

In the name of God, most Kind, most Merciful

The 25 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Islam

By Dr. Shahid Athar

INTRODUCTION

The pluralistic American society has changed from being a "melting pot" to a "salad bowl" where all ingredients are encouraged to preserve and display their distinct tastes and flavors. However, even though Islam is a major religion with over 1.25 billion followers worldwide and over 8 million in the U.S., some Americans still mistake it for a cult, or that all Muslims are terrorists, or that every Muslim has 4 wives. The really naïve among my compatriots ask me if my wife puts on a veil, walks behind me, and belly dances for me! Misconceptions about Islam and Muslims continue because of the lack of availability of correct information about the basic teachings of Islam.

The misrepresentation of Islam by the media, especially Hollywood, often challenges Muslims to answer questions put forth by their non-Muslim neighbors, colleagues, and friends. I have been blessed by the opportunity of speaking about Islam and Muslims to non-Muslims in schools, colleges, churches, synagogues, inter-faith gatherings, and on radio and TV talk shows. Such experiences have been most rewarding, often resulting in friendships. In addition, these experiences have enabled me to put together 25 frequently asked questions about Islam, and of course my answers to them.

This booklet is meant as a brief introduction about Islam and Muslims, as well as a handy guide for teachers and all others who are asked about Islam and Muslims.

I welcome all suggestions and ideas for improvement, and thank all those who helped in the production of this booklet. I ask Allah to forgive me for any mistakes and seek reward from Him alone.

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1. What is Islam?

"Islam" is an Arabic word that means peace and submission. The "peace" in Islam means to be at peace with oneself and your surroundings and "submission" means submission to the Will of God. A broader meaning of the word "Islam" is to achieve peace by submitting to the Will of God.

Islam is a unique religion with a name that signifies a moral attitude and a way of life. Judaism takes its name from the tribe of Judah, Christianity from Jesus Christ, Buddhism from Buddha, and Hinduism from the Indus River.

However, Muslims derive their identity from the message of Islam, rather than the person of Muhammad (salla Allah 'alayhi wa sallam-peace and blessings be upon him). Therefore, Muslims should never be called "Mohammedans".

2. Who is Allah?

Allah is the Arabic word for the "One God."

Allah is not a deity specific to Muslims alone.

He is God of all creations, because He is their Creator and Sustainer.

An Arabic speaking person of any religion would only call God by His name in Arabic, which is Allah. After all Moses and Jesus did not speak English, and the English-language word "God" was not in their vocabulary!

3. Who is a Muslim?

The word "Muslim" means the one who submits to the Will of God, declaring that "there is no one worthy of submission except the One God and Muhammad is the messenger of God." In a broader sense, anyone who willingly submits to the Will of God is a Muslim. Thus, all the prophets preceding Prophet Muhammad are considered Muslims. The Qur'an specifically mentions Abraham who lived long before Moses and Jesus that, "he was neither a Jew or a Christian but a Muslim," because, he had submitted to the Will of God. Thus, there are Muslims who are not submitting at all to the Will of God and there are Muslims who are doing their best to live an Islamic life.

One cannot judge Islam by looking at those individuals who have a Muslim name but in their actions, they are not living or behaving as Muslims. In fact, many Muslim Americans have not even adopted traditional Muslim names and there are good Muslims. The extent of being a Muslim can be according to the degree to which one submits to the Will of God in his beliefs and his actions.

4. Who was Muhammad?

Muhammad was born in a noble tribe of Mecca in Arabia in the year 570 CE. His ancestry goes back to Prophet Ishmael, son of Prophet Abraham. His father died shortly before his birth and his mother died when he was six. He did not attend school and was thus unable to read and write.

