

BBC Religion Packet: Islam

Islam at a glance

The word Islam means 'submission to the will of God'.

Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers. The 2001 census recorded 1,591,000 Muslims in the UK, around 2.7% of the population.

- Muslims believe that Islam was **revealed** over 1400 years ago in Mecca, Arabia.
- Followers of Islam are called Muslims.
- Muslims **believe** that there is only One God.
- The Arabic word for God is Allah.
- According to Muslims, God sent a number of prophets to mankind to teach them

how to live according to His law.

- Jesus, Moses and Abraham are respected as prophets of God.
- They believe that the final Prophet was Muhammad.
- Muslims believe that Islam has always existed, but for practical purposes, date their religion from the time of the migration of Muhammad.
- Muslims base their laws on their holy book the **Qur'an**, and the Sunnah.
- Muslims believe the Sunnah is the practical example of Prophet Muhammad and that there are five basic

Pillars of Islam.

- These pillars are the **declaration of faith, praying** five times a day, giving money to **charity, fasting** and a **pilgrimage** to Mecca (atleast once).

al-Burda

The al-Burda, also called Qasida (hymn) Burda, is an Arabic poem honouring the Prophet **Muhammad**. The name means 'poem of the mantle' or 'of the cloak'.

It was written in the 11th century by Imam al-Busiri and forms part of a vast body of literature in praise of the Prophet that emerged from an Islamic culture where seeking knowledge of him was encouraged. Imam Al-Busiri both acknowledges this and the shortcomings of describing the Prophet in the poem itself.

“He is like the sun, small to the eye when seen from afar,
But when glimpsed close up. It dazzles and overwhelms.”

al-Burda

The famous Mamluke minister Ibn Hinna, who served under the legendry sultan Barbys, took Imam al-Busiri under his patronage and freed him to write his poems in material security.

However, art often suffers when the artist is freed from suffering, and comes to life when calamities call. His greatest poem would result from a powerful tribulation: he woke up to find he was paralysed; half his body without movement. Suddenly, this man, whose erudition and art had elevated him to the status of prince of poets of his time, was reduced to an invalid unable to rise from his bed. This state of affliction stirred him to write the Burda.

“...I began to contemplate writing a poem in the qasida form, and soon after, I did so as a way of interceding by it with the Messenger of God to God, the Exalted, hoping that he might heal me.

I was repeating it often, singing it, calling upon God through it, and seeking intercession with it. During that time, while sleeping, I saw the Prophet, upon him and his family be prayers and peace. He wiped over my face with his blessed hand and thrust upon me his cloak. I immediately got up and left my house. I had told no one of my poem nor of anything I had been doing prior to that.

On the road, I met a fellow spiritual wayfarer, who said to me, "I want you to give me a copy of the poem you wrote in praise of the Prophet, upon him be prayers and peace." I responded, "which one?"

He said, "The one you wrote during your illness."



He then recited its opening lines saying, "By God, I heard it in a vision last night recited in the presence of God's messenger, upon him and his family blessing and peace. It greatly pleased the prophet, and I saw him thrust his cloak on the one who wrote it!" I provided him with a copy, and he began telling others of his vision. Thus its news spread far and wide.

Imam al-Busiri

Imam al-Busiri died in Alexandria, Egypt in the year 1295 CE. His grave is well known and is connected to a large mosque. His poem embellishes its walls.

The Burda was also engraved on the Prophet's mosque in Madina. There it adorned its walls and reminded believers for centuries before being erased by people who could not comprehend it. There is still one line left that has not been removed:

He is the beloved whose intercession is hoped for
As arms against a host of relentless calamities.

al-Burda

Introduction to Islamic art



Calligraphy, as in this Qur'an manuscript, is a major art form © Islamic art is often vibrant and distinctive.

Unlike Christian art, Islamic art isn't restricted to religious work, but includes all the artistic traditions in Muslim culture. Its strong aesthetic appeal transcends time and space, as well as differences in language and culture.

This is because of common features in all Islamic art which give it a remarkable coherence, regardless of the country or the time in which it was created.

There are, however, strong regional characteristics, and influences from other cultures are also visible.

