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Islam 101

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What is Islam and who are the Muslims ?

Islam is not a new faith. It is that same truth which God revealed through all His prophets to every people since the dawn of humanity. Islam is a religion of mercy, tolerance, generosity of spirit, inner peace, and outer tranquility. For a fifth of the world's current population, Islam is both a personal religion as well as a complete way of life.

Muslims come from all walks of life, and comprise all the races, nationalities, and cultures of the globe. They have varied languages, foods, styles of dress, and customs; even the way they actually practice Islam may slightly differ, yet they all consider themselves to be Muslim and all bow to the same God.

Islam is a qualitative term—the quality of accepting God's supreme authority above ones own. Being a Muslim does not mean that one has to give up their regional culture or family traditions; rather to be Muslim means adopting the clear and logical principles of Islam to better ones life and to attain to peace. Islam is not the name of a tribe, or of a particular historical figure, but is a word that literally means submission, which is further derived from the Arabic root word meaning peace and security.

Islam is a religion for all, and always has been. The world's largest Muslim community is now found in Indonesia. Contrary to popular belief, less than 15% of Muslims live in the Arab world. A fifth of the Muslim population is found in Sub-Saharan Africa. Substantial parts of Asia, and almost all the Central Asian republics, are Muslim as well. Significant Muslim minorities are also to be found in China, India, Russia, Europe, and North and South America.

What do Muslims Believe?

Muslims believe in the One, Unique, Incomparable, and Merciful God—the Sole Creator, Sustainer, and Cherisher of the Universe; in the Angels created by Him; in the prophets through whom His revelations were brought to humanity; in the Day of Judgment and individual accountability for actions; in God's complete authority over human destiny; and in life after death. Muslims believe that God sent His prophets and messengers to all people throughout history. Some of the familiar Biblical prophets that are also mentioned in the Quran include: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus; may God's peace and blessings be upon them all. God's final message to humanity was revealed to the last prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him), through the agency of the Archangel Gabriel. This message confirmed and finalized all previous revelations that were sent through God's messengers and it established the final covenant between the Creator of existence and humanity. No elaborate or burdensome rituals are required for one to accept the faith of Islam. One becomes a Muslim by simply believing and then proclaiming that, "There is no deity except God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." By this declaration the believer announces his or her faith in the One God and in all of God's messengers, as well as in the original scriptures that were revealed to them.

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Who is Allah?

Allah is the proper name for God in the Arabic; both a sacred and Semitic language. Muslims believe in and worship the same One God that Jews, Christians, and other faith groups aspire to worship. Allah says in the Quran: And do not debate with the People of the Book, unless in the best of manners, except those who are unjust, and say: "We believe in the Revelation that has come down to us and in that which has come down to you; Our God and your God is One, and to Him do we wholly give ourselves." (Quran 29:46) The word Allah is a unique term in that it has no plural and it does not carry any gender signification. This divine utterance, Allah, even predates the advent of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself and is still used today by both Jewish and Christian Arabs to signify the same one and only God. He is God, the one whom there is no deity but He; the Knower of the unseen and the apparent; He is the Benevolent, the Merciful. He is God, the one whom there is no deity but He; the King, the Holy, the Source of All Peace, the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver, the Mighty, the Compeller, the Majestic; Glory be to God, beyond their associations (of partners with Him)! He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner. To Him belong the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise. (Quran 59:22-24)

Do Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have different origins?

No. Muslims believe that the original, unchanged message given to Muhammad, Jesus, Moses and all other prophets came from the one and same God. This common origin explains their many similarities in aspects of belief, values, and even in some practices. Say: "We Believe in God and what has been revealed to us; and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribe; and what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him (God) do we wholly give ourselves." (Quran 3:84) Muslims, Jews, and Christians all consider Abraham as their Patriarch. Abraham is mentioned in the Quran and is one of the greatest prophets ever. He was blessed by God to be the father of many nations. From his second son, Isaac, descended the tribes of Israel, and through them, the noble prophets Moses and Jesus; and from the lineage of his first son, Ishmael, came the final prophet and messenger Muhammad (may God's peace and blessings be upon them all). Abraham was commanded by God to rebuild the place of worship that Adam had originally established—the Ka'bah, which resides in the holy city of Makkah (Mecca). The Ka'bah, or Ancient House, is a simple stone structure erected as a sanctuary for the worship of the One God. Muslims do not worship the Ka'bah, rather, the cubical building is a unified direction toward which all Muslims face in their daily prayers to God, the Almighty.

