

a new introduction to islam

A New Introduction to Islam: Understanding the Faith, Practices, and Core Beliefs

Embarking on a journey to understand Islam offers a profound insight into one of the world's largest and most influential religions. This comprehensive guide serves as a new introduction to Islam, delving into its foundational principles, historical context, and the daily lives of its adherents. We will explore the core tenets of Islamic faith, the significance of the Quran and the Sunnah, and the fundamental pillars that shape Muslim practice. For those seeking clarity on Islamic teachings, this article aims to provide an accessible and informative overview, demystifying common misconceptions and highlighting the rich spiritual heritage. Join us as we explore the essence of Islam, its global impact, and the pathways to a deeper appreciation of this diverse and vibrant faith.

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Understanding the Essence of Islam

At its heart, Islam is a monotheistic religion that centers on the concept of submission to

the will of Allah (God). The word "Islam" itself translates to "submission" or "peace," reflecting a core value of achieving peace through adherence to divine guidance. Muslims, followers of Islam, believe that Allah is the one and only God, the creator and sustainer of all existence. This unwavering belief in the absolute oneness of God, known as Tawhid, is the foundational principle upon which the entire faith is built. A new introduction to Islam must begin with this fundamental understanding – that all Muslims strive to live their lives in accordance with God's commands as revealed through His prophets.

The essence of Islam also encompasses a deep sense of responsibility and accountability to God. Muslims believe that life is a test, and every action, thought, and intention will be accounted for on the Day of Judgment. This belief fosters a strong moral compass and encourages individuals to live ethically and compassionately, treating all of creation with respect. Understanding this intrinsic connection between faith and action is crucial for grasping the holistic nature of Islam.

The Meaning of "Muslim"

The term "Muslim" literally means "one who submits to God." It is not an ethnic or racial designation but rather a spiritual one, signifying anyone who consciously chooses to embrace the Islamic faith and live according to its principles. This submission is not one of forced servitude, but rather a willing surrender to the divine wisdom and mercy of Allah, recognizing His ultimate power and sovereignty. It's a commitment to aligning one's will with the will of the Creator.

The Concept of Peace in Islam

While "Islam" means submission, it is also intrinsically linked to the concept of peace. True peace, in the Islamic worldview, is achieved when an individual is at peace with God, with themselves, and with others. This internal peace stems from a sincere devotion to Allah and living a life of righteousness, which in turn contributes to external peace and harmony within society. The pursuit of justice, compassion, and forgiveness are all integral to fostering this state of peace.

The Quran: The Divine Revelation

The Quran is the holy book of Islam, considered by Muslims to be the literal word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of approximately 23 years. It is the ultimate source of guidance for Muslims, containing comprehensive teachings on theology, morality, law, and spirituality. Understanding the Quran is paramount for anyone seeking a new introduction to Islam, as it provides the blueprint for a Muslim's life. The Quran is revered for its eloquent Arabic language, its profound wisdom, and its timeless relevance.

Muslims believe that the Quran is preserved in its original Arabic form, uncorrupted by human alteration. This belief in the divine origin and impeccable preservation of the Quran is a cornerstone of Islamic faith. The text is divided into chapters called surahs, and further

into verses called ayahs. Its verses cover a vast spectrum of topics, from the oneness of God and the stories of previous prophets to ethical guidelines for personal conduct and societal organization.

The Revelation Process

The Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel (Jibril). This revelation was a gradual process, with verses being revealed at different times and in response to specific circumstances. This gradual unfolding allowed the teachings to be absorbed and implemented by the early Muslim community. Muslims believe that this method of revelation was a mercy from Allah, providing context and clarity for the divine message.

The Structure and Content of the Quran

The Quran is organized into 114 chapters (surahs) of varying lengths, arranged not chronologically by revelation, but in a manner believed to be divinely ordained. The longest surah is Al-Baqarah (The Cow), and the shortest is Al-Kawthar (Abundance). The content is diverse, encompassing theological discussions about Allah's attributes, narratives of prophets like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, legal injunctions, moral admonishments, and descriptions of paradise and hell. Its verses often call for reflection on the natural world as signs of God's existence and power.

