

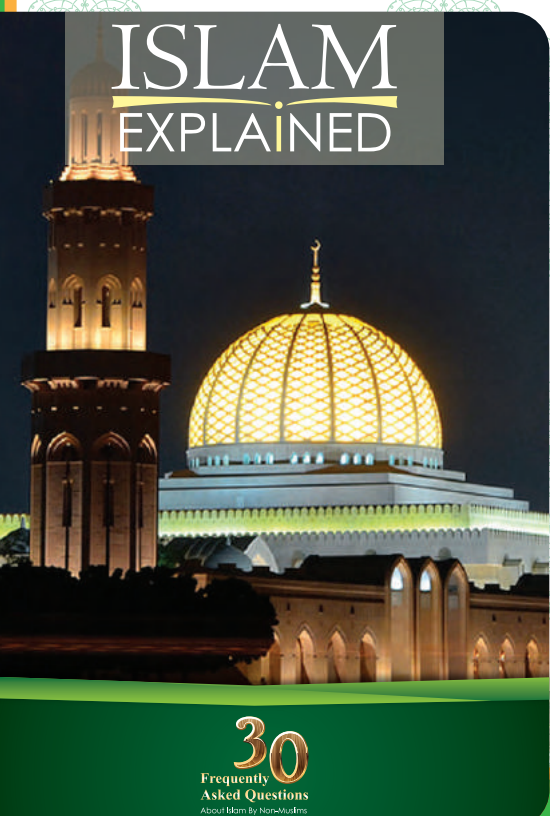
30

Frequently Asked Questions

About Islam By Non-Muslims

The Call to Prayer

Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah, Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu Allah. Hayya 'ala al-salah. Hayya 'ala al-salah. Hayya 'ala al-falah. Hayya 'ala al-falah. Allah is the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest! I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah. I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah. I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. Come to prayers. come to prayers. Come to success. Come to success. Allah is the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest! There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.



1 - What is Islam and who are the Muslims?

'Islam' means submission to the will of God. Anyone who accepts and practices Islam is called a 'Muslim'. Islam is not a new religion, but the same truth that God revealed through all His Prophets to every people: recognition of the Divine Unity of the One Almighty God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and a total submission to His Will. For a quarter of the world's population, Islam is both a religion and complete way of life that governs all facets of their existence: moral, spiritual, social, political, economic, intellectual, etc. Thus, Islam aims to govern people's relationship with their Creator, to each other, and to their environment in a just manner as willed by the Creator. Over 1.6 billion people from a vast range of races, nationalities and cultures from the entire world's continents – are united by their common Islamic faith and practice. About 20% live in the Arab world; the largest Muslim community is in Indonesia; substantial parts of Asia and most of Africa are Muslim, while significant Muslim minorities are to be found in the Soviet Union, China, North and South America, and Europe. Muslims follow a religion of peace, mercy, forgiveness, equality and tolerance, and the majority of Muslims have nothing to do with the extremely grave events that have recently come to be associated with their faith in the media.

2 - What do Muslims believe?

Muslims believe in One, Unique, Eternal, Absolute, Incomparable God - the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; in Angels created by Him; in the Prophets sent by Him and through whom His revelations were brought to mankind; in the Hereafter, the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for their actions in this life; in God's complete authority over human destiny. Muslims believe in a chain of Prophets starting with Adam and including Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, Ezekiel, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Zachariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Muhammad, peace be upon them all. Muslims accept the original unaltered Torah of Moses, the original Gospel of Jesus and the original Psalms of David since all were revealed by God. However, none of these original scriptures are in existence today in their entirety. Muslims have been asked to follow the subsequent, final, and preserved revelation of God - the Qur'an.

3 - Who is Allah?

Allah is not the God of Muslims only, rather the God of all people and all creation. Allah is the personal name of God, and Muslims prefer to use the Arabic word 'Allah' for God because it has no gender or plural. While English translations of Arabic texts generally refer to 'Allah' as 'He', this is only reflects the absence of a neuter pronoun, but does not indicate that God is 'masculine'. Islam teaches that God is loving, merciful, compassionate, and forgiving. It also teaches that God is just and swift in punishment. Muslims believe that God's mercy prevails over His wrath and therefore Muslims strive to strike a balance between fear and hope, protecting one from both complacency and despair. Allah possesses many attributes (names) that are unique and are applicable to Him only. These attributes are not shared by other beings. A few of these names are: the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Loving, the All-Knower, the All-Hearer, the Protector, the Provider, the Eternal, the Forgiving, the Just, the Powerful, the Source of Peace, and the Truth.

4 - Who is Muhammad?

Muhammad is the last servant and messenger of God. He was born in Makkah, a city in Arabia, in the year 570 CE. His father died before his birth and his mother died shortly afterwards. His uncle from the respected tribe of Quraysh raised him. As he grew up, he became known for truthfulness, generosity and sincerity, to the extent he was sought after for his ability to arbitrate in disputes. The historians describe him as being calm and meditative. Muhammad was of a deeply religious nature, and had long detested the spiritual and moral decadence of his society. It became his habit to meditate from time to time in the Cave of Hira at the summit of Jabal an-Nur, near Makkah. At the age of 40, while engaged in a meditative retreat, Muhammad received his first revelation from God through Angel Gabriel. Muhammad was the last messenger of God to all humanity. He was human (not divine) and Muslims neither worship Muhammad, nor pray through him. They solely and directly worship the Unseen and Omniscient Creator.