Who is Muhammad (Peace and blessings upon him)?

Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) was born in Makkah in the year 570 CE, during the period of history that was known in Europe as the Middle Ages, a time in which Christianity had yet to be fully established there. Muhammad was the son of Amenah and 'Abdullah, and was from the respected and noble Makkan tribe of Quraysh. He was a direct descendant of Ishmael, the eldest son of Prophet Abraham. Muhammad's father died just before he was born, and his mother passed away when he was only six. He was raised as an orphan by his grandfather, who was the chief of Makkah, and upon his grandfather's death, Muhammad came under the care of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib. Muhammad was a shepherd in his youth. As he grew up, he became known for his truthfulness, generosity, and sincerity; earning the title of al-Amin, literally, the trustworthy one. Muhammad was frequently called upon to arbitrate disputes and counsel his fellow Makkans. At age 25, Muhammad married Khadijah, an honorable and successful Makkan businesswoman. They were blessed with two sons and four daughters. It was an ideal marriage and they lived a happy family life. Muhammad was of a contemplative nature and had long detested the decadence of his society. Early on it became his habit to meditate from time to time in the cave of Hira' near the summit of Jabal an-Nur, the "Mountain of Light", on the outskirts of Makkah.

How did he become a Prophet and Messenger of God?

At the age of 40, while engaged in a meditative retreat, Muhammad received his first revelation from God through the Archangel Gabriel. This revelation, which continued to descend over a period of twenty-three years, is known as the Quran. Muhammad began to share the revelations he received from God with the people of Makkah. Being idol worshippers, the general populace rejected Muhammad's call to worship only one God. They opposed him and his small group of followers in every way possible, some suffering bitter forms of persecution and even torture. In 622 CE, God gave the community of believers the command to emigrate. This event, known as the hijrah, or migration, in which they left Makkah for the blessed city of Madinah (some 260 miles to the north), marks the beginning of the official Muslim calendar. The city of Madinah provided the new community of Muslims a safe and nurturing abode in which they could practice their faith without the spite of persecution. After several years, the Prophet and his followers returned to Makkah, peacefully claiming the city and forgiving their enemies. Then, turning their attention to the Ka'bah (the sanctuary that Prophet Abraham had previously built), they removed the idols and rededicated the sanctuary to the worship of the One God. By the time of the Prophet's passing, at the age of 63 (may God bless him and grant him peace), most of the people of Arabia had

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embraced the Prophet's message, and in less than a century thereafter, Islam rapidly spread to Spain in the west, and as far as China in the east.

How did the spread of Islam affect the World?

The Muslim community continued to grow after Prophet Muhammad's passing (may God bless him and grant him peace). Within a few decades, vast numbers of people across three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—had already chosen Islam as their way of life. One of the reasons for the rapid and peaceful spread of Islam was the beauty and simplicity of its doctrine—Islam calls to faith in only one God and to belief and acceptance of all God's messengers. This, coupled with the Islamic concepts of equality, justice, and freedom, resulted in the formation of a united and tranquil community. People were free to travel from Spain to China without fear, and without crossing any manmade borders. As millions of people embraced Islam, they brought with them the heritage of ancient civilizations from lands such as Egypt, Greece, India, Persia, and Rome. Muslims cherished these cultures, their sciences, and the collective knowledge that they had to offer, and they took great pains to preserve their libraries and to honor the scholars residing in their cities. Many Muslim scholars traveled to these cities seeking knowledge. They translated volumes upon volumes of philosophical and scientific works into Arabic from Greek and Syriac languages (the languages of Eastern Christian scholars), from Pahlavi (the scholarly language of Pre-Islamic Persia), and from Sanskrit (an ancient Indian language). As a result, Arabic soon became the world language of scholarship, and people from all over the world migrated to study in Muslim universities. For centuries to come, Arabic remained the most important scientific language and was the repository of much of the wisdom and sciences of antiquity. The achievement of scholars working in the Islamic tradition went far beyond mere translation and the preservation of ancient learning. These Muslim scholars built upon the knowledge of the ancients, all the while forwarding their own scientific endeavors. These very advancements were a direct cause of the European Renaissance. Muslims excelled in art, architecture, astronomy, geography, history, language, literature, medicine, mathematics, and physics. Many crucial systems such as algebra, the Arabic numeral system, and the very concept of the zero (vital to the advancement of mathematics itself), were formulated by Muslim scholars and thereafter shared with medieval Europe. Muslims invented sophisticated instruments that made the European voyages of discovery possible, including the astrolabe and the quadrant, as well as detailed navigational maps and charts.

