

MUSLIM BELIEFS & PRACTICES AT END OF LIFE



Islam is an Arabic word meaning "surrender" or "submission." It is a faith that encompasses approximately one-fifth of humanity. Its adherents reside in almost every country of the world and comprise majorities in large segments of Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and Asia. Six million Americans follow Islam.

The Origins of Islam

The historical origins of Islam date back to seventh century Arabia. The Prophet Muhammad, an aristocratic Arabian born and raised an orphan in the sanctuary city of Mecca, experienced a revelation in his fortieth year. He began to preach to his own people, most of whom initially persecuted him. After thirteen years of suffering with patience and endurance, he migrated to the nearby city of Medina. For over twenty-three years, beginning in 610 C.E., the Prophet orally transmitted the [Quran](#) (Koran). Muslims believe the Quran was revealed from God through the archangel Gabriel. In it, a cosmology, a theology, and an elaborate [eschatology](#) are described. By the end of the Prophet's life in 632 C.E., almost the entire Arabian Peninsula had converted from paganism to Islam, and within a hundred years, its followers stretched from France to China.

Although considered the youngest of the three great Abrahamic faiths that include Judaism and Christianity, Islam does not view itself as a new religion but rather as a reformed Abrahamic faith. Muslims believe that the Quran corrects distortions of previous prophetic dispensations while not departing from the aboriginal faith of humanity, which according to the Muslims is Islam, or sub-mission to one God. While Muslims believe all prophets have taught the unity of God and that their beliefs about God were the same, their actual practices have changed to suit various times and places. According to Muslims, this is why religions tend to differ outwardly, while retaining an essential inward truth common to them all. However, the Quran declares its message as uniquely universal applying to all people for all remaining time.

Basic Beliefs of Muslims

Islam is based upon five "pillars" that represent the bedrock upon which all else is based. The first pillar, which makes one a Muslim, is called the *shahadah*, meaning, "testimony" or "witnessing." It is fulfilled by declaring to two witnesses

the foundational creed of Islam: "*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah wa anna Muhammadan rasulullah.*" This means, "I witness that there is nothing worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is God's messenger." The first part of the testimony is a belief that God is unique with no partners. Thus, nothing in creation can be associated with God, as creation has no real substantiation without the sustaining power of God. Indeed, creation is not God nor does it have any eternal qualities of the divine that are worthy of worship. Rather, creation is a theater of divine manifestations. Creation is seen as a place where analogies of the divine reveal themselves. The intellect of a person is the vehicle given by God to discern this truth about creation as indicated by several verses in the Quran.

The second part of the declaration, Muhammad is the messenger of God, acknowledges the means through which this understanding of God has come. All prophets are special human beings capable of refracting divine light, acting like prisms that allow others to see it. The intensity of direct divine light is something only a prophet can bear. Muslims believe that the revelation given to Muhammad is like refracted green light, which lies in the middle of the light spectrum. Muslims consider Islam to be the most balanced of the prophetic dispensations, the "middle way." The Prophet Muhammad's life is considered to be moderate and exemplary for both men and women. He abhorred extremes saying, "Beware of extremism in your religion." After the Quran, the Prophet's practice, or *Sunnah*, is the second most important authority in Islam.

The second pillar of Islam is prayer. While people may supplicate anytime they wish to do so, there is a specific prayer every adult Muslim, female and male, is obliged to perform five times a day. The times are determined by the perceived movement of the sun as a way of reminding people of the temporal nature of the world. Thus, each day is considered to be a microcosm of one's own life: the dawn prayer as one's coming into the world, the midday prayer as the end of youth, the afternoon prayer as old age, the sunset prayer as death, and the evening prayer as the beginning of the descent into the darkness of the grave and returning to the dawn prayer as the awakening and resurrection of the dead. After the testimony of faith, prayer is considered the most important pillar.

The third pillar of Islam is paying *zakah*, an obligatory alms given once every lunar year from the standing capital of every responsible adult. It is not an income tax, as income tax is prohibited in Islamic law, but rather a capital tax on wealth that has been stagnate for at least a year. It is one-fortieth of a person's liquid assets. According to the Quran, *zakah* is distributed among eight categories of people, the two most important recipients being the poor and the needy.