5 - What are the main sources of Islamic teachings?

The two main sources of Islamic teachings are the Qur'an and Sunnah. The Qur'an is the last revealed word of God to mankind, and it is the prime source of every Muslim's faith and practice. The Qur'an deals with all the subjects that concern human beings: spiritual guidance, laws, worship, lessons from the past, wisdom and science. But its basic theme is the relationship between God and His creatures in this life and the Hereafter. It also provides guidelines for a just society, proper human conduct and equitable economic system. The Sunnah represents the practices and examples of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and it is the second authority for Muslims. The Sunnah is a collection of 'hadiths' – reliably transmitted reports of what the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, did, or approved. Example of a hadith - the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "God has no mercy on one who has no mercy for others." (Sahih Bukhari & Muslim) Another hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his fellow human what he wishes for himself." (Sahih Bukhari & Muslim)

TOLERANCE "Let there be no compulsion in religion..." [Qur'an 2:256] "Say, O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah." But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]." [Qur'an 3:64]



EQUALITY "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing and All-Aware." [Qur'an 49:13]

6 - What is the Qur'an?

The Qur'an is God's word and His last message (testament) to humanity. It is a record of the exact words revealed by God through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) over a period of 23 years (610-632 CE). It was memorized by Muhammad and then dictated to his Companions, and written down by Scribes during his lifetime. Prophet Muhammad had many sessions with the Angel Gabriel to go over the Qur'an to ensure its structure and correctness before Prophet's death. From the Prophet's time to this day, millions of Muslims have memorized the Qur'an letter for letter, from beginning to end, every word and every syllable. All Muslims precisely recite chapters of the Qur'an from memory in each of their daily prayers. The Qur'an has little over 6,000 verses grouped in 114 chapters. Not one word of its 114 chapters has been changed over the centuries, thus ensuring the Qur'an in every detail a unique and miraculous text. The Qur'an has no flaws or contradictions. The original Arabic scripture has never been changed or tampered with. The 7th century Arabic manuscripts of the Qur'an have been preserved to this day. The most frequently cited ones are at the Hast Imam Museum in Tashkent; at the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul; at the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago; and at the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg.

7 - How did this latest revelation of Islam start?

The latest revelation of Islam started in Makkah, a city in Arabia, in 610 CE when Muhammad at the age of 40 received his first revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel. As soon as he began to recite the words he heard from Gabriel, he started to preach the truth that God had revealed to him. He first started to tell his closest members of family and friends. Later, he was asked by God to spread the truth to all people. Initially, Muhammad and his small group of followers suffered bitter persecution, which grew so fierce that in the year 622 CE God gave him the command to migrate to Madinah, a city some 260 miles to the north and establish the first Islamic state. This migration is referred as 'Hijra' and marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. After several years, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers were able to return to Makkah, where they forgave their enemies and establish Islam definitively. Before the Prophet Muhammad died at the age of 63, the greater part of Arabia was Muslim, and within a century Islam had spread as far as Spain to the West and as far as China to the East.

8 - What do Muslims think about other religions?

From Islam's perspective, all religions fall into two categories: (1) **Heavenly religions** - Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions of the same divine origin descending from the monotheist traditions of Prophet Abraham, peace be upon him. In their purest form, all these three religions have the same basic principles of faith and worship. Jews and Christians are called "People of the Book" in many verses of the glorious Qur'an. This means that they are people who follow divine scriptures, namely the Torah and the Gospel. However, these two scriptures in their present form are not the original messages of their respective Prophets, Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them. Consequently, Islam views modern Jews and Christians as having deviated from the original teachings of Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them; (2) **Other religions** - With regards to religions other than Judaism and Christianity, Islam views them as religions which are not associated with Abraham's traditions. They have grossly deviated from the worship of the One true God, Allah, by associating other gods with Him.

RIGHTEOUSNESS "...do no evil nor mischief on the (face of the) earth. [Qur'an 2:60] "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting (others) to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity." [Qur'an 3:104] "...He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion..." [Qur'an 16:90]

9 - What are the six articles of faith in Islam?

The six articles of faith represent the basic set of beliefs that one must have in order to be considered a Muslim. They are: (1) Belief in Monotheism – that is, there is only One God and His attributes are unique and cannot be shared with any other being. He is eternal, begets not, nor is He begotten and non is comparable to Him; (2) Belief in the Angels who are the spiritual agents of God; (3) Belief in all the original scriptures revealed to His Prophets including revelations given to Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them); (4) Belief in all the Prophets of God whom He sent to different people at different times; (5) Belief in the Life after Death, the Day of Judgment, the Hereafter, eternal Paradise and Hellfire; and (6) Belief in the Divine Decree (or Destiny) that everything happens in the universe, happens with God's full knowledge and permission.

