

Seven Common Questions about Islam

(part 1 of 2)



1. What is Islam?

Islam is the name of the religion, or more properly the ‘way of life’, which God (Allah) has revealed and which was practiced by all of the Prophets and Messengers of God that He sent to mankind. Even the name stands out unique among other religions in that it means a state of being; it does not refer

to any particular person, such as Christianity, Buddhism or Zoroastrianism; a tribe like Judaism; or a nation like Hinduism. The root Arabic word from which Islam is derived implies peace, safety, salutation, protection, blamelessness, wholesomeness, submission, acceptance, surrender, and salvation. Islam specifically means being in the state of submission to God, worshipping Him Alone, and reverently accepting and obeying His Law. Through this submission, the peace, security, and wholesome well-being implied in its literal meaning is achieved. Hence, a Muslim or Muslimah is a person (male or female) in that state of submission. A person’s Islam weakens through sins, ignorance, and wrongdoing, and becomes nullified in totality by associating partners with God or disbelieving in Him.

2. What are Muslims?

The Arabic word “Muslim” literally means “someone who is in a state of Islam (submission to the will and law of God)”. The message of Islam is meant for the entire world, and anyone who accepts this message becomes a Muslim. Some people mistakenly believe that Islam is just a religion for Arabs, but nothing could be further from the truth. In actuality, over 80% of the world's Muslims are not Arabs! Even though most Arabs are Muslims, there are Arabs who are Christians, Jews and atheists. If one just takes a look at the various peoples who live in the Muslim World - from Nigeria to Bosnia and from Morocco to Indonesia - it is easy enough to see that Muslims come from all different races, ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities. Islam has always been a universal message for all people. This can be seen in the fact that some of the early companions of the Prophet Muhammad were not only Arabs, but also

Persians, Africans and Byzantine Romans. Being a Muslim entails complete acceptance and active obedience to the revealed teachings and laws of God the Exalted. A Muslim is a person who freely accepts basing his beliefs, values and faith on the will of Almighty God. In the past, even though you do not see it as much today, the word “Mohammedans” was often used as a label for Muslims. This label is a misnomer, and is the result of either willful distortion or sheer ignorance. One of the reasons for the misconception is that Europeans were taught for centuries that Muslims worshipped the Prophet Muhammad in the same way that Christians worship Jesus. This is absolutely not true, since one is not considered a Muslim if he worships anyone or anything besides God the Exalted.

3. Who is Allah?

Often one hears the Arabic word “Allah” being used in discussions regarding Islam. The word “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for Almighty God, and is the same word used by Arabic speaking Christians and Jews. As a matter of fact, the word Allah was in use far before the word God ever came into existence, since English is a relatively new language. If one were to pick up an Arabic translation of the Bible, one would see the word “Allah” being used where the word “God” is used in English. For instance, Arabic speaking Christians say that Jesus is, according to their canon belief, the Son of Allah. In addition, the Arabic word for Almighty God, “Allah”, is quite similar to the word for God in other Semitic languages. For example, the Hebrew word for God is “Elah”. For various reasons, some non-Muslims mistakenly believe that Muslims worship a different God than the God of Moses and Abraham and Jesus. This is certainly not the case, since the Pure Monotheism of Islam calls all people to the worship of the God of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and all the other prophets, peace be upon them.

4. Who is Muhammad?

The last and final prophet whom God sent to humanity was the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. At the age of forty, he received the revelation from God. He then spent the remaining portion of his life explaining, and living the teachings of Islam, the religion that God revealed to him. The Prophet Muhammad is the greatest of all prophets for many reasons, but primarily because he was chosen by God to be the last prophet - whose mission to guide humanity would continue until the Last Day - and because he has been sent as a mercy to all of mankind. The result of his mission has brought more people into the pure belief in One God than any other prophet. Since the beginning of time, God sent prophets to the earth, each one to his own specific nation. The Prophet Muhammad, however, was sent as the final Messenger to all of humanity.

