

FULL TEXT

CHAPTER 9 - Learning About World Religions: Islam

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9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will take a closer look at the religion of Islam. It was founded by the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century.

If you visited any city in a Muslim country today, you would notice many things that reflect the teachings of Islam. Five times a day, you would hear a call to prayer throughout the city. While some people hurry to houses of worship, others simply remain where they are to pray, even in the street. You would see people dressed modestly and many women wearing head scarves. You would find that Muslims do not drink alcohol or eat pork. You might learn how Muslims give money to support their houses of worship and many charities. Soon, you would come to understand that Islam is practiced as a complete way of life.

In this chapter, you will explore the basic beliefs and practices of Islam. You will learn more about the holy book called the Qur'an. Together with the Sunnah (SOON-ah)—the example of Muhammad—this book guides Muslims in the Five Pillars of Islam.

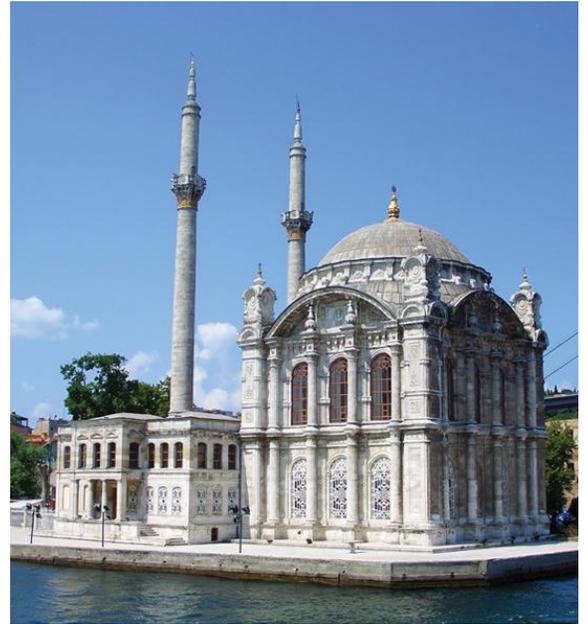
The Five Pillars are: declaration of faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Makkah. You will also study the idea of jihad (jee-HAHD). Jihad represents Muslims' struggle with internal and external challenges as they strive to please God. Finally, you will examine shari'ah (sha-REE-uh), or Islamic law.

9.2 Background on Islam

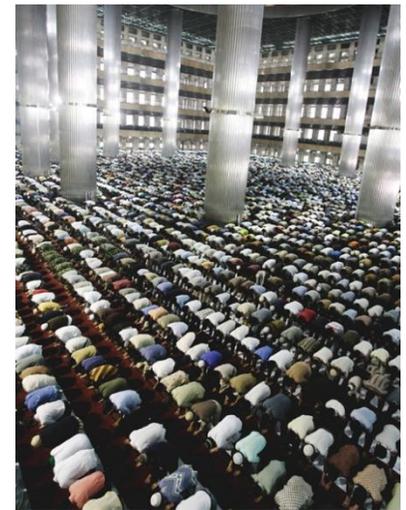
Since the time of Muhammad, Islam has had an impact on world history. Islam spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, across North Africa to Spain, and across Central Asia nearly to China. In addition to sharing a common faith, Muslims also belonged to a single Islamic community, called the *ummah* (UH-mah). The Islamic community blended many peoples and cultures.

Islam is the world's second largest religion, after Christianity. One out of five people in the world is Muslim. Most people in the Middle East and North Africa are Muslim, but Muslims live in nearly every country of the world. In fact, the majority of Muslims live in Asia, in nations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the southeast Asian country of Indonesia. Islam is also the fastest-growing religion in the United States.

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have much in common. Members of all three faiths are monotheists (they believe in one God). All three religions trace their origins to Abraham. Their scriptures, or sacred writings, all include such figures as Adam, Noah, and Moses. Muslims believe that all three religions worship the same God.



