

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

outreach tools for interfaith work

As many people of faith make even greater strides in reaching out to the Muslim community, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice has prepared answers to some of the most common questions about Islam and tips on how to build relationships.

What is Islam?

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Who are Muslims?

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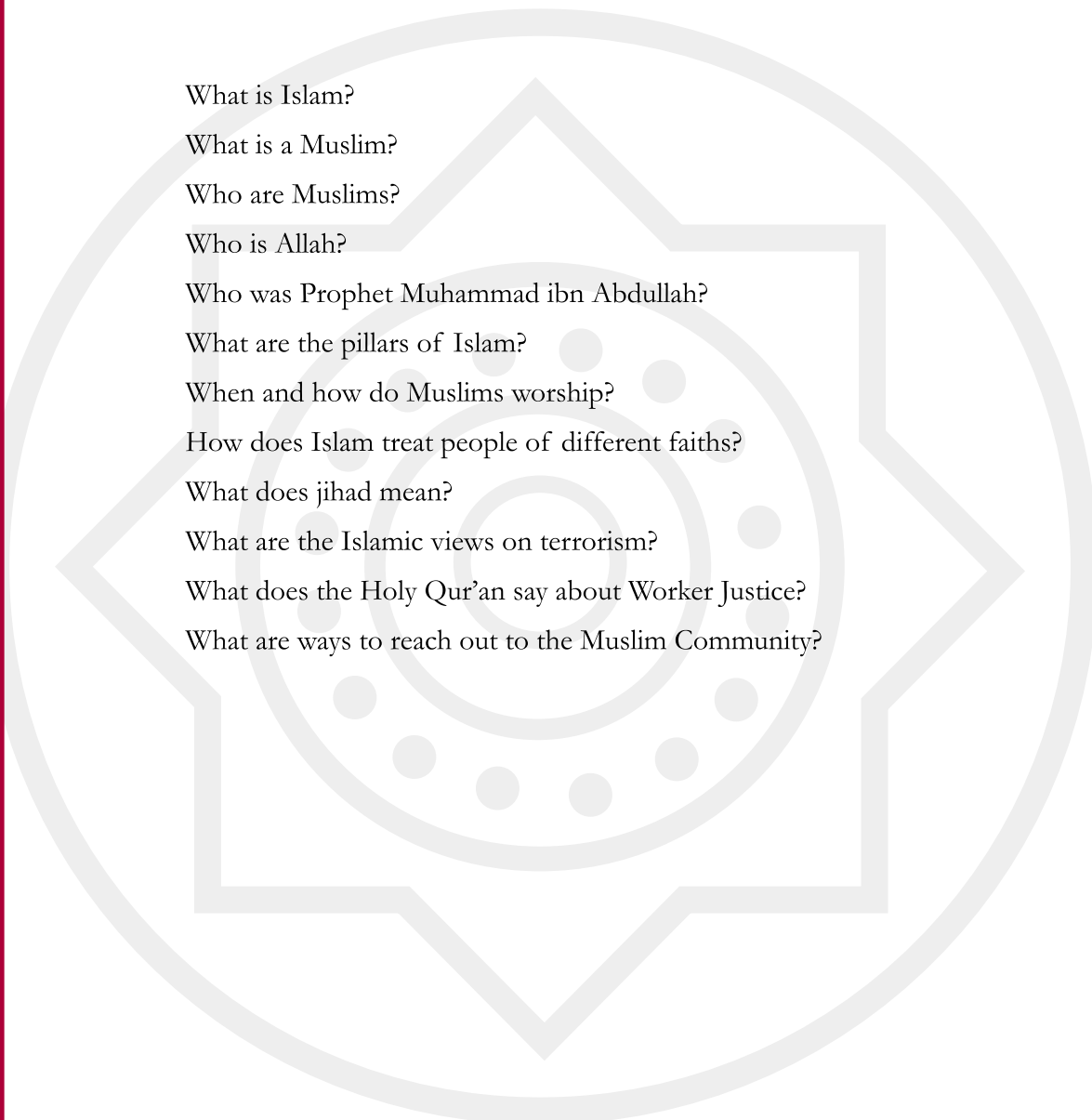
How does Islam treat people of different faiths?

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What is Islam?

Translated literally, Islam is an Arabic word meaning “to submit” and is derived from a word meaning “peace.” The Holy Qur’an says in verse 3:19 “The only religion approved by God is Submission.” Though the term Islam was articulated through Prophet Muhammad 1400 years ago (the seventh century), Islam is not viewed by its believers as a new religion, but the last stage of God’s revelation to humanity. It is a process that began with Abraham, and which continued through all the biblical prophets from Moses to Jesus, all those who practiced and preached submission to God.

What is a Muslim? A Muslim is one who practices Islam. One becomes a Muslim by proclaiming, “There is no god, but Allah (God) and Muhammad is His Messenger.”

Who are Muslims?

Muslims are the second largest religious population in the world, numbering more than 1.5 billion around the world. They come from many ethnic groups, nationalities, cultures in nearly every part of the inhabited earth. About 18 percent are from the Arab world. The world’s largest Muslim community is in Indonesia. Much of Asia’s people and most of Africa’s are Muslim. Small but significant muslim groups live in Russia, China, Europe, Australia, Central and South America—including Suriname, where 20 percent of the population is Muslim. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, where currently approximately six million Muslims live.

A Muslim leader is called an “imam,” a title equivalent to minister or rabbi. The terms “shayk” or “mullah” are also general terms referring to a religious scholar. In the Nation of Islam the term “minister” is used in place of “imam.” If in doubt, just ask.