Even though other religious communities have claimed to believe in One God, over time, some corrupted ideas entered into their beliefs and practices leading them away from the pure sincere monotheism of the prophets. Some took their prophets and saints as intercessors with Almighty God. Some even believed that their prophets were the manifestations of God, or “God Incarnate” or the “Son of God”. All of these misconceptions lead to the worship of created beings instead of the Creator, and contributed to the idolatrous practice of believing that Almighty God may be approached through intermediaries. In order to guard against these falsehoods, the Prophet Muhammad always emphasized that he was only a human-being with the mission of preaching and obeying God's message. He taught Muslims to refer to him as “the Messenger of God and His Slave”. Through his life and teachings, God made Muhammad the perfect example for all people - he was the exemplary prophet, statesman, military leader, ruler, teacher, neighbor, husband, father and friend. Unlike other prophets and messengers, the Prophet Muhammad lived in the full light of history, and all his sayings and acts were meticulously recorded and collected. Muslims don't need to have mere ‘faith’ that he existed, or that his teachings are preserved - they know it to be a fact. God took it upon Himself to protect the message revealed to Muhammad from distortion or from being forgotten or lost. This was necessary because God promised that Muhammad was to be the final Messenger to mankind. All of God's Messengers preached the message of Islam - i.e. submission to the law of God and the worship of God alone – but Muhammad is the last prophet of Islam who brought the final and complete message which was never to be changed until the Last Day.

(part 2 of 2)

5. What are the Teachings of Islam?

The foundation of the Islamic faith is belief in absolute Monotheism (the Oneness of God). This means to believe that there is only one Creator and Sustainer of everything in the Universe, and that nothing is divine or worthy of being worshipped except for Him. Truly, believing in the Oneness of God means much more than simply believing that there is “One God” - as opposed to two, three or four. There are a number of religions that claim belief in “One God” and believe that ultimately there is only one Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, but true monotheism is to believe that only the One True Deity is to be worshipped in accordance to the revelation He sent to His Messenger. Islam also rejects the use of all intermediaries between God and Man, and insists that people approach God directly and reserve all worship for Him alone. Muslims believe that Almighty God is Compassionate, Loving and Merciful.

A common misconception is the claim that God cannot forgive His creatures directly. By over-emphasizing the burden and penalty of sin, as well as claiming

that God cannot forgive humans directly, people often despair of the Mercy of God. Once they become convinced that they cannot approach God directly, they turn to false gods for help, such as heroes, political leaders, saviors, saints, and angels. We often find that the people who worship, pray to, or seek intercession from these false deities, do not consider them to be a 'god'. They claim belief in One Supreme God, but claim that they pray to and worship others beside God only to get closer to Him. In Islam, there is a clear distinction between the Creator and the created. There is no ambiguity or mystery in issues of divinity: anything that is created does not deserve to be worshipped; only Allah, the Creator, is worthy of being worshipped. Some religions falsely believe that God has become part of His creation, and this has led people to believe that they can worship something created in order to reach their Creator.

Muslims believe that even though God is Unique and Exalted beyond speculative comprehension, He definitely has no partners, associates, peers, antagonists or offspring. According to Muslim belief, Allah "neither begets, nor was He begotten" - neither literally, allegorically, metaphorically, physically or metaphysically. He is Absolutely Unique and Eternal. He is in control of everything and is perfectly capable of bestowing His infinite Mercy and Forgiveness to whomever He chooses. That is why Allah is also called the All-Powerful and Most-Merciful. Allah has created the Universe for man, and as such wants the best for all human beings. Muslims see everything in the Universe as a sign of the Creatorship and Benevolence of Almighty God. Also, the belief in the Oneness of Allah is not merely a metaphysical concept. It is a dynamic belief that affects one's view of humanity, society and all aspects of practical life. As a logical corollary to the Islamic belief in the Oneness of Allah, is its belief in the oneness of mankind and humanity.

6. What is the Quran?

The Quran is the final revelation of Allah to all of mankind, which was spoken by Allah the Exalted Himself and conveyed through the Arch-Angel Gabriel in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad, in sound, word and meaning. The Quran, (sometimes incorrectly spelled Koran), was then relayed to the Prophet's companions, and they diligently memorized it verbatim and meticulously compiled it into written form. The Holy Quran has been continually recited by the companions of the Prophet and their successors until the present day. In short, the Quran is the revealed book of Divine scripture from Allah to all humanity for their guidance and salvation.