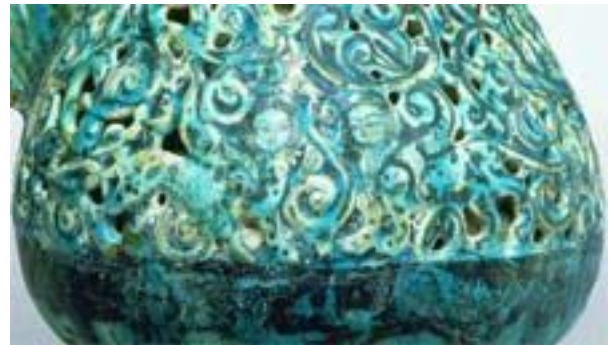
The essentials of Islamic art

- Includes all Muslim art, not just explicitly religious art
- Islamic art seeks to portray the meaning and essence of things, rather than just their physical form
- Crafts and decorative arts are regarded as having full art status
- Painting and sculpture are not thought of as the noblest forms of art
- Calligraphy is a major art-form
 - Writing has high status in Islam
 - Writing is a significant decoration for objects and buildings
 - Books are a major art-form
- Geometry and patterns are important
- People do not appear in specifically religious art

Meaning and design

Art is the mirror of a culture and its world view.

The art of the Islamic world reflects its cultural values, and reveals the way Muslims view the spiritual realm and the universe.



For the Muslim, reality begins with and centers on Allah.

Allah is at the heart of worship and aspirations for Muslims, and is the focus of their lives.

So Islamic art focuses on the spiritual representation of objects and beings, and not their physical qualities.

The Muslim artist does not attempt to replicate nature as it is, but tries to convey what it represents.

This lets the artist, and those who experience the art, get closer to Allah.

For Muslims, beauty has always been and will always be a quality of the divine. There is a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that says: "Allah is beautiful and he loves beauty."

Geometry

A common feature of Islamic art is the covering of surfaces covered with geometric patterns.

This use of geometry is thought to reflect the language of the universe and help the believer to reflect on life and the greatness of creation.

So how is geometry seen to be spiritual?

- Because circles have no end they are infinite - and so they remind Muslims that Allah is infinite.
- Complex geometric designs create the impression of unending repetition, and this also helps a person get an idea of the infinite nature of Allah.
- The repeating patterns also demonstrate that in the small you can find the infinite ... a single element of the pattern implies the infinite total.



The use of patterns is part of the way that Islamic art represents nature and objects by their spiritual qualities, not their physical and material qualities. The repeated geometric patterns often make use of plant motifs, and these are called arabesques. Stylised arabic lettering is also common.



Islamic arts and crafts



The integration of arts and crafts into everyday life was very much the norm in the traditional Islamic world.

The idea is that as Islam is integral to every part of a Muslim's life and makes it beautiful, so Islamic art should be used to make the things of everyday life beautiful.

The emphasis in Islamic art is on ornamentation rather than on art for art's sake.

An example is this lajvardine bowl, from 13th century Iran, decorated in gold and cobalt blue (lajvard is Persian for cobalt).

Islamic architecture

Architecture is one of the greatest Islamic art forms. An Islamic style is seen in mosques but also in Muslim houses and gardens.

Some of the typical features are:

- It's hidden - another term is "the architecture of the veil"
- A traditional Islamic

house is built around a courtyard, and shows only a

wall with no windows to the street outside

- It thus protects the family, and family life from the people outside, and the harsh environment of many Islamic lands - it's a private world

- Concentration on the interior rather than the outside of a building - the common Islamic courtyard structure provides a space that is both outside, and yet within the building

Another key idea, also used in town planning, is of a sequence of spaces.

- The mechanical structure of the building is de-emphasised
- Buildings do not have a dominant direction
- Large traditional houses will often have a complex double structure that allows men to visit without running any risk of meeting the women of the family
- Houses often grow as the family grows - they develop according to need, not to a grand design

Buildings are often highly decorated and colour is often a key feature.

But the decoration is reserved for the inside. Most often the only exterior parts to be decorated will be the entrance and the dome.

Religious buildings in particular will often use geometry to symbolic effect.

The life of Rumi

Jalaluddin Rumi

Jalaluddin Rumi, better known simply as Rumi, was perhaps the finest Persian poet of all time and a great influence on Muslim writing and culture. His poetry is still well known throughout the modern world, and he is one of the best selling poets in America.