What is the Qur'an?

Muslims believe that the Quran is a complete record of the exact words revealed by God through the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace). It was memorized in its entirety by many of his followers, and throughout his prophetic mission it was continuously dictated to his companions and was written down by scribes who also cross-checked it during his very lifetime. Not one word of its 114 surahs (chapters) has been changed over the centuries. In summary, the Quran is in every detail the same unique and miraculous text that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) over fourteen centuries ago. The Quran is the principle source of every Muslim's faith and practice. It deals with everything that may be of concern to the human being, including profound spiritual wisdom; religious doctrine and ethics; and worship and law; but its basic theme is the intimate relationship between God and His creatures and the lessons that can be learned from this relationship throughout history. At the same time, the Quran provides guidelines for a just and good society, proper human conduct, and equitable economic practices. He (God) has sent down to you the Book (the Quran) with truth, confirming what was revealed aforetime; and He sent down the Torah (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this as a guide to humankind; and He sent down the Criterion (the Quran). (Quran 3:3-4)

Are there any other sacred sources in Islam?

Yes. The sunnah is the practice and example of the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) and is the second source of inspiration and guidance for Muslims. The Prophet's sayings and actions were meticulously documented, both orally and textually, by his contemporaries and are known as hadith. Here are a few examples of hadith from the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace): "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." "He who eats his fill, while his neighbor goes without food, is not a true believer." "God does not judge you according to your physical bodies and outward appearances, but He looks into your hearts and observes your deeds." "Whoever does not express his gratitude to people shall never be truly grateful to God." "Show mercy to those on earth, and the One in Heaven will show mercy to you." "God is gentle and He loves gentleness." "The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you as His guardians over it." "Forgive him who wrongs you; join him who cuts you off; be good to him who does you evil; and speak the truth even if it be against yourself." "A man traveling along a path fell thirsty. Reaching a well he descended into it, drank his fill and came up. Upon this he saw a dog with its tongue hanging out, licking up the mud to quench its thirst. Realizing that the dog was feeling the same thirst that he had just felt, he went down into the well again and filled his shoe with water and gave the dog a drink. God forgave this man's sins for this one action." The Prophet was asked: "Messenger of God, are we rewarded for kindness shown toward animals?" He said, "There is a reward for kindness to every living being."

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What are the 5 Pillars of Islam?

1. TESTIMONY OF FAITH (Shahadah) The five pillars of Islam are the basis of Muslim life and are the foundation upon which the faith itself stands. The Prophet Muhammad said: "Islam is founded on five pillars; to testify that 'there is no deity except God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God;' to establish the ritual prayers; to give charity (to the needy); to perform the pilgrimage to the House (in Makkah); and to fast during the month of Ramadan." A practicing Muslim's life is centered upon these five pillars, the first and foremost of which is the testimony: "There is no deity except God; Muhammad is the messenger of God." This simple declaration of faith is required of all those who wish to accept Islam as their chosen way of life. These words are to be uttered with sincerity and out of personal conviction, as there is no coercion in Islam. The significance of this testimony is that the only purpose of life is to serve and obey God, such being achieved through following the beautiful and noble example of the Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace). Muslims believe that God sent messengers, at different points in history, to guide humanity to the ways peace and guidance. The foundation of their message was always the testimony, "There is no deity except God". The first commandment found in the Bible is: "I am the Lord, thy God; thou shalt not have other gods before Me." This belief in the Oneness of God is central to Islam and permeates all of Muslim life.

