

A basic guide to elements of Islam

WASHINGTON (CNS) — With an estimated 1.2 billion followers, Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Islamic organizations say there are an estimated 6 million to 7 million Muslims in the United States; of those, 85 percent are U.S.-born. Islam draws its name from the Arabic terms for peace and loving submission to God's will. Its followers consider it to be both a religion and a guide for a complete way of life.

Historic records of Islam date from the time of the prophet Mohammed, who was born in Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia, in 570. Beginning at age 40, he began receiving revelations from Allah, the Arabic word for God, through the angel Gabriel. These revelations received over the course of 23 years were compiled during Mohammed's lifetime in a book known as the Quran.

Muslims believe the Quran contains the exact words of God, conveyed in Arabic. Muslim scholars around the world study its text in Arabic, because translations are not considered to be 100 percent accurate.

Islam's origins are generally the same as those of Christianity and Judaism. They share many of the same prophetic revelations — for instance, Abraham's message that there is but one God. Muslims believe Islam was founded by Allah and is a reiteration of events known to Jews through the Torah and to Christians in the Bible through the time of Jesus.

They recognize a chain of many prophets — a great number of them familiar to Christians and Jews. The Quran refers to 25 prophets, and treats Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed as the most significant.

The Quran considers Jesus one of God's greatest messengers to humankind, acknowledging his virgin birth and the miracles he performed.

Islam does not recognize Jesus as the son of God. However, it regards his mother, Mary, as the purest woman in all creation. In fact, the Quran contains more passages about Mary than does the New Testament.

Followers of Islam emphasize its laws over theology and religious practice over belief. These laws — known as Shariah — are based on the Quran as well as tradition. These traditions are derived from Mohammed's words and deeds, known as the Sunna.

The Sunna includes reports from Mohammed's companions about his life. Different

groups of Muslims place varying importance on these reports. For instance, Sunni Muslims, who make up between 85 percent and 95 percent of the Islamic population, give it different merit than do Shiite Muslims, the next largest group.

Common to all Muslims, however, are five fundamental obligations, known as the five pillars of Islam. They are:

- Profession of the faith. Simply, “there is no God but God, and Mohammed is his messenger.”

- Worship. Specifically, five-times-a-day prayers known as “salat.” These prayers may be said at a mosque or wherever else is convenient, but preferably in community with other Muslims.

- Almsgiving, known as “zakat,” which means purification and growth. Each Muslim calculates his own “zakat” based on certain principles.

- Fasting. Muslims are obligated to abstain from food, drink and sex from first light until sundown during the Islamic calendar’s month of Ramadan.

- Pilgrimage. A pilgrimage, or “hajj,” to Mecca, Islam’s holiest city, at least once in a lifetime is considered obligatory for those who are physically and financially able to make the trip.

Like Christians, Muslims believe God forgives sins. The Quran contains many passages about the mercy of God. Muslims also believe in a judgment day, resurrection, heaven and hell and angels.

Unlike Catholicism and other Christian denominations, Islam has no central authority structure. Religious scholars and others educated in the Quran provide guidance and may issue legal opinions, known as “fatwas,” about specific issues, but all individuals are not under any religious obligation to follow them. In some countries, civic law is derived from political leaders’ interpretation of Islamic law and therefore is broadly enforced.

Among the elements of Islam that may seem confusing or exotic to contemporary Christians are its rules about diet and dress and its approach to marriage.

Dietary rules include a prohibition on eating pork, animals that were not killed in the proper way and products made with any animal’s blood. Alcoholic beverages also are forbidden.

As for wardrobes, men and women are expected to dress in a modest and dignified way. In many places, this is defined for women as meaning their hair should be covered and their clothes should cover them from the neck to the knees.

In some Islamic cultures, women are required to wear a full-length robe called a “chador” and a face-covering veil. In others, Muslim women may choose to dress no differently than their non-Muslim contemporaries. Likewise, Muslim men sometimes are required to wear beards and head coverings, depending upon the local culture.

Muslim marriages consist of a legal agreement in which either partner is allowed to include conditions. Divorce is not common, but in some countries there are different rules for men and women about how to divorce a spouse. Even very early Islamic laws specifically protected the wife financially in case of divorce.

Islam permits men to take more than one wife under certain circumstances, including that the first wife must agree and local law allows it.

Another Islamic term that has been widely used but little explained is “jihad.” The word “jihad” means struggle and can apply to any kind of daily effort to please God. Muslims believe among the highest levels of “jihad” are the internal struggle against wrongdoing and bearing witness to the faith. In some uses of the word, “jihad” and spiritual discipline are similar in meaning.

Islamic scholars say the type of “jihad” in which arms are taken up in defense of Islam or a Muslim country can only be declared by the religious leadership or a Muslim head of state who is guided by the Quran and the Sunna. There is great debate within Islam about whether anyone is qualified to invoke this kind of “jihad” today.