet's name? |
| 14 Do all Muslims practise in the same way? | 29 How can I talk with a Muslim friend about their faith? |
| 15 What is the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims? | 30 A colleague or classmate is Muslim. What should I know? |

Is Islam only for Arabs?

No. Islam is not tied to an ethnic identity. Muslims come from many countries and speak many languages. Arabic has a special place because it is the language of the Qur'an, but being Arab is not a condition of being Muslim.

The Qur'an addresses humanity and describes the diversity of peoples and tribes. A person can learn about Islam without changing their nationality or assuming that every cultural custom is a religious obligation.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 49:13

What is the difference between Islam and Muslim?

The terms describe different things. Islam is the name of the religion, while Muslim describes a person who follows Islam. Neither word names an ethnicity, language, or nationality. A mosque is a place of Muslim worship, and the Qur'an is Islam's central scripture.

This distinction helps when reading a headline or meeting someone. "Muslim" does not tell you everything about a person's culture, political views, or level of religious practice. Begin with the shared foundations, then allow room for individual lives and differences of interpretation.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 49:13 · Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi 2

Who is Allah?

Muslims use Allah to refer to the one God, the Creator and sustainer of everything. Allah is not the name of a separate tribal deity within Islamic belief.

The central teaching is God's oneness, called tawhid. The short Qur'anic chapter Al-Ikhlās expresses that God is unique and beyond comparison. You can explore this idea in our introduction to the Islamic understanding of God.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 112

Do Muslims worship Muhammad?

Muhammad is central to Muslim belief as the final prophet, but he is not understood to be God or a part of God. Love for and respect towards a messenger are distinct from worship. The testimony of faith connects belief in God with Muhammad's role as His messenger.

You may hear blessings spoken after his name, or see people try to follow his example. These are expressions of religious honour. They should not be confused with the belief that Muhammad created the world, controls it independently of God, or is himself an object of worship.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 18:110 · Qur'an 33:40

Do Muslims believe in Jesus?

Yes. Muslims honour Jesus as a prophet and the Messiah. They believe in his miraculous birth to Mary, who is also deeply respected in Islam. Chapter 19 of the Qur'an is named Maryam, the Arabic form of Mary.

Muslims do not regard Jesus as God or worship him. This is a central difference from mainstream Christian theology. Acknowledging both common ground and real differences allows for a more respectful conversation than pretending the traditions say the same thing.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 19:16-36

Is Islam a new religion?

As a historical movement Islam began in Arabia in the early seventh century with the revelation to Muhammad. Muslims, however, do not regard their faith as new. The Qur'an presents Islam, submission to the one God, as the religion of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and presents Muhammad as the final messenger in that line.

This is why the Qur'an calls Abraham a Muslim and tells Muslims to say they believe in all the prophets without distinction. The community founded in 622 is new; the message it carries is understood as the oldest of all.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 3:67 · Qur'an 2:136 · Qur'an 42:13

How many prophets does Islam recognise?

The Qur'an names twenty-five prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Job, Jonah, Zechariah, John, Jesus, and Muhammad. It also states that God sent a messenger to every community and that some prophets are not mentioned.

A widely cited report puts the number of prophets at 124,000; Muslims treat the figure as indicating a vast number rather than a precise count. Muslims honour all the prophets, make no distinction between them in belief, and regard Muhammad as the last.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 4:164 · Qur'an 16:36 · Qur'an 33:40

Who is Abraham in Islam?

Abraham, Ibrahim in Arabic, is among the most important figures in the Qur'an. He is called the friend of God, described as neither Jew nor Christian but a pure monotheist who submitted to God, and remembered for smashing his people's idols, surviving the fire, and being ready to sacrifice his son at God's command. Muslims recall him in every formal prayer.

With his son Ishmael he raised the foundations of the Ka'bah, and the rites of Hajj re-enact episodes from his family's story. Eid al-Adha commemorates his willingness to sacrifice. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all look to Abraham, which is why they are often called the Abrahamic faiths, even though each tells his story in its own way.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 4:125 · Qur'an 3:67 · Qur'an 37:102-107 · Qur'an 2:127

Do Muslims believe in angels?