2. PRAYER (Salah) Another key element of Muslim life is the daily ritual prayers, or Salah. These prayers are performed five times a day, everyday, and are a direct link between the worshipper and God. This very personal relationship with the Creator allows one to fully depend upon, trust in, and love God; and to truly achieve inner peace and harmony, regardless of the trials of life that one faces. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Indeed, when one of you prays, he communes privately with his Lord." The prayers are performed at dawn, mid-day, late-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall; reminding one of God throughout the day. Regular prayer helps prevent destructive deeds and gives one the opportunity to seek God's pardon for any misgivings that occur in the course of ones daily activities. The Prophet once asked his companions: "Think of a river by ones door and bathing in it five times a day; would there remain any dirt on such a person?" The Prophet's companions answered in the negative. The Prophet, peace be upon him, then said: "Such it is with the five (daily) prayers; through them God washes away your sins." Friday is the main day of week in which Muslims congregate. The mid-day prayer on Friday is different from all other prayers in that it includes a sermon. Prayers at other times are relatively simple; they include the recitation of verses from the Quran, specific movements and invocations, and they take only a few minutes to complete. Muslims are greatly encouraged to perform their five daily prayers in a group—in the mosque if possible. A mosque, in its most basic form, is simply a clean area designated for the daily prayers. Mosques throughout the world take on various architectural forms, typically reflecting local cultures and their aesthetic tastes. They range from detached pavilions in China to elaborate courtyards in India; from massive domes in Turkey to glass and steel structures in the United States. The Call to Prayer: God is Greater, God is Greater, God is Greater, God is Greater I testify that there is no deity except God I testify that there is no deity except God I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God Come to prayer! Come to prayer! Come to success! Come to success! God is Greater, God is Greater There is no deity except God.

3. CHARITY (Zakah) An important principle of Islam is that everything belongs to God; wealth is therefore held the human being as a trust. Zakah, or obligatory charity, is a word that linguistically signifies both purification and growth. Our possessions are purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need and for the society in general. Like the pruning of plants, this cutting back balances and encourages new growth. Each Muslim calculates his or her own zakah individually. This involves an annual payment calculated at 2.5% of ones assets, excluding such items as primary residence, car, and professional tools, to be given to those in need. Zakah is a unique concept, compared to other forms of giving, in that it redistributes the wealth of society, and when applied correctly, it could effectively eliminate deject poverty and world hunger all together. God places great emphasis on taking care of the needy; He says in the Quran: Those who spend of their wealth (in charity) by night and by day, in secret and in public, have their reward with their Lord; on them there shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Quran 2:274) Giving beyond the obligatory charity is expected of every Muslim and may take many forms. The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) said, "Even meeting your brother with a warm smile is an act of charity." The Prophet further said that, when one has nothing to give, staying away from evil is considered a form of charity as well.

4. FASTING (Siyam) Fasting in the month of Ramadan is an essential part of being a Muslim. Muslims fast from dawn until sunset—abstaining from food and drink, as well as from marital relations. During this blessed month, the Muslim should be even more vigilant about the destructive qualities of character, speech, and behavior. Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, as well as women who are pregnant or nursing, are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year (unless chronically ill). Children must begin fasting and the performance of ritual prayers at the age of puberty, although most children start much earlier on their own. God states in the Quran: O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you, in hopes that you may achieve greater awareness (of God). (Quran 2:183) Fasting is not only beneficial to ones health, but it also engenders empathy for those less fortunate. However, fasting is mainly a method of self-purification, spiritual discipline,

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and self-restraint. By withholding oneself from certain worldly comforts, even if for only a short time, the fasting person is able to focus on his or her purpose in this life by constantly being aware of God, thereby becoming more cognizant of the meaning of what occurs to them in this earthly abode and realizing the great importance of their final destination after life. Ramadan is a special time for Muslims everywhere; a time for clearer reflection and heightened spirituality. The end of Ramadan is ushered in by a holiday called Eid al-Fitr. On this day Muslims all over the world celebrate with prayers, friendly and family gatherings, and in many cases, a joyous exchange of gifts and the giving of sweets to children.