Jalaluddin Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh in present-day Afghanistan. Increasing Mongol incursions when he was around the age of eleven forced his family to leave Afghanistan, who travelled to Baghdad, Mecca, Damascus and finally settled in Konya in Turkey. Rumi lived here for most of his life.



Rumi was the son of a renowned Sufi scholar, and it is more than likely that he was introduced to Sufism from a young age. Sufism is a branch of Islam primarily concerned with developing the spirituality, or more precisely the inner character, of a Muslim.

Both he and his father were firm believers in the revelations of the Qur'an, but criticised the mere outwardly legal and ritual practice that was being promoted at the time. In fact, much of his work is dedicated to waking people up, and encouraging them to experience life themselves, rather blindly following the scholars of the day.

Rumi spent his early years, like many Muslims of the time, learning and studying Arabic, law, ahadith (the body of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), history, the Qur'an, theology, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy.

By the time of his father's death he had become an outstanding scholar in his own right, and took over his father's position as one of the highest scholars in

the country at the young age of 24.

He spent his time teaching and giving lectures to the public, and until the age of about 35, lived a fairly non-descript life.

Then in 1244 Rumi met a travelling Sufi, called Shams (or Shamsi Tabrizi) and the whole course of his life changed.

Shams became fast friends with Rumi, in whom he recognised a kindred spirit. The two developed a very close friendship and it was at this point that Rumi became more and more secluded, shunning the society of those he previously would discuss and debate matters with.

His relationship with Shams caused great jealousy in his family and other students, and after a few years, Shams disappeared. Many believe he was murdered, but Rumi himself did not think so. He travelled for years looking for his friend, and it was this loss that led to the outpouring of his soul through his poetry.

He wrote numerous lines of love poetry, called ghazals, but though they outwardly seem to be about Shams, it is not difficult to see that they are in fact poems describing his overpowering love of God.

Shams' effect on Rumi was decisive. Whereas Rumi had before preached Islam soberly, he became, through Shams' influence, filled with the love of God. What was inside his soul finally came out.

“Rumi was like a purely clean lamp, where the oil was poured in the holder and a wick placed therein, ready to be lit; and Shams was the spark to set it afire”

Golpinarali, introduction to Aflaki 1959-60, p. 648.

Many of Rumi's ghazals are signed "Shams". It is not clear precisely why he did this, although some orientalists believe this was out of humility and a sense of gratitude.

“Indeed Shamsi-Tabrizi is but a pretext - it is I who display the beauty of God's Gentleness, I.”

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Rumi rarely wrote down his own poetry. The six books of poetry in the Mathnawi were written entirely by Rumi, who would compose and dictate the poetry, and his student Husam Chulabi, who would write and edit it. It is believed that Rumi would turn round and round while reciting his poetry, and it is this dance which formed the basis for the Mevlevi Order, or Whirling Dervishes, after his death. Dervish means doorway, and the dance is believed to be a mystical portal between the earthly and cosmic worlds.

Rumi died in 1273 CE, halfway through the sixth volume of the Mathnawi.

The Mevlevi Order has been presided over by a member of Rumi's family for over 800 years.

2007 was designated the UNESCO Year of Rumi.

Basic articles of faith

Muslims have six main beliefs.

- Belief in Allah as the one and only God
- Belief in angels
- Belief in the holy books
- Belief in the Prophets...
 - e.g. Adam, Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Dawud (David), Isa (Jesus).
 - Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the final prophet.
- Belief in the Day of Judgement...
 - The day when the life of every human being will be assessed to decide whether they go to heaven or hell.
- Belief in Predestination...
 - That Allah has the knowledge of all that will happen.
 - Muslims believe that this doesn't stop human beings making free choices.

Allah

Allah is the name Muslims use for the supreme and unique God, who created and rules everything.

The heart of faith for all Muslims is obedience to Allah's will.

- Allah is eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent...
 - Allah has always existed and will always exist.
 - Allah knows everything that can be known.
 - Allah can do anything that can be done.
- Allah has no shape or form...
 - Allah can't be seen.
 - Allah can't be heard.
 - Allah is neither male nor female.
- Allah is just...
 - Allah rewards and punishes fairly.
 - But Allah is also merciful.
- A believer can approach Allah by praying, and by reciting the Qur'an.
- Muslims worship only Allah...
 - because only Allah is worthy of worship.

The one and only God

All Muslims believe that God is one alone:

- There is only one God.
- God has no children, no parents, and no partners.
- God was not created by a being.