The Importance of Tafsir (Exegesis)

Given the depth and complexity of the Quranic text, the study of Tafsir, or Quranic exegesis, is crucial. Tafsir involves interpreting the Quranic verses with the aid of the Sunnah (the traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad) and scholarly consensus. It helps to provide context, explain difficult passages, and elucidate the intended meaning of the divine words, ensuring a proper understanding for Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad: The Messenger of God

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is central to the Islamic faith. Muslims believe him to be the final prophet in a line of messengers sent by God, following in the footsteps of prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. His role was to convey God's final message to humanity, to exemplify the teachings of Islam through his life, and to establish the Muslim community. For anyone seeking a new introduction to Islam, understanding the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad is indispensable.

Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia, in the 6th century CE. He received his first divine revelation at the age of 40 and spent the rest of his life spreading the message of Islam. His character, known as the "Sunnah" (his practices, sayings, and approvals), serves as a practical guide for Muslims in all aspects of life. His compassion, wisdom, integrity, and

justice are highly admired and emulated by Muslims worldwide.

The Prophethood and Mission

The core of Prophet Muhammad's mission was to call people to the worship of the one God, Allah, and to lead them away from idolatry and ignorance. He preached monotheism, accountability in the afterlife, and the importance of moral conduct. His prophethood is seen as a mercy to mankind, bringing divine guidance to a world in need.

The Sunnah and Hadith

The Sunnah refers to the way of life of Prophet Muhammad. It is primarily documented in collections of Hadith, which are narrations of his sayings, actions, and tacit approvals. The Hadith literature provides detailed explanations of Quranic injunctions and offers practical guidance on everything from prayer and fasting to family life and business dealings. The authenticity of Hadith is rigorously assessed by Islamic scholars.

Prophet Muhammad's Character and Teachings

Prophet Muhammad's character is widely regarded as exemplary. He was known for his humility, kindness, patience, generosity, and unwavering commitment to justice. His teachings emphasized compassion, forgiveness, and the importance of knowledge. He taught that the best of people are those who are most beneficial to others, fostering a sense of community and mutual responsibility among his followers.

The Five Pillars of Islam: Foundations of Faith

The Five Pillars of Islam are the fundamental acts of worship and the core practices that define Muslim life. They are the framework through which Muslims express their submission to Allah and strengthen their connection with Him. These pillars are obligatory for all Muslims who are able to perform them, providing a structured approach to spiritual and moral development. A new introduction to Islam would be incomplete without detailing these essential tenets.

These pillars are not merely rituals but are intended to cultivate a sense of discipline, self-awareness, and responsibility towards God and fellow human beings. Each pillar reinforces the others, creating a holistic approach to faith and practice.

Shahada: The Declaration of Faith

The Shahada is the testimony of faith: "La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadun rasul Allah" (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger). This declaration is the gateway to Islam and the cornerstone of a Muslim's belief. It signifies a profound commitment to the

oneness of God and the acceptance of Prophet Muhammad as His final messenger.

Salat: The Five Daily Prayers

Salat, or prayer, is performed five times a day at prescribed times: dawn (Fajr), noon (Dhuhr), mid-afternoon (Asr), sunset (Maghrib), and night (Isha). Muslims face the Kaaba in Mecca while praying, a practice that unifies Muslims worldwide in their devotion. Salat is a direct communion with Allah, fostering mindfulness and remembrance of God throughout the day.

Zakat: Charitable Giving

Zakat is the mandatory charitable contribution that Muslims are required to pay annually on their wealth, typically 2.5% of their savings and assets above a certain threshold. It is a pillar of social justice, intended to purify wealth and support the poor, needy, and other eligible recipients. Zakat fosters a sense of empathy and responsibility towards the less fortunate.