5. PILGRIMAGE (Hajj) The pilgrimage, or Hajj, to Makkah is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation for those who are physically and financially able. Over two million people, from all corners of the globe, go for Hajj each year making it the largest gathering for peace, worship, and unity known to humankind. Hajj also provides a unique opportunity for people of different nations and cultures to meet one another. The annual Hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year. The Islamic year is lunar; consequently Hajj occurs throughout all the seasons of the year during ones lifetime. Pilgrims enter a state of sacredness where arguing, fighting, and even cutting a plant or harming a fly is prohibited. They are required to wear simple and similar garments, thereby stripping away any cultural distinctions and class considerations; all stand equal before God. The rites of the Hajj go back to Prophet Abraham and his family. They include visiting the Ka'bah and standing together on the vast plain of 'Arafat (a desert expanse just outside of Makkah). It is here that pilgrims pray for God's forgiveness and put forth all of their needs, in what is often considered a preview of the Day of Judgment. The Hajj provides an ideal occasion for the Muslim to reflect on his or her life, to refocus on God, and to return to their homes and their families spiritually rejuvenated. The close of the Hajj is marked by the second major Muslim holiday, the Festival of Sacrifice, Eid al-Adha. Pilgrims, if able, sacrifice a sheep or goat, commemorating Prophet Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his own son, a story that is known to both Jews and Christians as well. This sacrificial meat is then distributed to the needy and is not to be squandered in any way. Muslims around the world celebrate this day with prayers, ritual sacrifice, and an exchange of gifts.

Is Islam respectful of other beliefs?

Yes. The Quran states unequivocally: There is no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clearly from falsehood... (Quran 2:256) Freedom of conscience is an essential tenant of Islam. Truth can only be seen if it is not clouded by coercion. Protection of the rights of non-Muslims is an intrinsic part of Islamic sacred law. The Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) is reported to have said: "He who hurts a non-Muslim citizen of the Muslim State—I am his adversary and I shall be his adversary on the Day of Judgment." "Beware on the Day of Judgment; I myself shall be the accuser against him who wrongs a non-Muslim citizen or lays on him a responsibility greater than he can bear, or deprives him of anything that rightfully belongs to him." History provides many examples of Muslim respect towards other faiths. Prior to the Spanish Inquisition, Jews and Christians lived and prospered in Spain for centuries under Muslim rule. Another well-known example is when 'Umar, the second successor to Prophet Muhammad, entered Jerusalem. He refused to pray inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for he was concerned that some overzealous Muslims in the future might destroy the Church and build a Mosque there in his honor.

How did Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings upon him) interact with Christians?

The earliest interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims occurred near the beginning of the Prophet Muhammad's mission. The Prophet and his companions were greatly oppressed by the polytheists of Makkah. Concerned for their wellbeing, he sent some of his followers to seek refuge with the Negus of Abyssinia—a righteous and just Christian king. He listened attentively to the Prophet's emissary with great respect and awe, especially the Quranic description of Mary and Jesus. This description led the king and his subjects to affirm that this indeed was a revelation from God and they graciously granted the Muslims the asylum they sought. The Prophet recognized Christians as one of the "People of the Book." He treated them with respect and kindness, contracted treaties with various tribes amongst them, and he assured them the freedom to practice their faith and to determine their own affairs while living under Islamic law. One noteworthy example is when a large delegation of Christians from Najran visited the Prophet in Madinah. He received them with great hospitality, and they stayed at the Prophet's Mosque. When they wanted to leave the Mosque and go outside to perform their church services, the Prophet surprised them by offering the use of his Mosque. Although they did not reach an agreement on all matters of faith, they left Madinah with a treaty of peace and cooperation given to them by the Prophet. This, and similar incidents, are the examples that Muslims and Christians should emulate in the pursuit of better interfaith relations.

How do Muslims view Prophet Jesus?