- There are no equal, superior, or lesser Gods.

Jihad

The literal meaning of Jihad is struggle or effort, and it means much more than holy war.

Muslims use the word Jihad to describe three different kinds of struggle:

- A believer's internal struggle to live out the Muslim faith as well as possible
- The struggle to build a good Muslim society
- Holy war: the struggle to defend Islam, with force if necessary

Many modern writers claim that the main meaning of Jihad is the internal spiritual struggle, and this is accepted by many Muslims.

However there are so many references to Jihad as a military struggle in Islamic writings that it is incorrect to claim that the interpretation of Jihad as holy war is wrong.

Jihad and the Prophet

The internal Jihad is the one that Prophet Muhammad is said to have called the greater Jihad.

But the quotation in which the Prophet says this is regarded as coming from an unreliable source by some scholars. They regard the use of Jihad to mean holy war as the more important.

Top

The internal Jihad

The phrase internal Jihad or greater Jihad refers to the efforts of a believer to live their Muslim faith as well as possible.

All religious people want to live their lives in the way that will please their God.

So Muslims make a great effort to live as Allah has instructed them;

following the rules of the faith, being devoted to Allah, doing everything they can to help other people.

For most people, living God's way is quite a struggle. God sets high standards, and believers have to fight with their own selfish desires to live up to them, no matter how much they love God.



The five Pillars of Islam as Jihad

The five Pillars of Islam form an exercise of Jihad in this sense, since a Muslim gets closer to Allah by performing them.

Other ways in which a Muslim engages in the 'greater Jihad' could include:

- Learning the Qur'an by heart, or engage in other religious study.
- Overcoming things such as anger, greed, hatred, pride, or malice.
- Giving up smoking.
- Cleaning the floor of the mosque.
- Taking part in Muslim community activities.
- Working for social justice.
- Forgiving someone who has hurt them.

The Greater Jihad controversy

The Prophet is said to have called the internal Jihad the "greater Jihad".

On his return from a battle, the Prophet said: "We are finished with the lesser jihad; now we are starting the greater jihad." He explained to his followers that fighting against an outer enemy is the lesser jihad and fighting against one's self is the greater jihad (holy war).

This quotation is regarded as unreliable by some scholars. They regard the use of jihad as meaning 'holy war' as the more important.

However the quotation has been very influential among some Muslims, particularly Sufis.

Holy war

When Muslims, or their faith or territory are under attack, Islam permits (some say directs) the believer to wage military war to protect them.

However Islamic (shariah) law sets very strict rules for the conduct of such a war.

In recent years the most common meaning of Jihad has been Holy War.

And there is a long tradition of Jihad being used to mean a military struggle to benefit Islam.

What can justify Jihad?

There are a number of reasons, but the Qur'an is clear that self-defence is always the underlying cause.

Permissible reasons for military Jihad:

- Self-defence
- Strengthening Islam
- Protecting the freedom of Muslims to practise their faith
- Protecting Muslims against oppression, which could include overthrowing a tyrannical ruler
- Punishing an enemy who breaks an oath
- Putting right a wrong

What a Jihad is not

A war is not a Jihad if the intention is to:

- Force people to convert to Islam
- Conquer other nations to colonise them
- Take territory for economic gain
- Settle disputes
- Demonstrate a leader's power

Although the Prophet engaged in military action on a number of occasions, these were battles to survive, rather than conquest, and took place at a time when fighting between tribes was common.

The rules of Jihad

In recent years the most common meaning of Jihad has been Holy War ©

A military Jihad has to obey very strict rules in order to be legitimate.

- The opponent must always have started the fighting.
- It must not be fought to gain territory.
- It must be launched by a religious leader.
- It must be fought to bring about good - something that Allah will approve of.
- Every other way of solving the problem must be tried before resorting to war.
- Innocent people should not be killed.
- Women, children, or old people should not be killed or hurt.
- Women must not be raped.
- Enemies must be treated with justice.
- Wounded enemy soldiers must be treated in exactly the same way as one's own soldiers.
- The war must stop as soon as the enemy asks for peace.
- Property must not be damaged.
- Poisoning wells is forbidden. The modern analogy would be chemical or biological warfare.