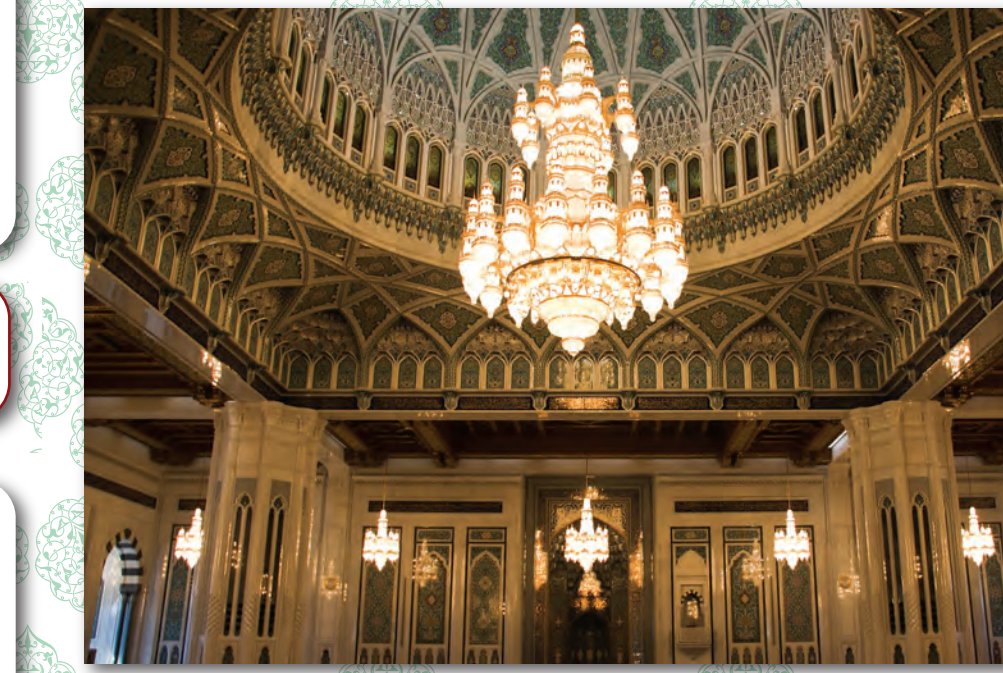
10 - What are the five pillars of worship in Islam?

In the Qur'an, 'faith' is linked to doing 'righteous deeds'. Thus, it is not enough for a Muslim just to have faith; the believer has to put his or her faith into practice. There are five pillars of worship and one must undertake these acts of worship with the best effort in order to be a true Muslim. These are: (1) 'Shahada' or testimony of the Oneness of God and Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh); (2) 'Salaa' or formal obligatory prayers which are performed five times a day to link up with the Creator and nourish the soul. The prayers are given at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, immediately after sunset and at nightfall - reflecting the rhythm of the entire day; (3) 'Zakaat' or compulsory charity which averages 2.5% of one's annual savings or accumulated wealth given to the needy for purification and growth of our wealth and soul; (4) 'Sawm' or fasting during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadhan for self-purification, self-control, and getting nearness to God. Fasting means abstaining from food, drink and intimate relation with a spouse. Those who are unable to fast are permitted not to fast and make up later; (5) 'Hajj' or pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in a life time, for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. The rites of Hajj are of Abraham's origin. Abraham and his first son Ishmael rebuilt Ka'aba in Makkah (used to be called Baka) - the first house of worship on the earth. The Old Testament also make a reference of believers visiting the House of God at the Valley of Baca (Psalm 84:4-6).

11 - What is the concept of Paradise in Islam?

The Qur'an contains many references to an afterlife in the eternal Paradise for those who believed and did good deeds. The Qur'an says, "The parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised! Beneath it flow rivers. Perpetual is the fruits thereof and the shade therein. Such is the end of the Righteous..." [Quran 13:35] Heaven in Islam is described primarily in physical terms as a place with splendid gardens where every wish is immediately fulfilled when asked. Islamic texts describe immortal life in heaven as happy, peaceful, without hardship, aging, diseases, or negative emotions. Those who dwell in heaven are said to be young, wear costly apparel, partake in exquisite banquets, and recline on couches inlaid with gold or precious stones. Inhabitants will rejoice in the company of their parents, spouses, and children. Paradise has levels and the highest level is called 'Firdaus' to which the Prophets, Truthful, Martyrs and other Pious people will go. It has been said that the lowest level of heaven is one-hundred times better than the greatest life on earth. Palaces are built in Paradise by Angels using solid gold for the occupants.

JUSTICE "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, with what you do, Acquainted." [Qur'an 4:135]



NON-VIOLENCE "...whosoever kills a human being, except (as punishment) for murder or for spreading corruption in the land, it shall be like killing all humanity; and whosoever saves a life, saves the entire human race. Our Apostles brought clear proofs to them; but even after that most of them committed excesses in the land." [Qur'an 5:32]

12 - What are the differences between Islam and Christianity?

