Islam

Islam is an Arabic word that means "surrender to God." Believers in Islam are called Muslims, or "those who surrender." Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last of a series of holy prophets that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. A prophet is a holy messenger. Christians believe that Jesus is God, while Muslims believe Allah is the only God and that Muhammad was his messenger. Allah is an Arabic term that means "the God" (al-El).

Muhammad lived about 600 years after Jesus in what we now call Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that Muhammad was visited in a cave by an angel. Muhammad repeated the words of the angel to others who learned them by heart. Eventually, Muhammad’s followers collected these messages and gathered them into a book known as the Quran. The Quran is the holy book of Islam. It has been translated into many languages, but many Muslims believe the only true version of the Quran is written in Arabic. This is why the Arabic language spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Often Muslims will learn Arabic as a second language, as a Jew would learn Hebrew.

The Islamic house of worship is a mosque. Unlike Jews and Christians, Muslims do not have a holy day, but many Muslims gather in mosques on Friday afternoon for prayers. Muhammad taught that believers should pray five times every day. Faithful Muslims will stop whatever they are doing and bow down to pray.

Mecca is a holy city to Muslims because it is the site of the Kaaba, a small shrine that Muslims believe to be the most sacred spot on Earth. Muslims orient themselves toward the Kaaba during their daily prayers. Every Muslim who makes the pilgrimage to Mecca walks around the Kaaba seven times. Islamic tradition states the stone was originally white, but it has become black by absorbing the sins of the millions of pilgrims who have kissed and touched it.

Ramadan is a sacred month to Muslims, and faithful Muslims fast between dawn and dusk during Ramadan. To fast means to go without eating. Ramadan is sacred because it is the month in which the Quran was revealed to Muhammad. Muslims use a lunar calendar, so Ramadan falls at different times each year.

There are more than one billion Muslims, but only five million live in the United States. Nations with large Muslim populations include Indonesia (180 million), Pakistan (125 million), Bangladesh (109 million), India (84 million), Iran (66 million), Egypt (60 million), Turkey (60 million), Nigeria (52 million), Algeria (29 million), Morocco (29 million), Ethiopia (24 million), Sudan (22 million), Afghanistan (22 million), Iraq (20 million) and Saudi Arabia (19 million). Russia also has a large Muslim population, but estimates on its size vary.

The crescent, star, and the color green are symbols often associated with Islam. The star represents knowledge and light, and the crescent represents progress. You will find these symbols on the flags of many Muslim nations.

Islamic art includes calligraphy, or decorative penmanship, but no images of people. The Quran forbid recreating any living thing, particularly Muhammad, because no one should copy what Allah has made. This is why you will not find a picture of Muhammad in Islamic literature.
How Do You Spell That?

The Quran is spelled many different ways because it is an Arabic word. Arabic is written in a different script than English. The generally accepted spelling for the Quran is with a ‘Q’ to represent the glottal ‘K’ sound. You will often see the holy book of Islam spelled Quran or Koran.

Many words associated with Islam have more than one accepted spelling. Muslim is more common than Moslem, and Mohammad is more common than Muhammad.

The Teaching of the Quran

The following translations from the Quran help define Islam for the non-Muslim. Many Muslims believe the only true version of the Quran is written in Arabic, and the word of Allah is lost when translated into another language.

There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger. Muhammad is only a messenger, and many messengers have gone before him.

Pay homage to Allah and be good to your parents and relatives, the orphans and the needy and the neighbors who are your relatives, and the neighbors who are your strangers and the friend by your side, the traveler and servants.

Give in charity what is good of the things you have earned, and of what you produce; do not choose to give what is bad as donations, that is, things you would not accept yourself.

It is good to give donations openly, but it is better to give to the poor in secret.

Be good to your parents. Look after them with kindness and respect.

Give full measure when you are measuring, and weigh with a balanced scale.

You make dislike something even if it is good for you, but other things that please you may be bad for you.

Allah is with those who preserve themselves from evil and do right.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahada-- The expression of faith. “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

Salat--Muslims pray five times every day—dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset and at night. Muslims always face toward the holy city of Mecca.

Zakat--Muslims give a portion of their income to the poor and to public charities.

Sawm-- Muslims do not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan. Ramadan is the holy month when the Quran was revealed to Muhammad.

Hajj—if they are in good health and can afford it, Muslims are expected to journey to Mecca once in their lifetime.