In accordance to the prevalent custom, he was raised first by a nurse, and then by his grandfather and uncle. As a young man, he was known as a righteous person, a trait that earned him the title of Al-Amin-the trustworthy. He often used to retire to meditate in a cave near Mecca. At age 40, he was given the prophethood when the angel, Gabriel, appeared in the cave with God's Command. Subsequently, the revelations came over 23 years and were compiled in the form of a book called the Qur'an which Muslims consider as the final and the last word of God given to

humankind. The Qur'an has been preserved in its original form and confirms the truth in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel.

5. Do Muslims worship Muhammad?

No. Muslims do not worship Muhammad or any other prophets. Muslims believe in all prophets including Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, Solomon, Moses, and Jesus. In fact, the belief is all prophets of God are an integral part of the faith. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last of the prophets. They believe that God alone is to be worshiped, not any human being.

6. What do Muslims think of Jesus?

Muslims hold Jesus and his revered mother, Mary in great esteem. The Qur'an says that Jesus is the outcome of a miraculous birth without a father. "Lo! The likeness of Jesus with God is the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, and then He said unto him: Be and he is" (Qur'an 3.59). He was given many miracles as a prophet, which includes speaking soon after his birth in defense of his mother's piety. God's other gifts to him included healing the blind and the sick, reviving the dead, making a bird out of clay and most importantly, the message he was carrying. These miracles were given to him by God to establish him as a prophet. According to the Qur'an, he was not crucified but was raised into Heaven. (Qur'an, Chapter Maryam)

7. Do Muslims have many sects?

Muslims have no sects. In Islam, there are two major schools of thought, the Shia and the Sunni, which have more in common than differences. They follow the same book-The Qur'an; the same prophet Muhammad, offer their prayers 5 times a day, fast in the month of Ramadan, and go for Hajj--pilgrimage to Mecca. Those who follow Prophet Muhammad, in accordance with his sayings and actions, are called Sunni and those who in addition also follow the sayings and views of Ali (Muhammad's son-in-law), whom they consider as the rightful successor to Prophet Muhammad, are called Shia.

The word Shia means a partisan (party of Ali) and it started more as a political party to help Ali in his conflict with his political adversaries. Most Shias live in Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan while the rest of the Muslim world is mostly Sunni. Shias comprise about 16 percent of the Muslim population.

8. What are the pillars of Islam?

There are 5 pillars of Islam, which are the articles of faith. 1) Belief (Iman) in one God and that Muhammad is His messenger. 2) Prayer (Salat) which is prescribed 5

times a day. 3) Fasting (Siyam) which is required in the month of Ramadan-9th month of the Islamic Hijri calendar. 4) Charity (Zakat) which is the poor-due (2.5%) on the wealth of the rich.5) Hajj--the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if one can afford it physically and financially.

All the pillars should be of equal height and strength in a building in order to give it due shape and proportion. It is not possible that one would do Hajj without observing fasting or without practicing regular prayers. Now think of a building that has pillars only. It would not be called a building.

In order to make it a building, it has to have a roof, walls, doors, and windows. These things in Islam are the moral codes of Islam such as honesty, truthfulness, steadfastness, and many other human moral qualities.

Thus in order to be a Muslim, one should not only be practicing the pillars of Islam but should also have the highest possible attribute for being a good human being. Only then, the building is completed and looks beautiful.

9. What is the purpose of worship in Islam?

The purpose of worship in Islam is to be God conscious. Thus worship, whether it is prayer, fasting, charity, or Hajj, is a means to achieve God consciousness so that when one becomes conscious of God, in thought and in action, he is in a better position to receive His bounties both in this world and the Hereafter.

10. Do Muslims believe in the Hereafter?

God who is Just and manifests His justice has established the system of accountability. Those who do good deeds will be rewarded and those who do wrong will be punished accordingly.

Thus, He created the Heaven and Hell and there are admission criteria for both. Muslims believe that the present life is a temporary one--a test and if we pass the test, we will be given a life of permanent pleasure in the company of good people in Heaven.