Muslims love and respect Prophet Jesus. They consider him one of the greatest of God's prophets and messengers ever sent to humankind. A Muslim never refers to him simply as "Jesus," but always adds the phrase "may the peace and blessing of God be upon him," or a similar phrase of respect and honor. The Quran confirms his virgin birth, and a special chapter of the Quran is entitled "Mary," in remembrance and honor of his mother. The Quran describes the Annunciation

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as follows: The angels said, "O Mary! God has chosen you, and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations..." The angels said, "O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, honored in this world and in the Hereafter, and one of those brought near to God. He shall speak to the people in infancy and in old age, and shall be of the righteous." She said: "O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?" He said: "Even so; God creates what he wills. When He decrees a thing, he says to it, 'Be!' and it is." (Quran 3:42, 45-7) Just as God created Adam without a mother or a father, He so caused Jesus to be conceived without a father: Truly the example of Jesus in relation to God is as the example of Adam. He created him from dust and then said to him, "Be!" and he was. (Quran 3:59) During his prophetic mission, Jesus performed many miracles. The Quran tells us that he said: "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I make for you out of clay, as it was, a figure of a bird, and breathe into it and it becomes a bird by God's leave. And I heal the blind, and the lepers, and I raise the dead by God's leave." (Quran 3:49) Jesus, like Muhammad, came to confirm and renew the basic doctrine of the belief in One God brought by earlier prophets. In the Quran, Jesus is reported as saying that he came: "To attest the Torah that was before me. And to make lawful to you part of what was forbidden to you; I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; so be conscious of God and obey me." (Quran 3:50) The Prophet Muhammad said: "Whoever believes that there is no deity except God, alone without partner, that Muhammad is His messenger, that Jesus is the servant and messenger of God—His word which he bestowed on Mary and a spirit proceeding from Him—and that Paradise and Hell are true, shall be received by God into Heaven."

Why is Islam often misunderstood?

In today's turbulent world, Islam is often on the front page and on every TV set—mostly for the wrong reasons. Islam comes from a root word that means peace; yet some have taken this peaceful way of life and hijacked it, thereby attempting to make it into a way of violence and hatred. Seeing the rich and beautiful Islamic faith merely through explosive world events, and then further judging it by the actions of a misguided few, are the primary reasons why Islam is often misunderstood in this current age.

What does Islam say about war?

Islam permits fighting in self-defense, in defense of one's faith, or on the part of those whose basic rights have been violated. It lays down strict rules of engagement, which include prohibitions against harming civilians and against destroying crops, trees, and livestock. The reality is that injustice and oppression would be rampant in the world if good people were not prepared to fight for a righteous cause. God says in the Quran: Permission (to defend) has been granted to those who are being fought against; that they have been oppressed. Verily, God has the power to help them. Those who were unjustly expelled from their homes for no other reason than their saying: "God is our Lord." If God were not to repel some human beings through others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the name of God is mentioned, would have certainly been destroyed. God will definitely help those who help Him. Verily, God is Powerful, Mighty. (Quran 22:39-40) War is the last resort, and is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the sacred law. The often misunderstood and overused term jihad literally means "struggle" and not "holy war" (a term not found anywhere in the Quran). Jihad, as Islamic concept, can be on a personal level—inner struggle against evil within oneself; struggle for decency and goodness on the social level; and struggle on the battlefield, if and when necessary, and in the manner deemed appropriate by Islam itself.

How does Islam guarantee Human rights?

According to the Quran, God has created all of humankind equal, and has given each the right to pursue their own destiny. The life, honor, and property of all people in a Muslim society are considered sacred, whether the person is Muslim or not. Racism and prejudice of any sort are unacceptable in Islam. The Quran speaks of human equality in the following terms: O humankind! We created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Truly, the most honored of you in God's sight is the greatest of you in piety. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Quran 49:13) The right to life is the most basic of human rights; the Quran equates the unjust killing of a single person to the killing of all humankind: And whoever kills a soul... it is as though he has killed all of humanity. (Quran 5:32) Dealing equitably and protecting the rights of every individual is the cornerstone of Muslim society. God further states in the Quran: O you who believe! Stand up firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealings, and let not hatred of a people invite you to act inequitably; act justly, for that is nearer to piety, and be conscious of (your duty to) God, surely God is aware of all that you do. (Quran 5:8)

Why is the family so important to Muslims?