The Qur'an on Jihad

The Qur'an has many passages about fighting. Some of them advocate peace, while some are very warlike. The Bible, the Jewish and Christian scripture, shows a similar variety of attitudes to war.

“Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors.”

Qur'an 2:190

“To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged;- and verily, Allah is most powerful for their aid.”

Qur'an 22:39

“Therefore if they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (Guarantees of) peace, then Allah Hath opened no way for you (to war against them).”

Qur'an 4:90

“But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah: for He is One that heareth and knoweth (all things).”

Qur'an 8:61

Hijab

Hijab is an Arabic word meaning barrier or partition.

In Islam, however, it has a broader meaning. It is the principle of modesty and includes behaviour as well as dress for both males and females.

The most visible form of hijab is the head covering that many Muslim women wear. Hijab however goes beyond the head scarf. In one popular school of Islamic thought, hijab refers to the complete covering of everything except the hands, face and feet in long, loose and non see-through garments. A woman who wears hijab is called Muhaajaba.

Muslim women are required to observe the hijab in front of any man they could theoretically marry. This means that hijab is not obligatory in front of the father, brothers, grandfathers, uncles or young children.

Hijab does not need to be worn in front of other Muslim women, but there is debate about what can be revealed to non-Muslim women.

Modesty rules are open to a wide range of interpretations. Some Muslim women wear full-body garments that only expose their eyes. Some cover every part of the body except their face and hands. Some believe only their hair or their cleavage is compulsory to hide, and others do not observe any special dress rules.

In the English speaking world, use of the word hijab has become limited to mean the covering on the head of Muslim woman. However, this is more accurately called a khimaar. The khimaar is a convenient solution comprising usually one, but sometimes two pieces of cloth, enabling Muslim women to cover their hair, ears and neck while outside the home.

Hijab, in the sense of veiling, can also be achieved by hanging a curtain or placing a screen between women and men to allow them to speak to each other without changing dress. This was more common in the early days of Islam, for the wives of the Prophet Muhammad.

Awrah

The Arabic word awrah refers to the parts of the body which must be covered with clothing. Awrah is any part of the body, for both men and women, which may not be visible to the public. Awrah is interpreted differently depending upon the sex of the company one is in.

Men

Most Muslims accept that for men everything between the navel and the knee is awrah and therefore should be covered at all times.

Women

Rules for women are more complicated. There are a number of scenarios for women:

- In front of unrelated men (Muslim or non-Muslim), women must cover everything except the hands and face
- In front of close male relatives, awrah is the navel to the knee and the stomach and the back
- In front of other Muslim females, awrah is from the navel down to, and including, the knees
- Awrah in front of non-Muslim women is a point of debate:
 - Some scholars say that women should cover all but the hands and face. This is to prevent non-Muslim women (who may not understand the rules regarding hijab) from describing the appearance of the hijab wearer to other men
 - Other scholars say that if a non-Muslim woman can be trusted not to describe a woman's appearance to other men, then she may reveal as much as she would in front of another Muslim woman in her presence.



The Hanafi school of thought, which is followed by most Muslims in the world, agree that the feet are not part of the awrah and therefore may be revealed.

Amongst other schools of thought a common opinion is that everything apart from a woman's face and hands is awrah.

Husband and wife

There is no restriction on what a husband and wife may show to each other in private. The Qur'an encourages married couples to enjoy each other's bodies.

Individuals in private

Islam highly values modesty, so even when alone, men and women are recommended never to be completely naked and to cover from the navel to the knee. Exceptions do apply where necessary, for example taking a shower or going to the bathroom.

Men who veil

Navid Akhtar with Tuareg singer Abdullah Ag Alhousseyni

While the issue of Muslim women and the veil attracts a lot of publicity, it is often forgotten that there is also a tradition of men covering their faces.

There is enough evidence that the Prophet himself covered his face ... when warriors were on horses and camels they covered their faces ... so we were missing a half of the story here when we focused too much on women, and by doing so we may have misunderstood even the meaning of women veiling.

Fadwa El Guindi, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the University of Qatar



The veil-cum-turban of the Tuareg tribes of North Africa is a sign of maturity. When a boy becomes a man, the cloth is wound around his face and head until only his eyes are visible. Its significance is both religious and cultural.

Sufi mystics in Cairo continue a long tradition of veiling when they go into retreat, to isolate themselves from the world. And in the ancient religion of Jainism, both men and women cover their faces when entering their temple's inner sanctum.