There are many commonalities in systems of belief and practice in both Islam and Christianity; however, there are also some differences. The major differences are: (1) Islam teaches the Divine Unity of God and rejects the concept of divine trinity; (2) Muslims believe in Jesus (pbuh), but as a servant and Prophet of God - not a divine son of God; (3) In Islam, all people are born dean (without sin) and with the tendency to submit to the One Almighty God; (4) The Qur'an denies that Jesus (pbuh) was killed or crucified, although there was an attempt to do so, but God protected him and raised him up to Himself; (5) Islam rejects 'vicarious atonement and redemption' (i.e. Jesus' blood in the crucifixion has been used to pay to God for human sins). Instead, Islam teaches the 'law of personal responsibility' where all mankind who are capable of exercising their free-will are responsible for their own actions in this world, and on the Day of Judgment they will answer to God for their every word, thought and deed. Consequently, a practicing Muslim is always striving to be righteous. However, God is forgiving and merciful and He promised to forgive all sins whosoever sincerely repents directly to Him and do righteous deeds.

13 - What is the status of women in Islam?

Islam grants women numerous rights inside and outside home and in society. Among them is the right to earn a living, to financial support, to education, to inheritance, to a dowry, to being treated kindly, to vote, to keep their maiden name, to choose their spouses, to worship, to be a witness, and to participate in public service. Women are not oppressed in Islam and any one (individual or government) that oppresses women or fail to giving women their rights as dictated in the Qur'an and Sunnah is not following Islamic teachings. Among the many teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that protect the rights and dignity of women is his saying, "... the best among you are those who are best (kindest) with their women." Women are free to choose their spouses and forced marriage is forbidden in Islam. This illegal practice should not be confused with arranged marriage, a practice which prevails in some Muslim societies. Fair and just divorce is permissible; however reconciliation is what is most encouraged. Polygamy is permissible in Islam, but it is restricted to a maximum of four wives and to be regulated under very strict conditions to ensure just and fairness among all wives and their children. Polygamy was allowed in Christianity and Judaism without any bounds. Female circumcision, 'honor killing', and any form of body mutilation and violence against women (young or old) is prohibited in Islam.

14 - What is Jihad and what is Islam's position on Apostasy?

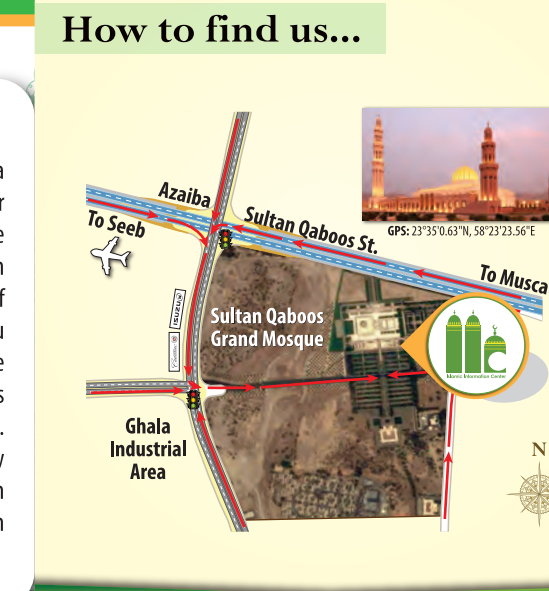
In Islam, the word 'Jihad' does not mean 'Holy War' as presented in the media. In fact, it was Crusaders who introduced the term 'Holy War' in the Middle Ages. Jihad in Islam means struggle, particularly the inner struggle that one endures in trying to submit one's will to the will of the One Almighty God. This struggle may involve physical struggle in some situations such as that of self-defense or when faced with oppression in trying to submit to the will of God or the struggle against a tyrant ruler. But there are many other forms of Jihad that are more relevant to the daily life of a Muslim (and every human being for that matter) such as the struggles against laziness, arrogance, stinginess, one's own ego, intolerance, social complexities, prejudice, disease, poverty, or against the temptations of Satan. Another common misconception in Islam is the issue of apostasy. The media portrayal of apostasy (renunciation of faith) in Islam as being punishable by death is contrary to the Qur'anic fundamental principle of faith, "There should be NO compulsion in religion." (Qur'an 2:256). Punishment is only mandated in the context of those who joined the enemy at war, which is more about "national security treason," rather than just apostasy. Treason happens to be punishable severely even in the modern secular states.

15 - What is Islam's position on racial relations?

Islam is arguably the most racially egalitarian among all major religions. Hinduism has a "cast system" that organizes division of labor and power in social classes. Judaism has a doctrine of the "chosen people" which has often been genealogically interpreted. Christianity has a long history of racial segregation, including the racial segregation of churches. Islam teaches that all human beings have been created from a single pair and have been made into nations and tribes so that they could know each other; the best among you is the one who is most fears God most. And the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught his followers: an Arab is not superior to a non-Arab, nor a white man to a black man except through piety and virtue. Muhammad's Companions were multicultural in composition, that includes the famous Persian Salman Farsi and Bilal Rabah, formerly Abyssinian slave. Islam condemns racial hatred and points out the way to equality and human brotherhood. Islam thus brings to the global ethic a doctrine of racial egalitarianism which goes back fourteen centuries ago.