11. Will the good actions of the nonbelievers be wasted?

No. The Qur'an clearly says that, "anyone who has an atom's worth of goodness will see it and anyone who has done an atom's worth of evil will also see it"

(Qur'an 99:7-8). By that, it is meant that the nonbelievers who have done good will be rewarded in this world for their good deed. On the other hand, those who do good if they are also sincere in submission to God (that is Muslims), they will be

rewarded not only in this world but also in the Hereafter. However, the final Judgment is up to God himself. (Qur'an 2:62)

12. What is the dress code for Muslims?

Islam emphasizes modesty. No person should be perceived as a sex object. There are certain guidelines both for men and women that their dress should not reveal body forms.

Men must cover at least the area from the knee to the navel and for women should cover all areas except the hands and face. The veil is not essential.

13. What are the dietary prohibitions in Islam?

Muslims are told in the Qur'an not to eat pork or pork products, meat of the animals that died before being slaughtered or carnivorous animals (as they eat dead animals), nor drink blood or intoxicants such as alcoholic beverages or use any illicit drugs. Muslims are also advised to be balanced in their intake of foods and beverages.

The Prophet advised that one should a portion of the stomach empty.

14. What is Jihad?

The word "Jihad" literally means struggle, which in Islamic terms means to strive in the way of God. Any struggle done in day-to-day life to please God can be considered Jihad.

One of the highest levels of Jihad is to stand up to a tyrant and speak the truth. The control of the self from wrongdoings is also a great Jihad.

One of the forms of Jihad is to take up arms in defense of Islam or a Muslim country when Islam is attacked. Such a Jihad has to be declared by the religious leadership or by a Muslim head of state who is following the Qur'an and Sunnah.

15. What is the Islamic Year?

The Islamic year started from the migration (Hijra) of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. It is a lunar year of 354 days.

The first month is called Muharram. Muslims do not celebrate a "new year" and like each day, pray for God's good pleasure and bounty.

16. What are the major Islamic festivals?

'Idul Fitr marks the end of fasting in the month of Ramadan and is celebrated with congregational prayers, feasts, and exchange of gifts. 'Idul Adha marks the end of the Hajj or the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. After congregational prayers, those who can afford, sacrifice an allowed animal such as lamb, goat, or cow to signify Prophet Abraham's obedience to God, shown by his readiness to sacrifice his son Ishmael.

Muslims live as a majority in some 52 countries and as minorities worldwide, and after 'Id celebrations vary from cultures, but remain within the confines of the Islamic moral code and dietary regulations.

17. What is the Shari'ah?

The Shari'ah is the comprehensive Muslim law derived from two sources: the Qur'an and the Sunnah-the Traditions of Prophet Muhammad. It covers every aspect of individual and collective living.

The purpose of Islamic laws are protection of the individual's fundamental rights to include right to life, property, political and religious freedom and safeguarding the rights of women and minorities. The low crime rate in Muslim societies is due to the application of the Islamic laws.

18. Was Islam spread by the sword?

The Qur'an declares, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), thus, no one can be forced to become a Muslim. While it is true that in many places where Muslim armies went to liberate people or the land, they did carry the sword as that was the weapon used at that time. However, Islam did not spread by the sword because in many places where there are Muslims now, in the Far East like Indonesia, China, and many parts of Africa, there are no records of any Muslim armies going there. For instance, instance Muslims ruled India for over 1,000 years and yet only 15% of Indians are Muslims. If the 'sword' had been used, the statistics would have been otherwise. Despite 1,400 years Muslim presence in the Arab world, only 10% of all Arabs are Christians.

In the U.S., Islam is the fastest growing religion and, according to a 2001 study, it has 7 million followers obviously without any sword around.

19. Does Islam promote violence and terrorism?

No. Islam is religion of peace and submission and stresses on the sanctity of human life.

