

The Teachings of Islam

Islam teaches that human beings are born pure and sinless. No one is responsible for or can take the responsibility of the sins of others. However, the doors of forgiveness are always open for those who repent sincerely. God continuously reminds us in the Qur'an of His infinite mercy and compassion. Muslims are enjoined to maintain inner spiritual purity through constant remembrance and prayer to God. Islam balances the spiritual dimension by emphasizing human responsibility. Human beings are created with a purpose. Attainment of piety is but one dimension of such purpose; playing an active role in the creation of a just society is another. Because Muslims attach importance to what happens in this world, they have made substantial contribution to the development of science, medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography and literature. Muslims like Avicenna and Avirroes have played major roles in the advancement of science in the west. The first university in the world was established by Muslims in Cairo, Egypt. Many crucial systems such as the Arabic numerals, algebra, the first map of the globe and navigational maps were developed by Muslims and adopted by the medieval Europeans.

Apart from human responsibility, Islam also teaches human accountability. The final destination of human beings is the hereafter. Muslims believe that, at the end of time, all human beings will be resurrected to account for their deeds. Those who have performed righteous deeds will be rewarded with eternal bliss in heaven and those who have performed evil acts will be punished in hell.

Muslim Practice

Salat (Prayers): Islam demands from its adherents that beliefs be supplemented with actions. Just as God communicates with us, we need to respond to Him by undertaking certain spiritual and social duties which will draw us closer to Him. Human beings can communicate directly with God through prayers. Although they can pray anywhere, Muslims are encouraged to pray in congregation. Muslims are required to pray five times every day. Prayers are offered in Arabic. Personal supplication may be recited in any language in the pursuit of closeness to the Lord. Prayers engender inner strength and inspire one to a closer relationship with the Creator. Muslims pray towards the Ka'ba, which is situated in Mecca. It was built by Abraham and Ishmael over four thousand years ago.

Saum (Fasting): Discipline in a believer is further inculcated by fasting. Every year in the month of **Ramadhan**, Muslims must fast by refraining from food and drink during the daytime. Fasting is regarded as an essential component in the growth of spirituality within a person. It also makes a person more aware of the plight of the poor and helps him develop willpower so as to discipline his desires.

Since Islam believes in values like chastity and morality, it prohibits all acts which lead to moral corruption. Drugs, alcohol, and substance abuse are strictly prohibited in Islam.

Zakat (Alms) Muslims see wealth to be a trust from God, to be dispensed in His way. Therefore, they are asked to purify their wealth by spending a portion of their income for those in need (called zakat). Giving the zakat is seen as one of the most meritorious deeds especially as it helps fulfill the Islamic vision of creating a just and equitable society. Undertaking social responsibility by helping the needy is highly encouraged in Islam.

Hajj (Pilgrimage): Once in their lifetime, Muslims are commanded to go for pilgrimage to Mecca provided there are no financial or physical constraints. Every year, about two million Muslims from different parts of the world converge on Mecca to perform the pilgrimage. This provides a unique opportunity for Muslims of different nations and diverse backgrounds to meet one another. During the rituals, pilgrims wear white clothing and stand close together in the worship of the one Lord. Islam recognizes no racial or ethnic boundaries. The hajj is the perfect example of the oneness of people of all races and nations, worshipping and serving the Lord.

The **hajj** is marked by the **Eid al-Adha**, a festival which is marked with prayers and other rituals performed by the pilgrims in the vicinity of Mecca. These rituals are meant to purify the faithful inwardly. The day is also marked in Muslim communities in different parts of the world with celebrations and exchange of gifts. This day, together with the **Eid al-Fitr**, a feast day commemorating the end of **Ramadhan**, are the two main festivals of the Muslim calendar. The Muslim weekly holiday is on Fridays when congregational prayers are held at noon.

Islam and War

The concept of **jihad** (wrongly translated as holy war) refers to the duty of Muslims to defend their faith and the welfare of the Muslim community when threatened. The Qur'an does not permit aggression against anyone and Prophet Muhammad is asked to proselytize in a peaceful manner. Warfare is permitted only in self-defense. However, it must be noted that people only resort to violence when their basic human rights are violated and when all attempts at peaceful settlement are thwarted.

Islam and Human Rights

Islam teaches that human beings have a moral obligation to live in harmony with one another. Islam also recognizes and accords rights to all human beings regardless of race, color or creed. Islam requires its followers to show respect and tolerance even to those who do not share their faith. Prophet Muhammad said: "**God has no mercy on one who shows no mercy to others**". Freedom of conscience is guaranteed by the Qur'an itself. It states: "**There is no compulsion in religion**" (2:256). Islamic law stipulates that Muslims should protect the status of minorities. Therefore, the life and property of all citizens in an Islamic state are considered sacred, whether a person is a Muslim or not. Because of this, non-Muslim places of worship have survived and flourished all over the Muslim world. Islam further encourages Muslims to respect the rights of all living things. Therefore, Muslims are required to be conscious of the environment and are not allowed to cause harm to nature.

It is important to realize that far from being extremists and fanatics, Muslims are peaceful and law-abiding citizens of the countries in which they live. This stance is derived directly from the Qur'an which states: **"O human beings, We have created you from one male and female (Adam & Eve), We have created you as different tribes and nations so that you may know each other" (49:13).**

Islam and Women

Muslim women have all the rights of their male counterparts. Islam granted full rights to women fourteen hundred years ago. Muslim women may own and dispose property; they may work, exercise voting powers and exercise other rights which women in other cultures enjoy. Muslim women may not be forced to marry against their will.

To preserve chastity, respect and moral values in society, Muslim men and women are required to dress in a manner which is considered modest and dignified. Women are asked to cover their hair and wear loose clothing. The diversity of female dress in some Muslim countries is often the expression of local customs.

Since Islam is a universal religion, it is easy to become a Muslim. One has to believe and affirm that **"There is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God"**. Today, the Islamic community in North America is growing rapidly with Muslims playing major roles in virtually all sectors of society. Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay), Malcolm X, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) are some of the well-known people who have embraced Islam.

May the blessings of the Almighty God be with you!