A healthy family structure is the foundation of any truly healthy society, and such is the Islamic ideal. The peace and security offered by a stable family unit is greatly valued by Muslims and is seen as essential for the spiritual growth of its members. It is quite common in the Muslim community to find large, extended families living together, thereby providing comfort, security and support to one another. Parents are greatly respected in the Islamic tradition. Mothers, in particular

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are especially honored. God says in the Quran: And we have enjoined upon man to be good to his parents. With difficulty upon difficulty did his mother bear him, and his weaning was for two years. Show gratitude to Me and to your parents; to Me is your final goal! (Quran 31:14) Marrying and establishing a family is very strongly encouraged in Islam: And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves; that you may find peace with them. And He put between you love and compassion. Surely in this are signs for a people who reflect. (Quran 30:21) A Muslim marriage is both a sacred act and a legal agreement, in which either the groom or the bride is free to include legitimate conditions. Marriage customs vary widely from country to country but the sacred law in Islam has clearly laid down the central requirements and procedures. Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) is reported to have said: "When a servant of God marries, he completes half his faith."

How does Islam elevate the status of Women?

According to the Quran, men and women are equal before God; both created for the sole purpose of knowing, loving, and worshipping God through faith and good deeds. O humankind! Be conscious of your Lord Who created you from a single soul, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread countless men and women. Be conscious of your Lord through Whom you demand your mutual rights, and honor the wombs; God is ever watchful over you. (Quran 4:1) Islam recognizes women as individuals with specific rights. Among these are: the right to life, the right to learn; the right to earn, own and dispose of property; the right to choose a husband; the right, as a wife, to her pre-marriage standard of living; the right to be treated equally; and the right to inherit. Women, like men, are rewarded by God for a righteously led life. Muslim women dress in a way that is modest and dignified. The purpose of clothing is not only to protect oneself from the physical elements, but also to protect oneself from immorality and vain pride. Some traditions of dress, and more generally, the treatment of women in some Muslim countries and societies, are often a reflection of culture. In some cases this may be inconsistent and even contrary to teachings of Islam. Prophet Muhammad said: "The most perfect in faith among the believers is he who is best in manner and kindest to his wife."

How do Muslims view the elderly?

Muslims, as a matter of principle and faith, are to respect and care for the elderly. It is quite common to find children, parents, grandparents and sometimes even great grandparents all living together in the same home. In the Islamic world there are no such things as old people's homes. If the elderly are in need of special and specific medical attention, which cannot be provided by the family or at the house, then appropriate arrangements are made, otherwise, the family remains close together as best as possible. In Islam, serving one's parents is a duty second only to worshipping God. It is considered despicable to express any irritation when, through no fault of their own, the elderly become difficult to attend to. God says in the Quran: Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not even say 'uff' to them or rebuff them, but speak to them in terms of honor and kindness. Lower to them the wing of humility, and say, "My Lord! Have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was young." (Quran 17:23-4) Mothers are particularly honored in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) taught that "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." Through this, and other prophetic narrations, the Prophet greatly emphasized that mothers deserve our merciful and loving companionship.

How do Muslims view Death and the Afterlife?

Muslims, as do Jews, Christians, and other faith groups, believe that this life is a temporal realm, to be viewed as a preparation ground for what is to come after. The afterlife comprises of resurrection, the Day of Judgment and then either a blissful paradise or a blazing hell. When a Muslim dies, he or she is washed, usually by a family member, wrapped in a clean white cloth, and buried after a special funeral prayer is performed, preferably all on the same day. God says in the Quran: Every soul shall taste death. And you will be given your dues on the Day of Judgment. Only the one who is removed from the brink of Hellfire and admitted into Paradise has achieved ultimate success; and the life of this world is nothing but a material illusion. (Quran 3:185) The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), taught that three things can continue to benefit a person even after their death: charity given toward ongoing works; knowledge that is of benefit; and prayers and supplication made on behalf of pious children.

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