Yes. Belief in angels is one of the six articles of faith. Angels are created beings, made of light according to tradition, who carry out God's commands without disobeying. Gabriel brought revelation to the prophets; other angels record deeds, take souls at death, and will sound the trumpet on the Last Day.

Angels are not God's children and are not worshipped. Islam also speaks of jinn, a different kind of created being with free will, and of Satan as a jinn who rebelled. Our guide to angels and the unseen explains these in more detail.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:285 · Qur'an 82:10-12 · Qur'an 35:1

What do Muslims believe happens after death?

Death is not understood as the end of a person's existence. Islamic belief includes resurrection, accountability, Paradise, and Hell. The life to come gives lasting significance to choices that may seem unnoticed or unresolved in this life.

Descriptions of the unseen are approached through revelation, not as observations this website can independently verify. Muslims also discuss details through different theological traditions. We should distinguish an outline of belief from claims to know the final fate of a particular individual.

For someone beginning to explore Islam, the central connection is between meaning and responsibility: how we treat people matters, including when no one seems able to hold us accountable here.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 99:6-8 · Qur'an 36:78-79

What do Muslims believe about heaven and hell?

Muslims believe that after resurrection and judgement people enter paradise, described as gardens with rivers, peace, and nearness to God, or hell, described as fire and regret. The Qur'an uses vivid imagery; scholars differ on how literally to read every detail, but agree that both are real.

The outcome is decided by God with perfect justice and encompassing mercy. Muslims hope for forgiveness and are warned equally against despair and complacency. No person can declare where another will stand; that judgement belongs to God alone.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 3:133 · Qur'an 21:47 · Qur'an 39:53

Do Muslims believe in original sin?

No. The Qur'an tells of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree, but it records that they repented and that God forgave them. Their descendants do not inherit guilt. Islamic teaching holds that every child is born in a natural state of purity, the *fitrah*, inclined towards God.

Qur'an 17:15 states that no soul bears the burden of another. People are accountable for what they themselves do, and the door of repentance is always open. This is one of the significant differences between Islamic and classical Christian theology.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:37 · Qur'an 17:15 · Qur'an 30:30

How many Muslims are there, and where do they live?

There are close to two billion Muslims, roughly one in four people on earth, making Islam the world's second-largest religion. The largest Muslim populations are in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nigeria. Only about a fifth of Muslims live in the Arab world.

Muslims are a majority in around fifty countries and significant minorities in many others, including India, China, Russia, and across Europe and the Americas. The picture of Islam as a Middle Eastern religion is therefore misleading; it is a global faith with its demographic centre in South and Southeast Asia.

Do all Muslims practise in the same way?

No. Muslims share central foundations such as belief in one God and the Qur'an, while differing in schools of thought, legal interpretation, cultural expression, and personal practice. Sunni and Shia are major traditions, and there is diversity within each.

Distinguish between a shared belief, an interpretation held by a particular school, and a local custom. Our articles identify a tradition when a framework is specific to it. An introductory page cannot speak on behalf of every Muslim community.

Sources & further reading: Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 2

What is the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims?

Sunni and Shia Muslims believe in the same God, the same Qur'an, and the same Prophet, and they pray, fast, give, and make pilgrimage in largely the same way. The split goes back to a dispute over leadership after the Prophet's death in 632: Shia Muslims hold that it belonged to Ali and his descendants; Sunni Muslims accepted the first caliphs chosen by the community.

From that difference follow others in law, hadith collections, and devotion, including the Shia commemoration of Husayn's death at Karbala. About nine in ten Muslims are Sunni. Our guide on Sunni and Shia Islam sets out the shared ground and the differences in more detail.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 49:10 · Encyclopaedia Britannica — Shi'i

What is a mosque, and what happens there?

A mosque is a building set aside for prayer. The essential features are simple: a clean, open prayer hall, usually carpeted, with a niche called the mihrab marking the direction of Mecca, and a place for washing before prayer. There are no images or statues; decoration uses calligraphy and geometric pattern. Many mosques have a dome and a minaret, from which the call to prayer is given, but neither is required.

Five daily prayers and the Friday congregational prayer take place there, along with classes, Qur'an study, charity collection, weddings, funeral prayers, and community meals during Ramadan. Many mosques welcome visitors; our guide to a first visit explains how to arrange one.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 9:18 · Qur'an 24:36

What is an imam?