Sawm: Fasting During Ramadan

Sawm is the act of fasting from dawn to sunset during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During this period, Muslims abstain from food, drink, and marital relations. Fasting is intended to foster self-discipline, spiritual reflection, empathy for the poor, and a deeper connection with Allah.

Hajj: The Pilgrimage to Mecca

Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which every Muslim is obliged to undertake at least once in their lifetime, if they are physically and financially able. It is a profound spiritual journey that symbolizes the unity of the Muslim community (Ummah) and the complete submission to God's will. The Hajj involves a series of rituals performed over several days.

Core Beliefs in Islam: Articles of Faith

Beyond the outward practices of the Five Pillars, Islam is grounded in a set of fundamental beliefs known as the Articles of Faith. These form the theological bedrock of the religion, shaping a Muslim's worldview and their relationship with the divine. Understanding these articles is essential for a comprehensive new introduction to Islam, as they explain what Muslims believe in their hearts.

These beliefs are not static pronouncements but are meant to be internalized and reflected in one's actions and character. They provide a framework for understanding the purpose of

life, the nature of reality, and the ultimate destiny of humanity.

Belief in Allah (God)

This is the most fundamental belief, as discussed earlier with Tawhid. Muslims believe in the absolute oneness, uniqueness, and omnipotence of Allah. He is the creator, sustainer, and ultimate judge of all that exists. His attributes, such as mercy, knowledge, and power, are infinite and beyond human comprehension.

Belief in Angels

Angels are believed to be beings created by Allah from light, who serve Him and carry out His commands. They are without free will and are inherently obedient. Prominent angels include Gabriel (Jibril), who delivered God's messages, Michael (Mika'il), who is responsible for natural phenomena, and Israfil, who will blow the trumpet on the Day of Judgment.

Belief in Divine Books

Muslims believe that Allah revealed His guidance through a series of divine books to various prophets. These include the Torah (Tawrat) revealed to Moses, the Psalms (Zabur) to David, and the Gospel (Injeel) to Jesus. Muslims believe that the Quran is the final and complete revelation, confirming the previous scriptures and correcting any alterations that may have occurred.

Belief in Prophets

Islam recognizes a long chain of prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Prophet Muhammad is believed to be the last prophet, sealing the line of prophecy. Each prophet was sent to guide their respective communities towards the worship of the one God, and Prophet Muhammad's mission was to deliver God's final message to all of humanity.

Belief in the Day of Judgment

Muslims believe in the Day of Judgment, when all of humanity will be resurrected and judged by Allah for their deeds in this life. Those who believed in God, lived righteously, and followed His commands will be rewarded with Paradise (Jannah), while those who rejected Him and committed grave sins will face punishment in Hellfire (Jahannam). This belief emphasizes accountability and the importance of living a moral life.

Belief in Divine Decree (Qadar)

Qadar refers to the belief that Allah has knowledge of and has decreed all that will happen.

This includes both good and bad events. However, this belief does not negate human free will or responsibility. Muslims believe that while Allah knows and has willed all things, humans are given the capacity to choose their actions, and they will be held accountable for those choices.

Islamic Practices and Daily Life

Islam is not just a set of beliefs; it is a comprehensive way of life that permeates the daily routines and interactions of Muslims. The Five Pillars provide the framework, but the essence of Islamic practice extends to every aspect of life, emphasizing the importance of intention (niyyah) and seeking God's pleasure in all endeavors. A new introduction to Islam should highlight how faith is lived out practically.

From personal hygiene to business ethics, from family relationships to social responsibilities, Islamic teachings offer guidance and principles to ensure that a Muslim's life is conducted in accordance with divine will. This holistic approach aims to bring peace and purpose to everyday existence.

Dietary Guidelines: Halal and Haram

Islam provides specific dietary laws, categorizing foods as Halal (permissible) and Haram (forbidden). The most well-known forbidden food is pork, as well as alcohol and meat that has not been slaughtered in the prescribed Islamic manner (Zabiha). Halal principles extend beyond just food, encompassing all permissible aspects of life, signifying purity and lawful engagement.