16 - If Islam is a complete way of life why there is a diversity of Muslim customs and practices?

Muslims represent over 1.6 billion people across the globe from a vast range of races, nationalities and cultures. It is natural to expect these people to have brought diversity of cultures into Islam. However, Islamic principles as presented in the Qur'an and Sunnah take precedence over cultural practices. The rule of thumb: if a cultural practice is agreeable to the Qur'an and Sunnah, it is accepted in Islam; if a cultural practice is in conflict with the Qur'an and Sunnah, it is rejected in Islam. Unfortunately, there are many Muslim societies that are still practicing some of the ancestral cultures that are not in line with Islam and Islamic teachings. Some examples are those of forced marriage, circumcision of women, honor killing, and any form of women subjugation. None of these practices are sanctioned in the Qur'an or Sunnah, and therefore they are un-Islamic. An outside observer of Islam and Muslims needs to differentiate the pristine Islamic teachings as revealed by the One Almighty God from the cultural distortions practiced by few misinformed and misguided Muslims. It's okay to pass judgment on Muslims who do not follow their religion, but one should not judge Islam based on the misbehavior of few Muslims.



Islamic Information Center
Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque,
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
TeleFax: +968 24505170
Email: info@icoman.om
Website: www.icoman.om

Al-Fatiha (The Opening)

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray. [Qur'an 1:1-7]

Al-Fatiha is the first chapter of the noble Qur'an. It is recited many times by over 1.6 billion Muslims in their daily prayers. And the first verse of this chapter is also recited by Muslims before embarking on any endeavor, small or significant.



Muslim Population by Region			
Asia-Pacific	1,005,507,000	62.1%	
Middle East & North Africa	321,869,000	19.9%	
Sub-Saharan Africa	242,544,000	15.0%	
Europe	44,138,000	2.7%	
Americas	5,256,000	0.3%	
Source:			Pew Research Center, 2011

27 - Why Islam claims to be a religion of moderation?

Islam is a religion of moderation, and the community of believers (Ummah) is described as a 'community of moderation,' contrary to how it is portrayed in the popular media today. Muslims are expected to maintain delicate balance between any two extremes: the worldly and spiritual, work and relaxation, pride and humility, extravagance and frugality, even hunger and satiety. The religion strikes a beautiful balance in all areas of life. Islam commands believers to fulfill certain duties and obligations, but there are always exceptions for those who are unable to do so. We are prohibited to eat pork products, unless it is out of dire necessity. We are expected to pray standing up, unless we are sick, too old or weak, in which case we may sit or lie down. Overall, Islam accommodates the various needs and situations of all members of the society, in all places and all times. God does not charge anyone with a responsibility or burden greater than he or she can possibly bear. This is the central tenant of religion of Islam.

28 - What is Islamic 'Shariah'?

Islamic shariah is often wrongly portrayed as 'Islamic law,' causing one to assume that it consists mostly of rulings on crimes and harsh penalties. However, sharia encompasses much more than the conventional understanding of law. Sharia is the practical guidance Muslims live by and it is rooted in the divine teachings of Islam. Its collective aim is to facilitate justice and benefits. Sharia is derived from the scholarly study of Islamic texts – the Qur'an and Sunnah through interpretive reasoning, legal analogy, and scholarly consensus. "Sharia Scaremongering" seems to be gaining momentum in the West where politicians scramble to pass anti-sharia legislation to ensure that no sharia law can sneak into their legal systems. The truth is, application of sharia in the West is only significant to Muslims family life and cannot be viewed differently from Jewish Law and Catholic Canon Law that are currently allowed to function in the secular West. Besides, sharia will only be binding upon parties when both sides agree to submit to sharia arbitration tribunal; and that arbitration tribunal will only be concerned with family matters involving marital disputes, child custody issues and inheritance. Unfortunately, most people who speak passionately against sharia do not, in reality, understand it and thus approach the issue with ignorance.

29 - Why so much of the Muslim world has fallen behind in development?

No one can deny the fact that in the last three centuries, Muslim heritage has been on the decline, the cause of which goes back into history. In the early stages of Islam, Muslim nations enjoyed over a thousand glorious years of wealth, centers of learning, advancement in science and technology, and public works. But affluence and excessive concern with worldly life eventually weakened religious consciousness, causing decline in the progression of learning and research and halted Islamic territorial influence and expansion. The rise of Western powers and influence starting from the renaissance marginalized the Muslim nations from their dominant position of global leadership. At that time, Europe was beginning to benefit from the achievements of Islamic scholarship and to assert itself. Most of Muslim regions of the world were then conquered, dominated and exploited by Western colonial powers for some time. Even in the post-colonial era, Western powers are still maintaining their influence on development and resources of the Muslim nations. The current backwardness of Muslim societies, their political degradation and their peoples' suffering, despite abundance of their human and material resources and of Islam's noble values and principles, is an unfortunate reality. But, if Muslim societies today are not meeting and standing up for their potential, it is surely not due to Islam; rather it is from their ignorance of the religion and failure to apply and practice it. Islam has never been a barrier to progress and science.