The fourth pillar is fasting the entire lunar month of Ramadan, and it begins with the sighting of the new crescent for that month. Fasting entails abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations from dawn to sunset and is obligatory on adults healthy enough to do so.

The fifth pillar is the *Hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims believe Mecca to be the site of the first house of worship built by the Prophet Adam and his wife Eve and then

restored millennia later by the Prophet Abraham and his son, the Prophet Ishmael. At the end of his mission, the Prophet Muhammad restored its [monotheistic](#) purpose by destroying the 365 idols in it that the Arabs had been worshiping prior to Islam. The rituals performed in the pilgrimage follow the footsteps of Abraham and his second wife Hagar. The Hajj culminates on a vast desert plain where approximately 3 million pilgrims from almost every country on Earth gather every year and prepare for standing before God on the Day of Judgment.

Customs and Practices of Muslims

Due to the broad cultural diversity in the Muslim world, Islam is a quilt of many colors rather than a monolithic faith etched in stone. The majority of Muslims have never considered Islam to be "straight and narrow" but rather "straight and broad." The word in Arabic for the sacred law of Islam, *shariah*, literally means "the broad path to water." The *shariah*, rather than being a rigid and inflexible law, is governed by a fluid and elastic set of principles, and Muslim legal theorists consider it rationally comprehensible and thus capable of being altered when the rationale is absent or the circumstances warrant.

Most Muslim cultures manifest their own characteristics. For instance, the Islam of Indonesia, while essentially the same in its skeletal form, is quite different culturally from the Islam of Senegal. Muslims are required to wear modest clothes, and women are required to cover their hair and entire body except for the hands and face when in the presence of unrelated males. However, the bright colors of the women of Nigeria contrast sharply with the moribund black of the Arabian Peninsula—both are considered acceptable. Food and merrymaking also differ greatly, and Muslims, like other peoples, have diverse ways of enjoying themselves and appreciating the milestones of life such as weddings, births, graduations, and religious holidays. Religious music and chanting are widespread in the Muslim world, and Quran reciters with beautiful voices have statuses in some Muslim countries.

Living and Dying in Islam

The German philosopher Goethe wrote, "If Islam means submission to the will of God, then in Islam we all live and die." This succinctly summarizes the goal of Muslims: To live and die in accordance with God's will as revealed in the Quran and practiced by the Prophet. Muslims attempt to adjust their view of the world with the lens of the Quran. The will of God is expressed in the Quran through both expectations and examples. The expectations are usually descriptions of how a believer should live his or her life, and various stories in the Quran provide positive and negative examples. The epitome of a positive exemplar is Moses, whose story is dealt with in great detail in the Quran. Struggle is at the root of life on earth, a spiritual survival of the fittest. The fittest are those closest to God; they are those who are "steadfast in prayer and spend out of what We have provided for them" (Quran 2:3; Ali 1999, p. 17). The negative prototype is embodied in Pharaoh, who elevates himself above God's law and makes his own law the only source of guidance. Moses is given the Promised Land for his perseverance and

steadfastness, and Pharaoh is destroyed by his own hubris and rebellion against the divine will. The story of Moses is an example of submission (Islam), and Pharaoh's is of rebellion and infidelity (*kufr*). Between these two lies the struggle of humanity.

Life is meant to be an arena whereby one struggles with good and evil. The Quran teaches that good and evil exist in the heart of every individual as well as in the society. The individual struggle is to act righteously in accordance with the Quran and prophetic example, and to shun one's own evil and its impulses. The collective struggle is to work with others to make the world a more righteous place. In Arabic, this inward and outward struggle is called *jihad*. While it can mean a militant struggle against those who attack the Muslim lands, it also signifies a person's struggle with the lower tendencies of the soul, the gravitational pull of self-destructive forces that lead to alienation from God and a state of spiritual disequilibrium. Because humans inevitably fall short morally and succumb to these destructive tendencies from time to time, a means of reestablishing spiritual balance is given, called *tauba* or atonement. This is done by experiencing a genuine sense of remorse for one's transgressions and a removal of the unhealthy effects of that state by turning to God and seeking divine grace through prayer, charity, and a sincere resolution not to return to the destructive patterns of the past.