Pictured above is the Ortaköy Mosque, built in the mid-1800s in Istanbul, Turkey.



These Muslims are praying during a service at a mosque in Indonesia.

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Muslims consider Jews and Christians to be “People of the Book.” Muslims believe that God **revealed** messages to Moses, Jesus, and others that were compiled into holy books, just as the Qur’an came from God to Muhammad. The Qur’an states that God “earlier revealed the Torah (Judaism) and the Gospel (Christianity) as a source of guidance for people.”

For Muslims, however, the Qur’an contains God’s final revelations to the world. They believe that its messages reveal how God wants his followers to act and worship. In the rest of this chapter, you will learn more about the ideas that have shaped the Muslim faith.



The Islamic community has spread throughout the world. These Muslims in Jerusalem, Israel, prepare to pray on a sidewalk by facing toward Makkah.

9.3 The Qur’an and the Sunnah

Two foundations of Islam are the **Qur’an** and the **Sunnah**. Through the Qur’an, God describes his laws and moral teachings, or the “straight path.” The Qur’an holds a central position for Muslims everywhere, guiding them in all aspects of their lives.

The Qur’an contains passages that Muslims believe Muhammad received from the angel Gabriel. Muhammad and his followers recited and memorized these verses. Because Muhammad apparently could not read or write, scribes wrote down these passages. The Arabic of the Qur’an is notable for its great beauty.

In about 651 C.E., Caliph Uthman established an official edition of the Qur’an. He asked those with variant versions of the Qur’an to destroy them so that there would be no confusion with these and the official **edition**. The Qur’an used today has remained largely unchanged since then.

Muhammad called the Qur’an God’s “standing miracle.” Muslims honor the spoken and written Qur’an. Most Muslims today do not let copies of the sacred book touch the ground. They also handle the Qur’an in a state of ritual purity. Most Muslims memorize all or part of the Qur’an in Arabic. Its verses accompany Muslims throughout their lives, from birth to death.

The Sunnah (“practice”) is the example that Muhammad set for Muslims during his lifetime. What Muhammad did or said in a certain situation has set a precedent, or guide, for all Muslims. For instance, Muhammad told his followers to make sure that their guests never left the table hungry, underscoring the importance of hospitality. He also reminded children to honor their parents when he said, “God forbids all of you to disobey your mothers.” For Muslims, the Sunnah is second only to the Qur’an in religious authority.

About 300 years after Muhammad’s death, thousands of reports about the prophet had spread throughout Muslim lands. Scholars looked into each story. They organized the stories they could verify into collections. Called *hadith* (“reports” or “tradition”), these accounts provided written evidence of Muhammad’s Sunnah through his own words and deeds. They continue to have this role today.

The most basic acts of worship for Muslims are called the **Five Pillars of Islam**. The Qur’an provides general commands to perform these five duties. The Sunnah explains how to perform them, based on Muhammad’s example. Let’s look next at each of the Five Pillars.

9.4 The First Pillar: Shahadah

The first Pillar of Islam is *shahadah* (shah-HAH-dah), the profession or declaration of faith. To show belief in one God and in Muhammad's prophethood, a Muslim testifies, "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God."

The first part of the shahadah affirms monotheism—"There is no god but God." Like Christians and Jews, Muslims believe that one all-powerful God—called *Allah* in Arabic—created the universe. They believe that the truth of that God was revealed to humankind through many prophets. These prophets include Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, who appear in Jewish and Christian scriptures. The Qur'an honors all these prophets.

The second part of the shahadah **identifies** Muhammad as God's messenger—"and Muhammad is the messenger of God." According to this statement, Muhammad announced the message of Islam, which was God's final word to humankind.

The meaning of shahadah is that people not only believe in God, but also pledge their submission to him. For Muslims, God is the center of life. The shahadah follows Muslims through everyday life, not just prayers. Parents whisper it into their babies' ears. Students taking a difficult test say the shahadah to help them be successful. To enter into the religion of Islam, a person must pronounce the shahadah aloud in the presence of two Muslim witnesses.