In most contexts an imam is the person who leads the congregational prayer and, in many mosques, teaches, gives the Friday sermon, and advises the community. Any adult Muslim with the necessary knowledge can lead prayer; there is no ordination and no priesthood. An imam is not an intermediary between people and God.

In Shia Islam the term Imam, with a capital letter, refers to the divinely guided leaders from the Prophet's family who hold religious authority after him. Sunni Muslims also call the founders of the major legal schools imams as a title of respect. Context usually makes clear which meaning is intended.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:124 · Sahih Muslim 673a

Can I visit a mosque if I'm not Muslim?

Often, yes. Many mosques offer open days, tours, or opportunities to speak with a host. Access arrangements are not identical everywhere, and some sacred sites have specific restrictions. Check the official information for the mosque you want to visit.

Ask about visiting times, clothing, shoes, accessibility, and photography. A respectful visit does not require joining prayer or declaring a faith. Our first-visit guide offers a practical way to prepare and questions you can bring along.

Sources & further reading: Cambridge Central Mosque — Guided tours

Why do Muslims pray five times a day?

The five daily prayers are an established part of Islamic worship. Rather than reserving religious attention for one day of the week, prayer returns a person to remembrance of God throughout each day.

Muslims understand these prayers as an obligation and an opportunity for gratitude and reflection. Their timing follows the sun. The physical practice includes accommodations for ability, and details are learned through the relevant tradition and qualified instruction.

Sources & further reading: Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 2 · Sahih al-Bukhari 528

Why do Muslims wash before prayer?

Before formal prayer Muslims perform wudu: washing the hands, mouth, nose, face, arms to the elbows, wiping the head, and washing the feet. Qur'an 5:6 prescribes it. Wudu remains valid until broken by using the toilet, passing wind, deep sleep, and similar things, so a person does not necessarily wash before every prayer.

Washing marks a transition from ordinary activity to worship and expresses the idea that one approaches God clean in body as well as intention. Where water is unavailable or harmful to use, a symbolic cleansing with clean earth, tayammum, takes its place. A fuller bath, ghusl, is required after sexual activity, menstruation, and before Friday prayer by recommendation.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 5:6 · Sahih al-Bukhari 135

What is the purpose of Ramadan?

Ramadan is the Islamic month in which eligible Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. The Qur'an connects fasting with God-consciousness: learning to live with awareness of God. Muslims also give attention to prayer, reading the Qur'an, and generosity.

Fasting is more than abstaining from food and drink. It is connected to self-restraint and conduct. Islamic teaching includes exemptions and accommodations; illness and travel are explicitly addressed in Qur'an 2:185. This page is a general explanation, not individual health or religious advice.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:183 · Qur'an 2:185

What is Eid?

Eid means festival. Muslims celebrate two each year. Eid al-Fitr, the Festival of Breaking the Fast, comes on the first day after Ramadan. Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, falls during the Hajj and commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son; families who can afford it sacrifice an animal and share the meat with the poor.

Both begin with a congregational prayer in the morning, followed by visits to family and friends, special food, new clothes, and gifts for children. The usual greeting is "Eid Mubarak", blessed festival, and a Muslim friend will be glad to hear it from you.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:185 · Qur'an 37:102-107 · Sahih al-Bukhari 952

How much do Muslims give to charity?

Zakat, the obligatory charity and one of the five pillars, is paid once a year by Muslims whose savings and assets exceed a minimum threshold. For money, gold, and trade goods the rate is 2.5 per cent of the amount held for a full lunar year; farm produce and livestock have their own rates. It goes to categories of people named in the Qur'an, chiefly the poor and needy.

Beyond zakat, voluntary charity, sadaqah, is encouraged without limit, and need not be money: the Prophet described a kind word, a smile, and removing harm from a path as charity. Surveys regularly find Muslims among the most generous religious groups in charitable giving. Our guide to zakat and giving explains the principles.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 9:60 · Qur'an 2:261 · Jami' at-Tirmidhi 1956

What does halal mean, and why avoid pork and alcohol?

In everyday conversation, halal often describes food permitted under Islamic teaching. The term is broader than a food label, however: it means permissible. Haram means prohibited. Qur'an 2:173 identifies pork among prohibited foods, and 5:90 addresses intoxicants.