30 - What do Muslims hope for in the new Millennium?

Muslims hope for peace, justice and prosperity in their countries and in the world. They hope for the return of their occupied lands and the return of all displaced people to their homes. They hope for continued true Islamic governance in their lands. They hope for a return to the genuine Muslim spirit of tolerance, love and peace. They hope and pray that others will come to know the reality of their beautiful religion, and not fall prey to negative media stereotypes. Mutual understanding and respect among nations is the key to world peace in our diverse world; as the Qur'an says: "O mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know each other. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who fears God most. God is all knowing and all-aware." [Qur'an 49:13]

25 - Why Muslim women wear headscarf?

Muslim women wear headscarf (or hijab) in fulfillment of God's decree to dress modestly. Islam values modesty as one of the supreme virtues in both genders and a way to enhance human dignity. In many Muslim societies, it is customary for both men and women to expose only face and hands outside of their homes. Men typically wear turban or cap and women wear headscarf. At home, dress codes are not overly relaxed. Hijab serves to identify one as attempting to follow God's instructions in daily life. Hijab is not merely a head covering dress, but more importantly, it is behavior, manners, speech and appearance in public. Righteous women throughout history have worn this type of modesty dress. Prominent examples are the Virgin Mary and Catholic Nuns. Muslims do not see the headscarf as a symbol of oppression, but of freedom. When dressed modestly and with dignity, it is easier for men and women to deal with each other seriously and not make superficial judgments of each other on the basis of physical appearance. Public display of the body may enrich the fashion, cosmetic industry and media business, but oppressively marginalizing many others in the society. Muslim women with hijab often seem mysterious to those not acquainted with the religious meaning of modesty dressing. This aura of mystery can be removed only if their beliefs, thought-systems and lifestyles are genuinely explored and understood. It should also be remarked that wearing headscarf for women is not just a Muslim ruling; it is also prescribed in other Scriptures.

Becoming a Muslim

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Any person of any race, creed and culture who is convinced in the heart and mind about Islamic system of beliefs and worship is welcome in Islam. To become a Muslim, a person simply needs to make a testimony of Islamic faith by stating that, **'I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except the One Almighty God; and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.'** The testimony needs to be pronounced willingly and with full conviction. Islam insists that, "there is no compulsion in religion."

26 - How come there are many sects in Islam when it claims to be a universal religion?

All Muslims irrespective of sectarian (madh'hab) affiliations adhere to the 'six articles of faith' and 'five pillars of worship' mentioned earlier, that represent the basic tenets of Muslim belief and practice. All Muslims worship the same Almighty God, follow the same Prophet, and are guided by the same Book. The major split in Islam occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) on the issue of: who should lead the Muslim nation after the Prophet's death? The group that eventually came to be known as "Shiite" took a position that the person who is going to lead the Muslim nation after the Prophet's death must come from the Prophet's family. The rest of the Muslims adhered to the principle that the leader could be appointed by nominating a qualified candidate who is knowledgeable, pious and has leadership qualities. These came to be known "Sunnis". The first three Caliphs (Abu Bakar, Umar and Othman) who lead the Muslim nation after the Prophet's death did not come from the Prophet's family. The fourth Caliph (Ali) though was the Prophet's cousin. Thus, the underlying issue in the formation of madh'hab was mainly political, not religious as such. But over the years madh'hab merely came to reflect different 'schools of jurisprudences' in the process of deriving Islamic rulings for various practices from the mass of evidence. Despite appearance of the outward drama of differences and dashes between madh'hab, Muslims have maintained unflinching attitude of sectarian tolerance, respect, brotherhood and intellectual cohesion. In most cases, Muslims of different sectarian affiliations would pray in the same mosques, behind the same Imams (the persons who leads Muslim prayers), learn from the same scholars, cross-marriage and live together peacefully and harmoniously in the same communities.

22 - What is the role of knowledge in Islam?

Islam attaches great importance to knowledge. When the Qur'an began to be revealed, the first word was 'Read' or 'Recite'. Allah says, "Read! In the Name of your Lord Who has created. He has created man from a dot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught by the pen? He has taught man that which he knew not" (Qur'an, 96: 1-5) Knowledge is thus the starting point of every human endeavor in Islam. Allah created humans and provided them with the tools for acquiring knowledge. Allah says, "And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks (to Allah)" (Qur'an, 16:78) A knowledgeable person is accorded greater respect in many prophetic narrations. Because of the importance of knowledge, Allah commanded His Messenger to seek more of it. Allah says, "And say: 'My Lord! Increase me in knowledge'" (Qur'an, 20:114) The Prophet made seeking knowledge an obligation upon every Muslim. He also said that seeking knowledge is a way leading to Paradise. He said: "Whoever follows a path in the pursuit of knowledge, Allah will make a path to Paradise easy for him." No other religion ever went so far in asserting the dominance of reason and learning above all other manifestations of human life. That is why history traces major scientific and technological developments in the Muslim world between the 7th and 17th centuries, when at that time period the West was immersed in the Dark Ages.