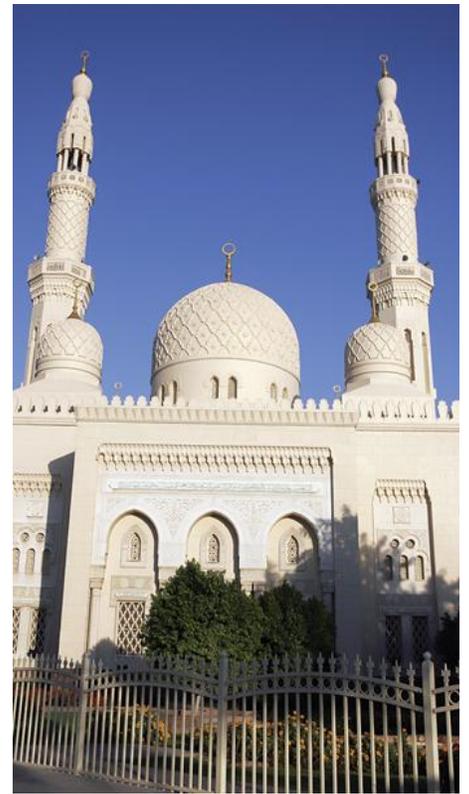
Beyond the shahadah, Muslims also believe in the idea of an unseen world of angels and other beings. According to their faith, God created angels to do his work throughout the universe. Some angels reveal themselves to prophets, as Gabriel did to Muhammad. Other angels observe and record the deeds of each human being. Belief in angels is found in Christianity and Judaism, as well as in Islam.

Muslims also believe that all souls will face a day of judgment. On that day, God will weigh each person's actions. Those who have lived according to God's rules will be rewarded and allowed to enter paradise. Those who have disbelieved or done evil will be punished by falling into hell.

9.5 The Second Pillar: Salat

The second Pillar of Islam is *salat* (SAH-laht), daily ritual prayer. Muhammad said that "prayer is the proof" of Islam. Salat emphasizes religious discipline, spirituality, and closeness to God.

Throughout Muslim communities, people are called to prayer five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and after nightfall. A crier, called a *muezzin* (moo-EHZ-en), chants the call to prayer, sometimes through a loudspeaker, from the tall minaret (tower) of the community's **mosque** (MOSK).



This mosque in Dubai has two minarets. Muezzins climb to the top of the tall towers to chant their calls to prayer out over the

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Before praying, Muslims must perform ritual washings. All mosques have fresh, flowing water in which worshipers wash their hands, face, arms, and feet. With a sense of being purified, Muslims enter the prayer area. There, they form lines behind a prayer leader called an imam. The worshipers face the *qiblah* (KIB-lah), the direction of Makkah. A niche in a wall marks the qiblah. People of all classes stand shoulder to shoulder, but men stand in separate rows from women.

The imam begins the prayer cycle by proclaiming “Allahu akbar!” (“God is most great!”). The worshipers then recite verses from the Qur’an and kneel before God.

While praying at a mosque is preferable, Muslims may worship anywhere. In groups or by themselves, they may perform their prayers at home, at work, in airports, in parks, or on sidewalks. A qiblah compass may help them locate the direction of Makkah. Some Muslims carry a prayer rug to have a clean spot on which pray. Some make additional prayers by using prayer beads and reciting words describing God’s many characteristics.

Unlike Christians and Jews, Muslims do not observe a sabbath, or day of rest. On Fridays, however, Muslims gather at a mosque for midday congregational prayer. The worshipers listen to a Qur’an reading and the sermon. After saying prayers together, some return to their regular business. For others, Friday is a special day when people meet with family and friends.

9.6 The Third Pillar: Zakat

The third Pillar of Islam is *zakat*, or charity. Muhammad told wealthy people to share their riches with the less fortunate. This practice remains a basic part of Islam.