Dress Code and Modesty

Modesty is a significant aspect of Islamic practice for both men and women. While interpretations vary, the general principle is to dress in a way that is modest and does not draw undue attention. For women, this often includes covering their hair and body, while for men, it involves covering from the navel to the knee. This emphasis on modesty is intended to foster dignity and a focus on inner character.

Family Life and Relationships

Islam places a high value on family. Marriage is encouraged as a sacred bond, and both spouses have rights and responsibilities towards each other and their children. Respect for parents is paramount, and maintaining family ties (Silat al-Rahim) is considered a highly virtuous act. Children are seen as a trust from God, and parents are responsible for their upbringing and education.

Business and Financial Ethics

Islamic finance and business practices are guided by principles of fairness, honesty, and the prohibition of interest (riba). Contracts must be transparent, and there is an emphasis on ethical conduct in all transactions. Profit is permissible, but it must be earned through legitimate means, and there is a strong discouragement of exploitation or deception.

The Importance of Community and Ethics in Islam

Islam strongly emphasizes the importance of community (Ummah) and the cultivation of ethical behavior. Muslims are encouraged to be active participants in society, contributing positively and upholding moral principles. This communal aspect and ethical framework are vital for a comprehensive new introduction to Islam.

The concept of the Ummah highlights the brotherhood and sisterhood among Muslims, transcending national, ethnic, and racial boundaries. This global community is bound by shared faith and the pursuit of righteousness, fostering mutual support and collective responsibility.

The Concept of the Ummah

The Ummah refers to the global community of Muslims. It is a concept that emphasizes unity, solidarity, and mutual support among all believers, regardless of their geographical location or cultural background. This shared identity is rooted in their common faith in Allah and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

Justice and Fairness

Justice ('Adl) is a cornerstone of Islamic ethics. Muslims are commanded to be just in all their dealings, whether with fellow Muslims or non-Muslims. This includes fairness in legal judgments, business transactions, and interpersonal relationships. Oppression and injustice are strictly condemned.

Compassion and Mercy

Compassion (Rahmah) and mercy are highly valued virtues in Islam. Muslims are encouraged to be merciful towards others, including animals and the environment. This compassion extends to helping the needy, forgiving those who have wronged them, and showing kindness in all interactions. Prophet Muhammad himself was described as a "mercy to the worlds."

Honesty and Integrity

Honesty (Sidq) and integrity are fundamental ethical principles. Muslims are expected to be truthful in their speech, dealings, and intentions. Deception, lying, and cheating are considered grave sins. This commitment to honesty builds trust and strengthens social cohesion.

Striving for Excellence (Ihsan)

Ihsan, often translated as excellence or perfection, is the striving to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, know that He sees you. This principle extends to all aspects of life, encouraging Muslims to perform their duties with utmost diligence and sincerity, seeking to achieve the highest standards of quality and ethical conduct.

Islam's Global Presence and Diversity

Islam is a global religion with a diverse following that spans continents, cultures, and ethnicities. Understanding this global presence and the inherent diversity within the Muslim world is crucial for a balanced new introduction to Islam. While the core beliefs and practices remain consistent, the expression and interpretation of Islam vary significantly across different societies.

This diversity is a testament to the adaptability of Islamic principles and the rich tapestry of human experience. It is important to recognize that there is no single monolithic culture of Islam, but rather a multitude of expressions shaped by local traditions and historical contexts.

Geographical Distribution

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, with a significant presence in the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and increasingly in Europe and the Americas. Major Muslim-majority countries are found across these regions, each with its unique cultural heritage and historical development.

Cultural Variations

While the Quran and Sunnah are universal sources of guidance, their interpretation and application are influenced by local customs and traditions. This leads to a rich diversity in Islamic art, architecture, cuisine, clothing, and social customs across different Muslim-majority societies. For example, the way Ramadan is celebrated or the styles of mosque architecture can vary considerably.