In this audio programme, Navid Akhtar meets the singer Abdullah Ag Alhousseyni from the Tuareg band Tinariwen, talks to men of different faiths about what the veil means to them, and asks whether their stories change the way we perceive women who are veiled.

Niqab



Niqab is different from hijab. Hijab refers to covering everything except the hands and face. Niqab is the term used to refer to the piece of cloth which covers the face and women who wear it usually cover their hands also. It is worn by many Muslim women across Saudi Arabia and the Indian subcontinent and is worn by many women in the West.

Historically, the veiling of the face was practised by many cultures before Islam and scholars say the adoption of its practice by Muslims was part of fitting into the society.

Although the majority of scholars agree that hijab is obligatory, only a minority of them say that the niqab is.

The scholars who do say it is obligatory are further divided by exactly what they believe needs to be covered. Some say that the eyes may be left unconcealed, while others say that everything must be concealed.

However, those scholars who rule that niqab is not an obligation do not necessarily oppose those who choose to wear it.

The most authentic ruling according to the majority of scholars is that it is not necessary and, unlike hijab, there is no sin if it is not worn. Some of these scholars state that wearing the niqab as an act of extra piety, provided they do not believe it is an obligation, will be rewarded.

Muslim headscarves

Hijab



The word hijab comes from the Arabic for veil and is used to describe the headscarves worn by Muslim women. These scarves come in myriad styles and colours. The type most commonly worn in the West is a square scarf that covers the head and neck but leaves the face clear.

Niqab



The niqab is a veil for the face that leaves the area around the eyes clear. However, it may be worn with a separate eye veil. It is worn with an accompanying headscarf.

Burka



The burka is the most concealing of all Islamic veils. It covers the entire face and body, leaving just a mesh screen to see through.

Al-Amira



The al-amira is a two-piece veil. It consists of a close fitting cap, usually made from cotton or polyester, and an accompanying tube-like scarf.

Shayla



The shayla is a long, rectangular scarf popular in the Gulf region. It is wrapped around the head and tucked or pinned in place at the shoulders.

Khimar



The khimar is a long, cape-like veil that hangs down to just above the waist. It covers the hair, neck and shoulders completely, but leaves the face clear.

Chador



The chador, worn by many Iranian women when outside the house, is a full-body cloak. It is often accompanied by a smaller headscarf underneath.

Sharia

Sharia is now a familiar term to Muslims and non-Muslims. It can often be heard in news stories about politics, crime, feminism, terrorism and civilisation. All aspects of a Muslim's life are governed by Sharia. Sharia law comes from a combination of sources including the Qur'an (the Muslim holy book), the Hadith (sayings and conduct of the prophet Muhammad) and fatwas (the rulings of Islamic scholars).

Muslim holy days

There are only two Muslim festivals set down in Islamic law: Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Adha (Eid or Id is a word meaning festival). But there are also several other special days which Muslims celebrate.

Eid al-Fitr

The first Eid was celebrated in 624 CE by the Prophet Muhammad with his friends and relatives after the victory of the battle of Jang-e-Badar.



Muslims are not only celebrating the end of fasting, but thanking Allah for the help and strength that he gave them throughout the previous month to help them practise self-control.

The festival begins when the first sight of the new moon is seen in the sky.

Muslims in most countries rely on news of an official sighting, rather than looking at the sky themselves.

The celebratory atmosphere is increased by everyone wearing best or new clothes, and decorating their homes.

There are special services out of doors and in mosques, processions through the streets, and of course, a special celebratory meal - eaten during daytime, the first daytime meal Muslims will have had in a month.

Eid is also a time of forgiveness, and making amends.



Eid ul Adha - the festival of sacrifice



This is a four-day public holiday in Muslim countries. The festival remembers the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son when God ordered him to.

Ibrahim's sacrifice

God appeared in a dream to Ibrahim and told him to sacrifice his son Isma'il. Ibrahim and Isma'il set off to Mina for the sacrifice.

As they went, the devil attempted to persuade Ibrahim to disobey God and not to sacrifice his beloved son. But Ibrahim stayed true to God, and drove the devil away.

As Ibrahim prepared to kill his son God stopped him and gave him a sheep to sacrifice instead.

Celebrations

Ibrahim's complete obedience to the will of God is celebrated by Muslims each year.