The word *zakat* means “purification.” Muslims believe that wealth becomes pure by giving some of it away, and that sharing wealth helps control greed. Zakat also reminds people of God’s great gifts to them.

According to the teachings of Islam, Muslims must share about one-fortieth (2.5 percent) of their surplus wealth each year with their poorer neighbors. They are encouraged to give even more. Individuals decide the proper amount to pay. Then they either give this sum to a religious official or **distribute** it themselves.

Zakat helps provide for many needs. In medieval times, zakat often went to constructing public fountains, so everyone had clean water to drink, or to inns so pilgrims and travelers had a place to sleep. If you walk down a busy street in any Muslim town today, you will see the effects of zakat everywhere. Zakat pays for soup kitchens, clothing, and shelter for the poor. It supports the building and running of orphanages and hospitals. Poorer Muslims may receive funds to pay off their debts. Zakat provides aid to stranded travelers.

Zakat also helps other good causes that serve the Muslim community. For instance, zakat can cover the school fees of children whose parents cannot afford to send them to Muslim schools. It can be used to pay teachers.

Zakat is similar to charitable giving in other religions. For instance, Jews and Christians also ask for donations, called tithes (TYTHZ), to support their houses of worship and charitable activities.

9.7 The Fourth Pillar: Siyam

The fourth Pillar of Islam is *siyam* (see-YAM), or fasting (going without food). Muslims were not the first people to fast as a way of worshipping God. The Bible praises the act. But the Qur'an instructs Muslims to fast for an entire month during **Ramadan**, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.

According to Islamic teachings, Ramadan was the month when God first revealed his message to Muhammad. Muslims use a lunar calendar (one based on the phases of the moon). A year on this calendar is shorter than a 365-day year. As a result, over time, Ramadan cycles through all the seasons of a standard year.

During Ramadan, Muslims fast from daybreak to the setting of the sun. Pregnant women, travelers, the sick, the elderly, and young children do not have to fast.

During the daylight hours on each day during the month of Ramadan, Muslims do not eat any food or drink any liquid, including water. At sunset, Muslims then break their fast, often with dates and other food and beverages—as Muhammad did—and perform the sunset prayer. After a meal shared with family or friends, Muslims attend special prayer services. Each night, a portion of the Qur'an is read aloud. By the end of Ramadan, devout Muslims who attended mosque regularly would have heard the entire holy book.

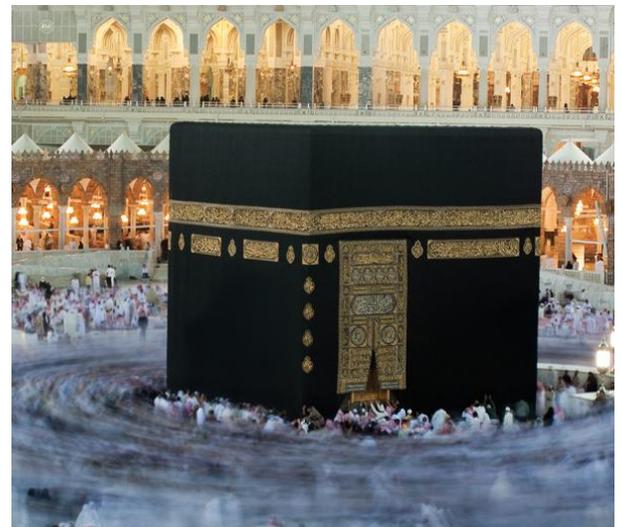
The holy month of Ramadan encourages generosity, equality, and charity within the Muslim community. Fasting teaches Muslims self-control and makes them realize what it would be like to be poor and hungry. Well-to-do Muslims and mosques often provide food for others. During Ramadan, Muslims also strive to forgive people, give thanks, and avoid gossip, arguments, and bad deeds.