Muslims may also check ingredients and how meat is sourced. Certification practices and scholarly judgements can differ, so a visitor hosting a Muslim guest should ask about that person's needs rather than assume a label answers every question.

These are religious commitments, not claims that everyone outside the faith must eat the same way. The Qur'an also discusses necessity; unusual personal situations need informed guidance. This introduction is not a medical or individual dietary ruling.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:173 · Qur'an 5:90

What is the Ka'bah? Do Muslims worship it?

The Ka'bah is the cube-shaped building at the centre of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Muslims believe Abraham and Ishmael built it as a house dedicated to the one God. It gives Muslims a single direction to face in prayer and is circled by pilgrims during Hajj and 'Umrah.

Muslims do not worship the Ka'bah. It contains nothing to worship; it is a point of orientation, as a flag or a compass bearing is. The second caliph Umar is reported to have said of the Black Stone set in its corner that it was only a stone and that he kissed it because he had seen the Prophet do so.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:125-127 · Qur'an 2:144 · Sahih al-Bukhari 1597

Can I read the Qur'an if I'm not Muslim?

Yes. You can begin exploring the Qur'an through a translation, an audio resource, or a guided introduction. No account or declaration of faith is needed to use the reading links on this site.

Start with a short passage and read it in context. A translation is a human interpretation of the Arabic meaning, and a commentary can explain historical and linguistic details. There are scholarly discussions about handling an Arabic physical copy; these are distinct from exploring translations or learning about the text.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 1 · Qur'an 96:1-5

What is a hadith, and how do Muslims know if it is reliable?

A hadith is a report of something the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or approved. Each has two parts: a chain of the people who passed it on and the text itself. Scholars studied the reliability of every transmitter and whether the chain was unbroken, then graded reports as sound, good, weak, or fabricated.

The most trusted Sunni collections are those of al-Bukhari and Muslim; Shia Muslims have their own collections. Hadith are distinct from the Qur'an, which is God's word transmitted by mass memorisation. When you meet a quotation attributed to the Prophet, ask for its collection and number; Sunnah.com lets you look it up. Our guide to hadith and Sunnah goes further.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 33:21 · Forty Hadith of al-Nawawi, 1 · Sunnah.com — About

Why do Muslims say “peace be upon him” after the Prophet's name?

When Muslims mention Muhammad they add a short blessing, usually “peace be upon him” or, more fully, “may God bless him and grant him peace”. In Arabic this is *sallallahu alayhi wa sallam*, often abbreviated in writing as ﷺ or PBUH. Qur'an 33:56 says that God and His angels send blessings on the Prophet and asks believers to do the same.

The phrase expresses love and respect, not worship; Muslims say “peace be upon him” for other prophets too, including Jesus and Moses. Non-Muslims are not expected to use it, and no offence is taken when they do not.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 33:56 · Sahih Muslim 408

How can I talk with a Muslim friend about their faith?

Most Muslims are happy to talk about their faith when the question is sincere. Ask about their own experience: what Ramadan means to them, how they learned to pray, what they wish people understood. Avoid opening with the most controversial headline; you will get further, and learn more, by starting with what matters to them.

Remember that one person speaks for themselves, not for two billion people. Do not expect them to defend every government or group that claims Islam. If you disagree, say so plainly and kindly; the Qur'an itself asks for discussion in the best manner.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 16:125 · Qur'an 29:46

A colleague or classmate is Muslim. What should I know?

Muslims pray five times a day at set times, so a colleague may step away for ten minutes around midday and mid-afternoon and will appreciate a quiet space. During Ramadan they will not eat or drink in daylight; most do not expect others to change their habits, but scheduling a lunch meeting or offering coffee repeatedly is awkward. Friday midday prayer is especially important. Pork and alcohol are avoided, so a halal or vegetarian option at events is a kindness.

Beyond that, people differ. Some shake hands with everyone; some prefer not to with the opposite sex, which is about modesty, not disrespect. Some wear visible religious dress; many do not. "Eid Mubarak" at the two festivals is always welcome. If you are unsure about anything, ask; a direct, friendly question is far better than guessing.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 62:9 · Qur'an 2:183-185 · Qur'an 5:3



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