Today the Quran is still memorized and taught by millions of people. The language of the Quran, Arabic, is still a living language to millions of people. Unlike the scriptures of some other religions, the Quran is still read in its original language by countless millions of people. The Quran is a living miracle

in the Arabic language, and it is known to be inimitable in its style, form and spiritual impact, as well as the unique knowledge that it contains. The Quran was revealed in a series of revelations to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years. In contrast to many other religious books, the Quran was always believed to be the exact Word of Allah. The Quran was recited publicly in front of both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and thereafter. The entire Quran was also completely written down in the lifetime of the Prophet, and numerous companions of the Prophet memorized the entire Quran word-for-word as it was revealed. The Quran was always in the hands of the common believers: it was always thought to be God's word; and, due to widespread memorization, it was perfectly preserved. Never was any part of it altered or decreed by any religious council. The teachings of the Quran comprise a universal scripture addressed to all of mankind and not to any particular tribe or 'chosen people'. The message that it brings is nothing new but the same message of all of the prophets: 'submit to Allah the One God and worship Him alone and follow Allah's Messengers for success in this life and salvation in the hereafter'. As such, Allah's revelation in the Quran focuses on teaching human beings the importance of believing in the Oneness of Allah, and framing their lives around the guidance which He has sent, which is articulated in the Islamic Law. The Quran contains the stories of the previous prophets, such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, peace be upon all of them, as well as commands and prohibitions from God. In our modern times, in which so many people are caught up in doubt, spiritual despair and social and political alienation, the Quranic teachings offer solutions to the emptiness of our lives and the turmoil that is gripping the world today.

7. How Do Muslims View the Nature of Man, the Purpose of Life and the Life Hereafter?

In the Holy Quran, Allah teaches human beings that they were created in order to glorify and worship Him, and that the basis of all true worship is God-consciousness. All of Allah's creatures worship him naturally and only the humans have the free will to worship Allah their Creator or to reject Him. This is a great test, but also a great honor. Since the teachings of Islam encompass all aspects of life and ethics, God-consciousness is encouraged in all human affairs. Islam makes it clear that all human acts are acts of worship if they are done for God alone and in accordance to His Divine Scripture and Law. As such, worship in Islam is not limited to religious rituals, and for this reason it is more properly known as 'way of life' than a religion. The teachings of Islam act as a mercy and a healing for the human soul, and qualities such as humility, sincerity, patience and charity are strongly encouraged. Additionally, Islam condemns pride and self-righteousness, since Almighty God is the only judge of human righteousness.

The Islamic view of the nature of man is also realistic and well-balanced in that human beings are not believed to be inherently sinful, but are seen as equally capable of both good and evil; it is their choice. Islam teaches that faith and action go hand-in-hand. God has given people free-will, and the measure of one's faith is their deeds and actions. However, since human beings have also been created innately weak and regularly fall into sin, they are in need of continually seeking guidance and repentance, which is, in itself, also a form of worship loved by Allah. The nature of the human being as created by God in His Majesty and Wisdom, is not inherently 'corrupt' or in need of repair. The avenue of repentance is always open to all. Almighty God knew that humans were going to make mistakes, so the real test is whether they seek repentance for their sins and try to avoid them, or if they prefer a life of heedlessness and sin, knowing well that it is not pleasing to God. The true balance of an Islamic life is established by having a healthy fear of Allah's rightful punishment for crimes and sins, as well as a sincere belief that Allah, in His infinite Mercy, takes pleasure in bestowing His reward for our good deeds and sincere worship to Him. A life without fear of Allah leads to sin and disobedience, while believing that we have sinned so much that God will not possibly forgive us only leads to despair. In the light of this fact, Islam teaches that only the misguided despair of the Mercy of their Lord, and only wicked criminals are devoid of the fear of Allah their Creator and Judge. The Holy Quran as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, also contains a great deal of teachings about life in the hereafter and the Day of Judgment. Muslims believe that all human beings will ultimately be judged by Allah, the Absolute Sovereign King and Judge, for their beliefs and actions in their earthly lives. In judging human beings, Allah the Exalted will be both Absolutely Just, by only punishing the truly guilty and rebellious unrepentant criminals, and Absolutely Merciful for those people who He, in His wisdom, judges worthy of mercy. None will be judged for that which was beyond their capacity, or for that which they did not actually do. It is sufficient to say that Islam teaches that life is a test designed by Allah, the Creator, Almighty and Most Wise; and that all human beings will be accountable before Allah for what they did with their lives. A sincere belief in the life of the hereafter is the key to leading a well-balanced and moral life. Otherwise, life is viewed as an end in itself, which causes people to become more selfish, materialistic and immoral by their blind pursuit of pleasure even at the expense of reason and ethics.