Toward the end of Ramadan, Muslims remember Gabriel's first visit to Muhammad. It is supposed to have occurred during one of the last ten odd-numbered nights of the month. Worshippers seek out this night because, according to the Qur'an, prayer during this "night of power" is equal to a thousand months of devotion. A celebration called Eid al-Fitr (eed-AL-fitter) takes place when Ramadan ends. People attend prayers. They wear new clothes, decorate their homes, and prepare special foods. They visit friends and family, exchange gifts, and give to the poor.

9.8 The Fifth Pillar: Hajj

The fifth Pillar of Islam is *hajj* (HAJZH), the pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah. In the twelfth month of the Islamic year, millions of believers from all over the world come together at Makkah. All adult Muslims who are able to make the journey are expected to perform the hajj at least once during their lifetime. By bringing Muslims from many places and cultures together, the hajj promotes fellowship and equality.

In Makkah, pilgrims follow what Muslims believe are the footsteps of Abraham and Muhammad, and so draw closer to



Pilgrims to the holy city of Makkah circle the Ka'bah seven times as directed in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

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God. For five days, they dress in simple white clothing and perform a series of rituals, moving from one sacred site to another.

Upon arrival, Muslims announce their presence with these words: “Here I am, O God, at thy command!” They go to the Great Mosque, which houses the Ka’bah. Muslims believe that Abraham built the Ka’bah as a shrine to honor God. The pilgrims circle the Ka’bah seven times, which is a ritual mentioned in the Qur’an. Next, they run along a passage between two small hills, as Hagar did when she searched for water for her baby Ishmael. The pilgrims drink from the Zamzam spring, which, appeared miraculously at Ishmael’s feet.

Later, pilgrims leave Makkah to sleep in tents at a place called Mina. In the morning, they move to the Plain of Arafat to pray until sunset, asking God’s forgiveness. Some climb Mount Arafat, where Muhammad preached his Last Sermon. After spending another night camped in the desert, they reject evil by casting stones at pillars representing Satan.

Afterward, pilgrims may celebrate with a four-day feast. In honor of Abraham’s ancient sacrifice, as recounted in religious scriptures, they sacrifice animals, usually sheep or goats, and share the meat with family, friends, and the poor. Then, having completed the hajj, they dress again in their own clothes. Before leaving Makkah, each pilgrim circles the Ka’bah seven more times. Muslims around the world celebrate this “farewell” day as Eid al-Adha (eed-AL-adh-hah).

9.9 Jihad

The word **jihad** literally means “to strive.” Traditionally in Islam, it has meant “physical struggle with spiritual significance.” The Qur’an tells Muslims to fight to protect themselves from those who would harm them or to right a terrible wrong. Early Muslims considered efforts to protect their territory and conquests to extend their empire as forms of jihad. However, the Qur’an forbids Muslims to force others to convert to Islam. So, non-Muslims under Muslim rule were usually allowed to practice their faiths.

Today, some have used jihad to try to make their government more Islamic or to resist perceived aggression from non-Muslims with acts of terrorism. But most Muslims reject such actions. They agree that to deliberately harm civilians, including non-Muslims, is forbidden in Islam.

Although the Qur’an allows war, it sets specific terms for fighting. Muhammad told his followers to honor agreements made with foes. Muslim fighters must not mutilate (remove or destroy) the dead bodies of enemies, nor harm women, children, the elderly, and civilians. Nor should they destroy property, orchards, crops, sacred objects, or houses of worship.



Jihad originally meant a physical struggle against enemies while striving to please God. Sometimes it may be a struggle within an individual to overcome spiritual challenges.

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Jihad represents the human struggle to overcome difficulties and do things that would be pleasing to God. Muslims strive to respond positively to personal difficulties as well as to worldly challenges. For instance, they might work to become better people, reform society, or correct injustice.