While life is seen as a spiritual test and journey, it is also seen as being filled with blessings from God to be enjoyed: "Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters. Say: 'Who hath forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He hath provided) for sustenance?'" (Quran, p. 352). Thus, in Islam, marriage is highly recommended and celibacy is frowned upon. The Muslim savants of the past identified sexual relations between a wife and her husband as a foretaste of eternal bliss with God in the afterlife. The Prophet Muhammad encouraged marriage and stated, "There is no [monasticism](#) in Islam." In Islam, children are highly esteemed and seen as one of God's greatest blessings to humanity. The Prophet stated that humans were born innocent and later corrupted by their societies. Thus, parents are held responsible for maintaining that state of innocence and raising them with a sense of love and awe of the divine. Motherhood is highly regarded in the Quran and the prophetic tradition. The Prophet said, "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." In most Muslim societies, adult women are still predominantly mothers and [housewives](#) during their productive years.

Death and Its Relevance to Muslims

Death is a question of ultimate concern for every human being, and Islam has a very vivid portrayal of the stages of death and the afterlife. Death is likened to sleep in Islam; interestingly, sleep in Arabic is called "the little brother of death." The Prophet spoke often of death, and the Quran is filled with warnings of the dangers of ignoring one's mortality and of not preparing for death before it is too late. In one poignant passage, the Quran reads,

And spend something (in charity) out of the substance which We have bestowed on you before death should come to any of you and he should say, "O my Lord! Why didst Thou not give me respite for a little while? I should then have given (largely) in charity, and I

should have been one of the doers of good." But to no soul will Allah grant respite when the time appointed (for it) has come; and Allah is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do. (*Quran*, pp. 1473–1474)

Hence, the world is seen as an opportunity to cultivate for the hereafter, and time is seen as capital that human beings either invest wisely or squander, only to find themselves bankrupt in the next life. Muhammad said, "One of you says, 'My wealth! My wealth!' Indeed, have any of you anything other than your food that you eat and consume, your clothes that you wear out, and your wealth that you give in charity which thus increases in return in the next world?"

The idea of mentioning death and reflecting on death is very important in a Muslim's daily life, and attending any Muslim's funeral, whether known or not, is highly encouraged; for such attendance, one is rewarded greatly by God. Muhammad advised, "Make much mention of the destroyer of delights," which is death. He also said, "Introduce into your gatherings some mention of death to keep things in perspective." This is not seen as a morbid exercise, and Muslims surprisingly accept death, resigned to what is called "one's appointed time" (*ajal*). Like the [telomere](#) in biology that dictates how many times a cell may regenerate before dying, an individual's appointed term, according to Islam, is inescapable and fated. When a Muslim survives a near-death experience, such as a serious car accident, an operation, or an illness, he or she will often remark, "My appointed time did not come yet."

After Death

Once a Muslim dies, the people left behind must prepare the body by washing, perfuming, and shrouding it. The funeral prayer is then performed, and the deceased is buried in a graveyard without a coffin, simply laid in the earth and covered. A person, usually a relative, informs the deceased of what is happening, as Muslims believe that the deceased can hear and understand what is being said. Muslims believe the dead person is not always aware of the transition, and so the one giving instructions informs the deceased that he or she has died, is being laid in the grave, and that two angels known as Munkar and Nakir will soon come into the grave to ask three questions. To the first question, "Who is your Lord?" the deceased is instructed to reply, "Allah." In answer to the second question, "Who is your Prophet?" the deceased should say, "Muhammad," and the correct response to the third question, "What is your religion?" is "Islam." If the individual passes this first phase of the afterlife, the experience of the grave is pleasant, and he or she is given glimpses of the pleasures of paradise. If however, the deceased does not pass this phase, then the grave is the first stage of chastisement.

After this, the soul sleeps and does not awake until a blast from an angel at God's command. According to Islamic tradition, this blast signals the end of the world and kills any remaining souls on the earth. It is followed by a second blast that causes all of the souls to be resurrected. At this point, humanity is raised up and assembled on a plain. The Quran states, "On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another; the trumpet will be blown, and We shall collect them all together" (Quran, p.

