

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO ISLAM

Attention fuels local questions about one of the world's largest religions

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Local Muslims cringe when their peace-promoting faith is linked to terrorism, including the Sept. 11 attacks.

"This atrocity, this crime, is really against the basic tenet of Islam," said Dirar Ahmad, who works for the state Department of Transportation and is a leader at the Islamic Center in South Charleston.

Islam is based on principles of peace, love and harmony, he said.

Even in times of war, Islam's prophet Muhammad told military commanders to leave nonsoldiers - women, children and old people - alone, Ahmad said. "He told them: Do not cut down the trees, do not destroy the houses of worship, do not spoil the wells," Ahmad said.

Recent immigrants and people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent have worried for their safety, fearing angry neighbors and colleagues would vent their anger toward them.

Locally, however, many neighbors have reacted with kindness and prayers, Ahmad said.

The teachers and principal have looked out for his son at school, and people of other faiths have sent notes and prayers to their neighbors and colleagues.

Last Saturday, Christians, Jews and others joined Muslims for a candlelight vigil. "I was in tears Saturday night," Ahmad said.

"I really, truly believe we live in the greatest country in the world. That's why we're here," he said.

Basic facts about Islam

Recent events have pushed questions about Islam to the front of American minds. Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the world and is often misunderstood.

No single newspaper page could convey everything about a faith as old, as widespread and as diverse as Islam. For people who are trying to understand, here are some facts to get started:

- The word Islam is Arabic and means many things, including "commitment to submit and surrender to God so that one could live in peace." Some followers say simply "peace."
- A person who follows Islam is called Muslim, or "one who submits to God's teachings and commandments which leads to peace."
- An Islamic religious leader or teacher is called an imam. In American communities, the imam often leads prayers on Fridays and serves as administrator of the mosque.
- Islam's holy text is called the Koran. It was originally written in Arabic, a language still spoken and read by millions of people today.
- Muhammad, an Arabian businessman in the early 600s, is credited with starting the religion. Muslims say he is God's last prophet. His spoken or written name is usually followed by the words "Peace be upon him."
- Muslims say that Islam existed from the beginning of time. Adam was the first Muslim, although the words and methods of the faith were not revealed until Muhammad's time.
- Historians believe Muhammad was born around 570 in Mecca, in what is now western Saudi Arabia. Muhammad married a widow named Khadija and looked after her trading business. He began to have

revelations, possibly around age 40. Encouraged by his wife and others, Muhammad shared what was revealed to him. His messages were welcomed as messages from God. Muhammad was respected as a prophet, similar to the way some Jews regarded Jesus as a prophet 600 years earlier. Those Jews became the first Christians. Muhammad's believers became the first Muslims.

Followers wrote down what he told them in what came to be the Koran. It was refined somewhat after Muhammad's death. Most scholars think the Koran reached its final form around the year 650.

- Islam is not considered a new teaching, separate from other world religions, according to believers. Islam reaffirms ancient teachings, which include the belief in one God who rules the universe; revelations, teachings, commandments and writings revealed by God through angels in heaven and prophets on earth; and a coming day of judgment, when God will reward and punish people based on how they have obeyed.
- Islam acknowledges earlier men as messengers of God, including figures prominent in Judaism and Christianity, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
- Muslims also have a sacred law, called the Shari'ah. It tells people not only how to worship, but also how to carry out what others sometimes call the secular parts of life. Done properly, other functions in life become acts of worship.
- Muslims use a calendar that is different from what most of the United States and other countries use for business purposes. In Islam, days and months are reckoned based on the moon. This causes the months to be different from the common calendar.

Muslims begin counting years from the time Muhammad and his community left Mecca to live in what is now Medina. That year corresponds to the year 622 on the common calendar used in the United States.

- After Muhammad's death, Islam broke into two main groups. The larger group, the Sunnite, believed Muhammad's contemporaries were legitimate successors to lead the community. They account for about 80 percent of Muslims today. Another group, the Shi'a, did not recognize the first three successors, who were not related to Muhammad. They recognized the fourth successor Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law. There are also other differences, other groups and subdivisions. In the eighth and ninth centuries, a mystical version called Sufism developed and helped to spread Islam to Africa and Asia.
- The Nation of Islam is a different movement started in the United States by blacks fighting for civil rights. The basic beliefs are the same, but followers of the Nation of Islam teach that Elijah Muhammad, an American man born in 1897, was also a prophet of God. Islamic groups have supported or distanced themselves from this movement at various times.

The Pillars of Islam

Muslims keep five basic commandments, called the Pillars of Islam:

1. They declare their belief in no god but God, or Allah, and that Muhammad is his prophet. The declaration is called "Shahada."
2. They offer prayer five times a day to remind themselves that remembering God is the greatest virtue. Prayer is called "salat."
3. They fast during the 29th and 30th days of the Islamic month of Ramadan. This year, Ramadan falls from Nov. 17 to Dec. 17. Fasting, called "sawm," also applies to drinking, smoking and marital intercourse. It reminds believers of their dependence on God and of the millions of people who are less fortunate.
4. They give an annual fixed amount of personal wealth to help others. This purification of wealth or "zakat" disciplines the soul against greed and reminds people that they enjoy God's bounty only through his mercy.
5. At least once in a lifetime, Muslims who are able are expected to make a pilgrimage or hajj to Mecca. Members from around the world join for prescribed acts of worship at the Holy House of the Ka'ba. According to the Koran, this house was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. They also go to Mount Arafat, where they remember Adam and the pure and original way of life.