Sectarian Diversity

The two main branches of Islam are Sunni and Shia. The distinction arose historically from a disagreement over succession following the death of Prophet Muhammad. While both branches share the core beliefs and pillars of Islam, they differ on certain theological and legal interpretations and historical leadership. It is important to note that the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni.

Contemporary Muslim Societies

Modern Muslim societies are characterized by a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Many Muslims navigate contemporary challenges and opportunities while adhering to their faith. This includes engagement with science, technology, democracy, and global issues, demonstrating the ongoing evolution and relevance of Islamic thought.

Navigating Misconceptions: A Clearer Perspective

Unfortunately, Islam, like many major religions, is often subject to misconceptions and stereotypes in the public sphere. A crucial part of providing a new introduction to Islam involves addressing these misunderstandings with factual information and a balanced perspective. It's important to differentiate between the actions of individuals and the core teachings of the faith.

Promoting a clear understanding requires looking beyond sensationalized media portrayals and focusing on the authentic sources of Islamic knowledge and the lived experiences of the majority of Muslims. This section aims to clarify common areas of confusion and provide a more accurate picture.

Misconceptions about Jihad

The term "Jihad" is often misunderstood to mean "holy war." While it can encompass defensive warfare under strict ethical conditions, its primary meaning in Islam is "struggle" or "striving." This includes the internal struggle to live a righteous life, the struggle to improve oneself and society, and the struggle to defend one's faith and community when unjustly attacked. Extremist interpretations that promote unwarranted violence are contrary to mainstream Islamic teachings.

Stereotypes about Muslim Women

Common stereotypes portray Muslim women as oppressed or lacking agency. However, Islamic teachings emphasize the spiritual equality of men and women and grant women rights concerning marriage, divorce, property, and education. The practice of hijab (headscarf) is often misunderstood; for many Muslim women, it is a personal choice and an expression of their religious identity and devotion, not necessarily a sign of subjugation.

The Relationship between Islam and Violence

While certain extremist groups engage in violence and misappropriate religious texts to justify their actions, these actions are condemned by the vast majority of Muslims and Islamic scholars. The Quran explicitly states that "whoever kills a soul, it is as if he had slain mankind entirely, and whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved mankind entirely" (Quran 5:32). Islam advocates for peace, justice, and compassion.

The Diversity of Islamic Thought

It is essential to remember the vast diversity of opinions and interpretations within Islamic scholarship and practice. Generalizations about "Islam" often fail to capture this rich intellectual and cultural heritage. Understanding the nuances and different schools of thought is key to a comprehensive appreciation of the faith.

Conclusion: Embracing a New Understanding of Islam

This comprehensive new introduction to Islam has aimed to illuminate the core tenets, practices, and beliefs that define this global faith. We have explored the divine revelation of the Quran, the exemplary life of Prophet Muhammad, and the foundational Five Pillars that structure Muslim worship and life. Understanding the articles of faith, the ethical principles, and the vibrant diversity within the Muslim world provides a more nuanced and accurate perspective.

By demystifying common misconceptions and emphasizing the emphasis on submission to God, community, compassion, and justice, we hope to foster a greater appreciation for Islam. Whether you are a student of religion, seeking to understand friends or neighbors, or simply curious about the world's second-largest faith, this guide serves as a foundational stepping stone to a deeper, more informed understanding. Islam is a faith of peace, submission, and a profound connection with the Divine, guiding millions toward a meaningful life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the core beliefs of Islam?

Islam is centered on the belief in one God (Allah), the prophethood of Muhammad, and the Quran as the literal word of God. Muslims also believe in angels, the Day of Judgment, and divine decree.

What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

The Five Pillars are the foundational acts of worship for Muslims: Shahada (declaration of faith), Salat (prayer), Zakat (charity), Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

Who is Allah in Islam?

Allah is the Arabic word for God. Muslims believe Allah is the sole, unique, and supreme creator and sustainer of the universe, without partners or equals.

Who was Prophet Muhammad?