735). From there, humanity will beg each of the prophets to intercede for them and hasten the Day of Judgment because the waiting is so terrible, but the prophets will refuse. Finally, all of humanity goes to the Prophet Muhammad. He will agree to intercede for them and ask that the Judgment commence. This intercession is granted to him alone. Then, each soul is judged based upon its beliefs and actions, which are weighed in the scales of divine justice. At this point, the two guardian angels assigned to all people throughout their adult lives will testify for or against them. According to the Quran, the limbs of each person will testify, and the earth herself is resurrected and bears witness against those who caused her harm. Next, a person will be given a book either in the right or left hand. For those given a book in the right hand, they pass the Judgment and are given the grace of God. For those given a book in their left hand, they fail the Judgment and are condemned to hell. However, at this point, prophets and other righteous people are allowed to intercede for their relatives, followers, or friends among the condemned, and their intercession is accepted.

Once the Day of Judgment is over, humanity proceeds to a bridge known as the *sirat*, which crosses over hell. The saved cross it safely to the other side and are greeted by their respective prophets. The Muslims who make it safely across are greeted by Muhammad, who will take them to a great pool and give them a drink that will quench their thirst forever. The condemned fall into hell. The Quran states that some will only spend a brief time there, while others, the unrepenting and [idolatrous](#) ingrates, are condemned forever. Muslims see death as a transition to the other side. Islam is seen as the vehicle that will take one safely there. It is only in paradise that the believer finds ultimate peace and happiness.

Common Misconceptions about Islam

Perhaps the most common misunderstanding about Islam is its attitude toward women. In light of modern sensibilities, Islam, as practiced by most Muslims, does retain some pre-modern attitudes. Much of this is cultural; however, some is not. For example, although the home is generally considered the best place for a woman, Islam does not prohibit a woman from a career in the outside world. In fact, many early Muslim women including the Prophet's wife, Khadija, were scholars and merchants. While Islamic law does legislate some differences between men and women, they are few in number. The majority of practicing Muslim women do not view them as [demeaning](#) because a woman is considered equal to a man before God. The Quran clearly states, "Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life, and life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions" (Quran, p. 663).

Another aspect of Islam that tends to spark interest is the idea of Jihad, or holy war. Some people think Islam condones violence and even terrorism. In reality, Islam rarely permits Muslims to use coercive force and does so only for reasons such as self-defense. Moreover, with the exception of self-defense, only legitimate state authority can exercise coercive force. Although there is a religious duty to fight to defend the lands of Islam, strict rules of engagement apply. The Prophet specifically prohibited the killing of religious people, old people, as well as women and children. Later, Muslim legal

theorists included any noncombatants in this prohibition. Sadly, like other religions, Islam has violent fanatics and extremists who justify their crimes by distorting Quranic verses and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad for heinous ends.

Muslims are a racially diverse community, the majority of which are non-Arab. Although Islam began in Arabia, Arabs comprise less than 15 percent of Muslims. The largest Muslim population is in Indonesia, and the second largest is in Bangladesh. There are estimated to be over 60 million Muslims in modern China. Largely due to high birthrates in the traditional Islamic world, Islam is considered to be the fastest growing religion in the twenty-first century. In 2000 it was the third largest religion in the United States and is expected to be the second after Christianity.

Muslim Attitudes Towards End of Life Decisions

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3516109/>

Guidelines for Health Care Providers Interacting with Muslim Patients and their Families

<http://www.ispi-usa.org/guidelines.htm>

The Culture Connection: Muslim End-of-Life Practices

<https://www.crossroadshospice.com/healthcare-professionals-resources/palliative-care-blog/2015/october/13/the-culture-connection-muslim-end-of-life-practices/>

Islamic Rituals for the Dying and Deceased

<http://christicenter.org/2013/03/islamic-rituals-dying-deceased/>

Palliative Care for Muslim Patients

[http://www.prolifemuslims.com/PDF-word-PowerPoint/Palliative Care for Muslim Patients.pdf](http://www.prolifemuslims.com/PDF-word-PowerPoint/Palliative_Care_for_Muslim_Patients.pdf)

Spiritual aspects of end-of-life care for Muslim patients: Experiences from Iran

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7549510_Spiritual_aspects_of_end-of-life_care_for_Muslim_patients_Experiences_from_Iran