The Qur'an (5:32) says: "anyone who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole of humankind and anyone who has killed another person (except in lieu of

murder or mischief on earth) it is as if he has killed the whole of humankind." Islam condemns all the violence. Muslims were and are the victims and not perpetrators of the violence that happened in the Crusades, Spain, the World Wars, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the atrocities committed in Bosnia and Kosovo by the Christian Serbs, in the former Soviet Union, in Palestine, and Kashmir.

Anyone who is perpetrating violence is not practicing his religion at that time. However, sometimes violence is a human response of oppressed people as it happens in Palestine. Although this is wrong, these oppressed people think that this is a way to get world attention. Of course, there is a lot of terrorism and violence in areas where there is no Muslim presence, such as Ireland, Latin America, and Sri Lanka. Sometimes the violence is due to a struggle between the haves and have-nots, or between the oppressed and the oppressors. We need to find out why people become terrorists. Unfortunately, the Palestinians who are waging a resistance movement are called terrorists, but not the armed Israeli settlers and even the Israeli government. Too often Muslims are blamed for things they did not do, for instance, the Oklahoma City bombing.

20. What is "Islamic Fundamentalism"?

There is no concept of "fundamentalism" in Islam. The western media has coined this term to brand those Muslims who wish to return to the fundamental principles of Islam and mould their lives accordingly. Islam is a religion of moderation and a practicing God fearing Muslim can neither be a fanatic nor an extremist.

21. Does Islam promote polygamy?

Polygamy in Islam is permission not an injunction. Historically, all the prophets except Jesus, who was not married, had more than one wife. For Muslim men to have more than one wife is a permission which is given to them in the Qur'an, not to satisfy lust, but for the welfare of the widows and the orphans of the wars. In the pre-Islamic period, men used to have many wives. One person had 11 wives and when he became Muslim, he asked Prophet Muhammad, "What should I do with so many wives?" and he replied, "Divorce all except the four." The Qur'an says, "you can marry 2 or 3 and up to 4 women if you can be equally just with each of them" (4:3). Since it is very difficult to be equally just with all wives, in practice, most of the Muslim men do not have more than one wife.

Prophet Muhammad himself from age 24 to 50 was married to only one woman, Khadija. In western society, some men who have one wife have many extramarital affairs. Americans had a president who was adept at such behavior! A survey published in USA Today (April 4, 1988 Section D) asked 4,700 mistresses about their preferred status, and they said that "they preferred being a second wife rather

than the 'other woman' because they did not have the legal rights, nor did they have the financial equality of the legally married wives, and it appeared that they were being used by these men."

22. Does Islam oppress women?

No. On the contrary, Islam elevated the status of women 1,400 years ago by giving them the right to divorce, the right to have financial independence and support and the right to be identified as dignified women (Hijab) when the rest of the world, including Europe, had no such rights. Women are equal to men in all acts of piety (Qur'an 33:32). Islam allows women to keep their maiden name after marriage, their earned money that they can invest or spend as they wish, and asks men to be their protector as women on the street can be molested. Prophet Muhammad told Muslim men, "The best among you is the one who is best to his family."

However, some Muslims warp Islamic teaching seemingly to oppress women in the name of "religion" an aberration deriving from cultural habits or ignorance about their religion. Female Genital Mutilations (female circumcision) has nothing to do with Islam. It is a pre-Islamic African custom practiced by non-Muslims including Coptic Christians.

23. Is Islam intolerant of other religious minorities?

Islam recognizes the rights of the minority. To ensure their welfare and safety, Muslim rulers initiated a tax (Jazia) on them. Prophet Muhammad forbade Muslim armies to destroy places of worship such as churches and synagogues. Caliph Umer did not even allow them to pray inside a church. Jews were welcomed and flourished in Muslim Spain, and when they were persecuted in Spain the rest of Europe after the exit of Muslims, Turkey gave the Jews refuge. The Jews consider that part of their history as the Golden Era. In Muslim countries, Christians live in prosperity, hold government positions, and attend their church. Pakistan has had a Christian chief justice of the Supreme Court. Even Iraq has a Christian senior vice president. Christian missionaries are allowed to establish and operate their churches, schools, and hospitals.