Who is Allah? Allah is an Arabic term meaning “one God.” Allah is the same Creator referred to in both Christianity and Judaism. For Muslims, Allah is the proper name of that One true God. Allah is the name of God in Aramaic, a sister language of Arabic and the one spoken by Jesus.

Who was Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdul Allah?

In short, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, peace be upon him (P) was born 570 AD. His family was from a noble Meccan tribe and his ancestry reaches back to Prophet Ishmael (P), son of Prophet Abraham (P). Orphaned by deceased parents at a young age, Muhammad (P) was moved from various family members until eventually he was raised by his grandfather and uncle. He never attended school. As an adult, he was known as a righteous and honorable person. At age 40 an angel named Gabriel appeared in a cave that Muhammad used frequently to meditate and bestowed upon him prophethood. Subsequently, these revelations followed for over 23 years, and were compiled in the form of a book called the Holy Qur’an, which Muslims consider to be the final revelation of God. Muslims believe the text confirms the truth in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel.

What are the pillars of Islam?

There are five major pillars of Islam, which are the articles of faith. These pillars are:

- 1) **belief** — in one God and that Muhammad (P) is His messenger,
- 2) **prayer** — prescribed five times a day,
- 3) **fasting** — required in the month of Ramadan,
- 4) **charity** — spent in the cause of truth,
- 5) **hajj** — the pilgrimage to Mecca to be made once in a lifetime if one can afford it physically and financially.

When and how do Muslims worship?

The primary method of worship in Islam is observed through the obligatory prayers called “salat.” These prayers are performed five times a day. Prayers are led by a learned person chosen by the congregation. The prayers contain verses from the Qur’an, and are spoken in Arabic, the language of the Revelation; personal supplication though, can be offered in one’s own language. The times for the prayers are dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere, in fields, offices, factories and universities. In the Muslim world, all business stops for prayer.

How does Islam treat people of different faiths?

Historically, Islam has always recognized the rights of people regardless of their beliefs. Prophet Muhammad (P) forbade Muslim armies to destroy churches and synagogues. The Holy Qur’an demands that Muslims defend any church or synagogue from being defaced and destroyed. Jews were welcomed and flourished in Muslim Spain even when persecuted in the rest of Europe. In Muslim countries, Christians live in prosperity, hold government positions and attend their churches. Christian missionaries are allowed to establish and operate their schools and hospitals. This respect reflects the Holy Qur’an, which proclaims, “Those who believe [in the Qur’an], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Surah 2:62)

What does jihad mean?

The word “jihad” means struggling in the cause of God. Personal restraint from wrong doings, one’s daily struggles, helping the poor, and being kind, are all efforts pleasing to God, and are jihad. One of the highest levels of jihad is to speak truth to injustice. The struggle for social and economic justice is jihad.

What are the Islamic views on terrorism?

Both the Holy Qur’an and Islamic leaders condemn hate crimes and terrorism just as the Holy Bible and Christian leaders condemn the actions of the Ku Klux Klan or Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh. On the subject of tolerance the Holy Qur’an proclaims, “It may be that God will grant love [and friendship] between you and those whom ye [now] hold as enemies. For God has power [over all things]; And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Surah 60:7)

WHAT DOES THE HOLY QUR’AN SAY ABOUT WORKER JUSTICE?

There are a host of scriptures in the Holy Qur’an that provide business ethics guidance for both the employer and employee:

- “I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other” (3:194).
- “Woe to those that deal in fraud. Those who when they have to receive by measure, from men exact full measure, but when they have to give by measure, or weight to men, give less than due.” (83:1-3)
- “Give full measure when you measure out and weigh with a fair balance. This is fair and better in the end” (17:35).
- “Give just measure, and cause no loss [to others by fraud]. And weight with scales true and upright and withhold not things justly due to me, nor do evil in the land, working mischief.” (26:181-183)
- “Men shall have the benefit of what they earn, and women shall have the benefit of what they earn” (4:32)

what are ways to reach out to the muslim community?

1. Muslim American communities and organizations desire to be understood by the larger society. Most would welcome a phone call. Don't worry about not understanding Muslim culture. Be yourself and let the person know you are unfamiliar with Islam, but seek opportunities to foster better relations to help low-wage workers. There are several things one can do to help foster good relationships when reaching out.

Begin by:

- a) asking if there are any group gatherings where you'd be welcome. Whenever going to a mosque or Muslim-sponsored event, both men and women should dress modestly (meaning wear clothing that is not too tight and covers the shoulders at least up to the elbow and the legs at least below the knees),
- b) seeing if the imam is involved in any interfaith programs;
- c) inquiring if any of his congregation is immigrant, and if so, has he heard about any workplace problems they face.

2. Invite the local imam or leader of a Muslim organization to:

- a) participate in Labor in the Pulpits Program,
- b) serve on a steering committee or participate in a worker rights board,
- c) participate in a religious fact-finding delegation, or
- d) spread the word about Seminary Summer

(Be sure to consider dietary requirements if you invite a Muslim to an event where food will be served. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.)

3. Contact Muslim American organizations such as:

Mahdi Bray of Muslim Public Affairs Council at
994 National Press Building
529 14th Street NW
Washington, DC 20045
or by phone at (202) 879-6726.

Khalid Iqbal of Council on American Islamic Relations at
453 New Jersey Avenue, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
or by phone at (202) 488-8787.

The American Muslim Council
1212 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005
or by phone at (202) 789-2262.

Prepared by Toure Muhammad, communications coordinator of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.

Reviewed by NICWJ board member Mahdi Bray, political director of Muslim Public Affairs Council and Imam Mujahid Ramadan, board member of the Nevada Interfaith Council for Worker Justice.