Prophet Muhammad is believed by Muslims to be the final prophet in a line of prophets that includes Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. He received the Quran from God and his life and teachings (Sunnah) serve as a model for Muslims.

What is the Quran?

The Quran is the holy book of Islam, believed by Muslims to be the direct, unadulterated word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad over 23 years. It serves as the primary source of Islamic guidance.

What is the significance of the Sunnah?

The Sunnah refers to the sayings, actions, and approvals of Prophet Muhammad. It provides practical guidance and context for understanding and implementing the teachings of the Quran.

How do Muslims pray?

Muslims perform five daily prayers (Salat) at specific times. These prayers involve reciting verses from the Quran, praising Allah, and performing a series of physical movements like bowing and prostrating.

What is the role of community in Islam?

Community (Ummah) is highly valued in Islam. Muslims are encouraged to support each other, engage in collective worship, and work towards the betterment of society.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to a new introduction to Islam, with descriptions:

1. The Message of Islam

This book offers a comprehensive yet accessible overview of Islamic beliefs, practices, and history. It delves into the core tenets of faith, the Five Pillars of Islam, and the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The author aims to clarify common

misconceptions and present Islam as a holistic way of life. It serves as an excellent starting point for anyone seeking to understand the essence of Islam.

2. Islam: A Very Short Introduction

Part of a popular series, this concise volume provides a swift yet insightful introduction to the world's second-largest religion. It covers Islam's origins, its relationship with other Abrahamic faiths, and its diverse global presence. The book explores key concepts like the Quran, Hadith, and Sharia in a straightforward manner. It's ideal for readers wanting a quick but informative foundation in Islamic studies.

3. Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Insightful Perspective of Islam

This title focuses on providing a clear and balanced understanding of Islamic principles and the Muslim community. It explains the theological underpinnings, ethical framework, and social values that guide Muslims. The author strives to foster empathy and knowledge by explaining the "why" behind Islamic practices and beliefs. It's designed to bridge cultural and religious divides through education.

4. The Light of Islam: A Beginner's Guide

This book is crafted as a friendly and guiding introduction for newcomers to Islam. It breaks down complex topics into easily digestible sections, covering topics such as the nature of God, the role of prophets, and the importance of compassion. The narrative style aims to be engaging and reassuring for those unfamiliar with Islamic concepts. It offers a gentle path to learning about Islam's teachings.

5. No God but Allah: Understanding the Islamic Foundation

This book specifically focuses on the foundational concept of Tawhid (the oneness of God) in Islam. It explores how this central belief shapes all other aspects of the faith, from worship to daily life. The author elaborates on the attributes of Allah as revealed in the Quran and the Sunnah. It's crucial reading for understanding the very core of Islamic theology.

6. The Rihla: A Journey into Islam

The title suggests a personal and experiential journey into learning about Islam. This book likely walks the reader through various facets of Islamic life and thought, perhaps through narrative or thematic exploration. It aims to provide a deeper, more engaging understanding than a purely academic approach might. Readers can expect to discover the richness and diversity within Islam.

7. Islam: An Historical Introduction

This title points to an introduction that emphasizes the historical development and evolution of Islam. It traces the religion's emergence from its Arabian roots, its expansion across continents, and its impact on civilizations. The book likely discusses key historical figures and events that shaped the Muslim world. Understanding Islam's history is vital for comprehending its present.

8. The Heart of Islam: Companion for the New Muslim

Tailored for individuals newly embracing Islam, this book serves as a supportive guide. It addresses the practical and spiritual aspects of transitioning into Muslim life, offering counsel on prayer, fasting, and community engagement. The book provides encouragement and clarity for navigating the initial stages of practicing Islam. It's a compassionate resource for those embarking on their Islamic journey.

9. _An Introduction to the Quran: The Divine Word of Islam_

This book focuses specifically on the Quran, Islam's holy book. It introduces its structure, themes, and the methodology for its study and interpretation. The author explains the Quran's significance as the literal word of God in Islam. Understanding the Quran is fundamental to comprehending Islamic teachings and practices.

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