Each Muslim, as they celebrate, reminds themselves of their own submission to God, and their own willingness to sacrifice anything to God's wishes.

During the festival Muslims who can afford to, sacrifice domestic animals, usually sheep, as a symbol of Ibrahim's sacrifice. (British law insists that the animals must be killed in a proper slaughterhouse.)

The meat is distributed among family, friends and the poor, who each get a third share.

As with all festivals there are prayers, and also presents.

Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when Muslims fast during daylight hours.

There are several reasons why Ramadan is considered important:

- The Qur'an was first revealed during this month
- The gates of Heaven are open
- The gates of Hell are closed and the devils are chained up in Hell.

Special practices

There are a number of special practices which are only done during Ramadan.

Fasting the whole month long

Although Muslims fast during other times of the year, Ramadan is the only time when fasting, or sawm, is obligatory during the entire month for every able Muslim.

Ramadan is intended to increase self-control in all areas, including food, sleeping, sex and the use of time.

Taraweeh Prayers

These are long night prayers, which are not obligatory, but highly recommended.

Mosques are filled with worshippers who go to attend these prayers, which usually last for one and a half to two hours.

These prayers also give Muslims a chance to meet at the mosque every day, and so they also help to improve relationships in the Muslim community.

I'tikaf

I'tikaf refers to going into seclusion during the last ten nights of Ramadan, in order to seek Lailat ul Qadr by praying and reading the Qur'an. Some people live in the mosque during this time for serious reflection and worship. Others spend a few hours at the mosque or home.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The most important Muslim practices are the Five Pillars of Islam.

The Five Pillars of Islam are the five obligations that every Muslim must satisfy in order to live a good and responsible life according to Islam.

The Five Pillars consist of:

- Shahadah: sincerely reciting the Muslim profession of faith
- Salat: performing ritual prayers in the proper way five times each day

- Zakat: paying an alms (or charity) tax to benefit the poor and the needy
- Sawm: fasting during the month of Ramadan
- Hajj: pilgrimage to Mecca

Why are they important?

Carrying out these obligations provides the framework of a Muslim's life, and weaves their everyday activities and their beliefs into a single cloth of religious devotion.

No matter how sincerely a person may believe, Islam regards it as pointless to live life without putting that faith into action and practice.

Carrying out the Five Pillars demonstrates that the Muslim is putting their faith first, and not just trying to fit it in around their secular lives.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is the holy book for Muslims, revealed in stages to the Prophet Muhammad over 23 years.

Qur'anic revelations are regarded by Muslims as the sacred word of God, intended to correct any errors in previous holy books such as the Old and New Testaments.

Origin

The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by God in Arabic.

Some Qur'anic fragments have been dated as far back as the eighth, and possibly even the seventh, century. The oldest existing copy of the full text is from the ninth century.

Although early variants of the Qur'an are known to have existed, Muslims believe that the text we have today was established shortly after the death of the Prophet by the Caliph Uthman.

Contents

There are 114 chapters in the Qur'an, which is written in the old Arabic dialect.

All the chapters except one begin with the sentence Bismillahir rahmanir raheem, 'In the name of Allah the most merciful and the most kind'. This is the thought with which Muslims should start every action.

The longest chapter of the Qur'an is Surah Baqarah (The Cow) with 286 verses and the shortest is Surah Al-Kawther(abundance) which has 3 verses.

The arrangement of surahs does not correspond to the chronological order in which they were revealed. The Qur'an is sometimes divided into 30 roughly equal parts, known as juz'. These divisions make it easier for Muslims to read the Qur'an during the course of a month and many will read one juz' each day, particularly during the month of Ramadan.

Translations

Translations of the Qur'an exist in over 40 languages but Muslims are still taught to learn and recite it in Arabic, even if this is not their native language and they cannot converse in it.

Translations are regarded by Muslims as new versions of the holy book, rather than as translations in the conventional sense.

Memorising the Qur'an

At the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, books were not readily available and so it was common for people to learn it by heart.

Committing the Qur'an to memory acted as a great aid for its preservation and any person who is able to accomplish this is known as a hafiz.

Respect

The Qur'an is treated with immense respect by Muslims because it is the sacred word of God.

While the Qur'an is recited aloud, Muslims should behave with reverence and refrain from speaking, eating or drinking, or making distracting noise.