However, the same religious tolerance is not always available to Muslim minorities as seen in the past during Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades, or as seen now by the events in Bosnia, Israel and India. Muslims do recognize that sometimes the actions of a ruler do not reflect the teachings of his religion, and in fact, many of the Muslims being accused of terrorism are struggling against such undemocratic regimes.

24. What is the Islamic view on:

a. Dating and Premarital Sex:

Islam does not approve of intimate mixing of the sexes, and forbids premarital and extramarital sex. Islam encourages marriage as a shield to such temptations and as a means of having mutual love, mercy, and peace.

b. Abortion:

Islam considers abortion as murder and does not permit it except to save the mother's life when advised by competent medical professionals (Qur'an 17:23-31, 6:15 1).

c. Homosexuality and AIDS:

Islam categorically opposes homosexuality and considers it a major sin. However, Muslim physicians are advised to care for AIDS patients with compassion just as they would for other patients.

d. Euthanasia and Suicide:

Islam is opposed to both suicide and euthanasia. Muslims do not believe in heroic measures to prolong the misery in a terminally ill patient.

e. Organ transplantation:

Islam stresses upon saving lives (Qur'an 5:32). Thus, transplantation in general would be considered permissible provided donor consent is available. The sale of the organ is not allowed.

25. How should Muslims treat Jews and Christians?

The Qur'an calls the Jews and Christians as "People of the Book", i.e., those who received Divine scriptures before Muhammad. Muslims are told to treat them with respect and justice and do not fight with them unless they initiate hostilities or oppose their faith. The Muslims ultimate hope is that they all will join them in worshipping one God and submit to His will.

" Say (O Muhammad): O people of the Book (Jews and Christians) come to an agreement between us and you, that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall take no partners with Him, and none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are those who have surrendered (unto Him)." (Qur'an 3:64)

What about Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists, and members of other religions? They should also be treated with love, respect, and understanding to make them recipients of the invitation to Islam.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

1. The Holy Qur'an (A.Yusuf Ali trans.) - Amana Corp., MD
2. Islam in Focus (H. Abdalati) - Islamic Teaching Center, Plainfield, IN
3. Towards Understanding Islam - (Abul Aala Maududi) - ATP, Indianapolis
4. Reflections of an American Muslim (Shahid Athar) - Kazi Publication, Chicago.

"I found your booklet interesting and informative. Thanks and best wishes." - Hon. Richard G. Lugar, U.S. Senator (R-Indiana).

"You have certainly focused on important questions and presented the answers in an understandable format. Best wishes in your continued efforts to build bridges of understanding in our state, nation, and world." - Honorable Evan Bayh, Governor of the State of Indiana.

"I found the booklet extremely informative and interesting. It is very important to educate people about different religions, thus dispelling false impressions."

- Honorable Senator Joseph L Lieberman, State of Connecticut

"Thank you for the autographed pamphlet 25 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Islam. I found this extremely valuable and insightful in furthering my understanding of Islam."

- Honorable Governor Kirk Fordice, State of Mississippi "May God help you in all your efforts at this difficult moment of Islamic history."

-Seyyed Hossein Nasr, University Professor of Islamic History, George Washington University.

"It is a judicious, useful, balanced and good natured guide that should be appreciated by a wide range of people interested in learning some basics about Islam and Muslim."

- Professor Frederick M. Denny, Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder, Colorado.

"I deeply appreciate your furthering understanding of Islam and it is the way for us to gain appreciation and acceptance of persons in our society." - Rev. C. Edward Weisheimer, Regional Minister, Christian Church in Indiana (Disciples of Christ)

"I do thank you for sending me your thoughtful publication explaining the Islamic faith. I have found it to be most helpful and informative."

- Hon. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, U.S. Senator (D-New York)