HONESTY "And do not mix the truth with falsehood or conceal the truth while you know [it]." [Qur'an 2:42] "And take not your oaths, to practise deception between yourselves, with the result that someone's foot may slip after it was firmly planted..." [Qur'an 16:94]

23 - What is the Islamic economic system?

An Islamic economic system is not just concerned with the amount of production and consumption, organization of economic activities and markets, role of money and banking, fiscal and monetary policy. It calls for application of Islamic moral and ethical values to all economic activities and economic rules. Such Islamic moral and ethical values include the non-use of usury, interest, cheating, unfairness, disinformation, hoarding, monopoly, corruption and the like in all economic transactions. It also aims to strike a balance between personal and societal benefits, material and spiritual gains, profits and social welfare. Islam teaches that God has created provision for every person He brought to life, and therefore, the competition for natural resources that is presumed to exist among the nations of the world is an illusion. The challenge for humans lies in discovering, extracting, processing, and distributing these resources in a just and equity manner. Everything in Islam starts with the belief in God as the Creator, Sustainer, and Sovereign of the universe. God created humans on earth as His trustees and expect them to live according to the moral and ethical values that He Himself provided. In order to fulfill the responsibility of trusteeship, God has made everything in this universe subservient to mankind. However, humans are not given free reign to use and abuse these resources, because they will be accountable before God on the Day of Judgment.

GENEROSITY "O you who have believed, spend from the good things which you have earned and from that which We have produced for you from the earth. And do not aim toward the defective therefrom, spending [from that] while you would not take it [yourself] except with closed eyes. And know that Allah is Free of need and Praiseworthy." [Qur'an 2:267]

24 - Why Muslims eat halal food?

Islam gives guidelines on what exactly is considered lawful and therefore "halal to consume and what is considered unlawful or "haram" to consume. Through His divine wisdom, God has made unlawful the consumption of meat from animals that have not been slaughtered in Islamic way – by cutting throat with a sharp knife and invoking Allah's name. He also made unlawful the consumption of certain meats such as carrion, blood, pork, and meat of animals that have been strangled, beaten, fallen (to their death), gored, and devoured by beasts of prey. He also made unlawful the consumption of animals when sacrificed for other than God – e.g. animals used in idolatrous sacrifices. The following list represents the general guideline when it comes to Muslim food consumption: Alcohol – intoxicants and narcotic drugs are unlawful; Blood and blood by-products are unlawful. Blood is the circulatory cleansing fluid of the body and is not to be consumed; Carnivorous animals, birds of prey, scavengers, and animals improperly slaughtered, sick or dying before slaughter are unlawful; Swine and all pork by-products and/or their derivatives are unlawful; Foods contaminated with any of the above products or with "impurities" from processing, such as manure, urine, rodent droppings, infectious fluids, or pus are considered unlawful.

20 - What is the position of Islam on democratic values?

Democratic values based on justice have been present in Islam since 1400 years ago. They were embedded in cultural and religious practices that might have been now lost to history. History shows of active participation of the people with the leaders of their time, from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as he was directed by God to seek 'Shura' or 'mutual consultation' from his followers and companions. Michael Hamilton Morgan writes in Lost History, "Shura was the tradition Muhammed (pbuh) valued, and according to which decisions that affect the community are to be made in consultation with members of the community." In fact, one chapter of the Qur'an is named 'as-Shura', referring to a verse that states that those close to God should conduct their affairs by due consultation with others." Shura is a crucial part of the Islamic political system that allows common people to participate in the decision-making process. God commanded to use shura, "Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance." (Qur'an 42:38) Omar ibn Khattab, the second Caliph, has particularly left a legacy of democratic leadership. Upon assuming the role of second Caliph, he said: "In the performance of my duties, I will seek guidance from the Qur'an, and will follow the examples set by the Prophet and Abu Bakr [the first Caliph]. In this task, I seek your assistance. If I follow the right path, follow me. If I deviate from the right path, correct me so that we are not led astray."

Salvation in Islam

Salvation in Islam refers to the final abode into the paradise in the afterlife. Islam teaches that in order to gain salvation, one must have faith, perform good deeds, avoid sinning and seek Allah's mercy. It is eventually by God's mercy that merits one's salvation. Islam acknowledges the inclination of humanity towards sinning and Muslims are constantly reminded to sincerely repent and seek God's forgiveness directly. Islam teaches that God is Merciful and Forgiving. He is closer to us than our jugular vein. In one verse, the Qur'an says: *God accepts the repentance of those who do evil in ignorance and repent soon afterwards.* In another verse, the Qur'an says: *of no effect is the repentance of those who continue to do evil, until death faces them.* Finally, the Qur'an says: *don't lose hope from God's mercy; He forgives all sins.*

21 - What is Islam's position on Terrorism?