Jihad has always been an important Islamic concept. One hadith tells about the prophet's return from a battle. He declared that he and his men had carried out the "lesser jihad," the external struggle against oppression. The "greater jihad," he said, was the fight against evil within oneself. Examples of the greater jihad include working hard for a goal, giving up a bad habit, getting an education, or obeying your parents when you may not want to.

Another hadith says that Muslims should fulfill jihad with the heart, tongue, and hand. Muslims use the heart in their struggle to resist evil. The tongue may convince others to take up worthy causes. Hands may perform good works and correct misdeeds.

9.10 Islamic Law: Shari'ah

The body, or collection, of Islamic law is called **shari'ah** (sha-REE-ah). It is based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Shari'ah covers Muslims' duties toward God. It guides them in their personal behavior and relationships with others. Shari'ah promotes obedience to the Qur'an and respect for others.

In Madinah's Muslim community, Muhammad explained the Qur'an and served as a judge. After his death, the caliphs used the Qur'an and the Sunnah to solve problems. As the Muslim empire expanded, leaders faced new situations. Gradually, scholars developed a body of Islamic law. By the 12th century, several schools of Islamic law had emerged.

Islamic law guides Muslim life by placing actions into one of five categories: forbidden, discouraged, allowed, recommended, and obligatory (required). Sometimes the law is quite specific. Muslims, for instance, are forbidden to eat pork, drink alcohol, or gamble. But other matters are mentioned in general terms. For example, the Qur'an tells women "not to display their beauty to strangers." For this reason, Muslim women usually wear various forms of modest dress. For example, most women cover their arms and legs. Many also wear scarves over their hair. Others cover themselves from head to toe.



A shari'ah court is shown on this page from an illuminated manuscript dated 1334.

Shari'ah also outlines Muslims' duties toward other people. These duties can be broadly grouped into criminal, commercial, family, and inheritance law.

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In a shari'ah court, a qadi (KAH-dee), or judge, hears a case, which includes witnesses and evidence. Then the qadi makes a ruling. Sometimes the qadi consults a *mufti*, or scholar of law, for an opinion.

Islamic law helped Muslims to live by the rules contained in the Qur'an. By the 19th century, however, many Muslim regions had come under European rule. Western codes of law soon replaced the shari'ah except in matters of family law. Today, most Muslim countries apply only some parts of Islamic law. But shari'ah continues to develop in response to modern ways of life and its challenges.

For the past century, one of the major questions the Muslim world faces is how Islamic law can be made to relate to modern society and government. Turkey has chosen a non-religious legal model. However, Saudi Arabia and Iran have adopted shari'ah as the law of the land, each nation according to its own ideas. Other countries, such as Egypt and Pakistan, have strong Islamist parties and strong non-Islamist parties. Most Muslims feel that democracy and freedom do not **contradict** the teachings and law of Islam. But others feel that the two cannot go hand in hand. The debate continues.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned about the basic beliefs and practices of Islam. One of the world's major religions, Islam has more followers than any faith except Christianity.

Background on Islam Islam, Judaism, and Christianity share many similarities. People of these faiths believe in one God and have holy books. Muslims accept the Jewish and Christian scriptures as earlier revelations by God.

The Qur'an and the Sunnah The Qur'an is the Islamic holy book. It contains God's final messages to humanity and guides Muslims on how to live their lives. Additional guidance comes from the Sunnah (practice), the example of Muhammad. The hadith (tradition) provides a written record of sayings and deeds of the prophet.

The Five Pillars of Islam Islam is a way of life, as well as a set of beliefs. Muslims follow the Five Pillars of Islam. The five pillars are: shahadah (declaration of faith), salat (daily worship), zakat (charity), siyam (fasting), and hajj (the pilgrimage to Makkah).

Jihad Muslims also have the duty of jihad, which is a physical or spiritual struggle or striving to please God.

Islamic Law: Shari'ah Shari'ah, or Islamic law, helps Muslims live by the teachings of the Qur'an. It includes practices of daily life, as well as the duty to respect others.