Terrorism, unjustified violence and the killing of innocent people are absolutely forbidden in Islam. Islam is a way of life that is meant to bring about peace to a society. The extreme actions of those who claim to be Muslims may be, among other things, a result of their ignorance or uncontrolled anger. Tyrannical rulers and those who commit acts of terror in the name of Islam are simply not following Islam. Those individuals or groups have their own views and political agendas. Fanatical Muslims are no more representatives of Islam and Islamic teachings than Christian or Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu extremists are representatives of those religions. Perpetrators of violence do not fit any stereotype and exist in all religions, even though the media singularly pick on Islam. Those who hold human lives cheap and have power to expend human lives, appear at different levels in our societies. The frustrated employee who kills colleagues in cold-blood or the oppressed citizen in an occupied land who vents anger by blowing a school-bus is the terrorist who provoke our anger. However, the politicians who trigger ethnic wars or order bombing of entire cities or the international bodies that choke million civilians to death using weapons of sanctions are rarely blamed for their terror. Today it may well appear that some Muslim countries are not peaceful for political reasons, but for most of twentieth century the Muslim world was remarkably peaceful. The truly devastating conflicts of the last century, with their unprecedented level of military and civilian casualties, had not been the work of Muslims. It should also be remarked that today Muslim societies are still much less afflicted by domestic crime rate than those of some other parts of the world.

17 - Was Islam truly spread by the sword?

Islam did not spread by the 'sword' as erroneously claimed in the Western literature. It was certainly spread by the 'word' – the Islamic teachings and the example of its devout followers. The Qur'an insists, "There should be NO compulsion in religion." (Qur'an 2:256) "Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Shall you (Muhammad) then force people to become believers?" (Qur'an 10:99) "To each among you have We prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you one single community..." (Qur'an 5:48). Islamic law forbids any forced conversions, and regards them invalid if they occur. It is true that the political sway of Muslim rulers in history has sometimes been achieved through warfare, but this must be distinguished clearly from the spiritual expansion of the Islamic faith. There has never been a Muslim 'Inquisition' or a Muslim 'Crusade', which set out to massacre unbelievers or convert them by force as was done in Christianity in the Middle Ages. There was no Muslim army that marched to Indonesia to convert people, yet Indonesia today has the largest Muslim community in the world. Thus, the purpose of Muslim rule had not been to impose Islam, but to remove oppression and intolerance and to bring about religious freedom. The early Muslims brought religious toleration and pluralism to many Jewish and sectarian Christian minorities, which had formerly been the victims of bitter persecution by Byzantine and Sassanid Empires.

PATIENCE "And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed, it is difficult except for the humbly submissive [to Allah]. Who are certain that they will meet their Lord and that they will return to Him." [Qur'an 2:45-46]

18 - What is the position of Islam on the so called Muslim fundamentalists and extremists?

Muslim fundamentalists and extremists are false stereotypes perpetrated by misinformation and distortion about Islam and Muslims in the media. Extremism is condemned in Islam, as it means deviation from moderation of Islamic teachings or from correct method of applying them. However, it must be pointed out that often religious extremism is an expression of anger and resentment by a few against oppression and persecution which can occur in any religious community. Nonetheless, it remains unacceptable in Islam. The term "fundamentalist" reflect the media intent to stigmatize those Muslims who adhere to the fundamental principles of Islam and pattern their lives accordingly. While a practicing Jew is referred by the media as "orthodox" and a practicing Christian, Hindu or Buddhist is referred as "devout," a practicing Muslim is usually referred negatively as "fundamentalist." The truth of the matter is that in any religion, a person who adheres to the fundamentals of his or her religion is a fundamentalist, and the one who doesn't is a hypocrite.

MERCY "...So overlook (any human faults) with gracious forgiveness. [Qur'an 15:85] "And not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend." [Qur'an 41:34] "...if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah..." [Qur'an 42:40]

19 - What is the status of non-Muslims in an Islamic state?

Non-Muslim communities typically flourished under Muslim rule and retained their own places of worship, customs and laws mainly because of religious tolerance and pluralism in Islam. A good example: Hindus in Mughal India, Christians and Jews in Andalusia, and Copts in Egypt. Jewish and Christians citizens of an Islamic state had the status known as 'Dhimmi' or 'protection'. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Whoever oppresses any Jew or Christian enjoying Dhimmi status, shall have me as his adversary." A Dhimmi citizen is exempted from paying zakat and from being drafted in the army. Dhimmi citizens also enjoy the right to establish their own laws where questions of personal nature such as marriage, divorce, inheritance are adjudicated by a judge of their own religion. In exchange for the extension of the protection, primarily to life and property, Dhimmi citizens pay a relatively lower tax (compared to zakat) known as 'jizya'. Islamic law also affirms the right of non-Muslims to participate in the political process and be appointed to high office. Before the advent of political Zionism, Jewish historians gratefully recorded the history of Jewish people under Muslim rule in Spain, Portugal and Egypt as the golden era. In contrast very sharply, the record shows medieval Europe frequently persecuted religious minorities, particularly those termed Jewish and Christians 'heretics'.