

# Islam

## in the Welcoming Workplace

### A guide for inclusive relationships.

Worldwide about 23% of all people are Muslim. It is considered the fastest growing of the major religions and it may be one of the most misunderstood.

This guide is a short overview of a fascinating religion, designed to give readers information to help foster a welcoming and respectful workplace. Please remember that Muslims are diverse, varying by sect, culture, level of adherence, and personal interpretation. If you are curious about whether this information applies to your Muslim colleagues, we invite you to start a conversation.



Encounter World Religions can help you learn more about religious literacy and how to create a welcoming workplace.



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# Islam - The Basics

To create a welcoming workplace it helps to know a bit about each other. Knowing the basics about religion can increase our comfort with one another and makes us feel more connected. Islam is built upon 5 key pillars or practices that almost all Muslims recognize:

**Shahada** is the declaration of faith. Muslims proclaim out loud that "there is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger." Shia Muslims add "and Ali is the friend of God."

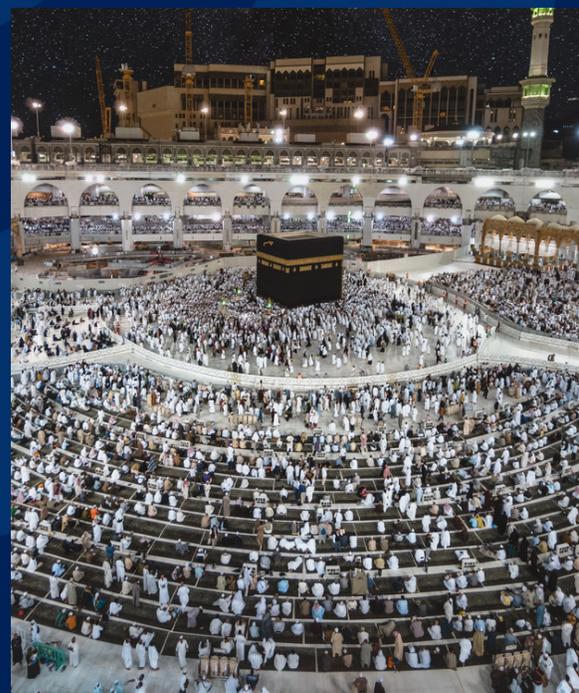


**Salat** is the prayer which Muslims do 5 times each day while facing Mecca. Devotees submit to God by touching their head to the ground. Each prayer takes just a few minutes. Devotees perform ablutions (washing hands, feet and face) before prayer although not always for every prayer since an earlier ablution sometimes suffices. Shia Muslims sometimes group the prayers, doing all 5 prayers in just three time slots by doing two back-to-back.

**Zakat** which translates to charity requires Muslims to give 2.5% of one's wealth (not income) to the needy.

**Sawm** refers to the fast of Ramadan where one does not eat, drink or have sex during daylight hours for one month. Ramadan is also a time when Muslims try to reform the self by refraining from gossip, being kinder to others and turning to God.

**Hajj** is a pilgrimage to Mecca that is obligatory to do once in your life (health and wealth permitting). Pilgrims don special garments that erase class distinctions.



# Greetings and Holidays

The two most significant holidays are **Eid al-Adha** which marks the end of the hajj and **Eid al-Fitr** which indicates the end of Ramadan. Both include special prayers at the mosque, gathering with family and community, exchanging food and gifts, and donating to the poor.

**Eid Mubarak** (Blessed Eid) is the common greeting on both days, Staff may request these days off and in some sects or cultures, additional days are also celebrated. The Islamic calendar is lunar, shifting about 10 days on the Western calendar every year, meaning holidays have no fixed Western dates.

## Cultural Awareness

**Physical Contact:** Some Muslims refrain from physical contact across gender lines, such as hugging or shaking hands. You can always reciprocate (i.e. shake a hand that is offered) but if you're initiating the contact and are unsure, just ask.

**Prayer times and spaces:** Muslims pray five times daily, two of which often fall during the typical workday. To pray, employees may need time, a private place, and an opportunity to do ablutions (washing) ahead of time. Prayer takes about 10 minutes.

**Food:** Many Muslims avoid consuming alcohol, eating pork or pork derivatives (e.g. gelatin), and any meat that is not halal (meaning ritually slaughtered). Providing halal options allows Muslim employees to be included in eating, which is a deeply social activity. Food is a way humans include (or exclude) others so think about how to ensure everyone can eat together.



In addition, many **Muslims fast during Ramadan**. During this month, it's respectful to avoid scheduling lunch meetings or any gatherings where food will be set in front of staff or where fasting employees must watch others eat. Where possible, scheduling meetings in the morning or early afternoon is also helpful as energy wanes later in the day.

# 5 Interesting Facts about Islam

**Very few Muslims are Arabs** (maybe 15%) and most don't speak Arabic (but may know a little for prayers).

The **Muslim prayer** has a kind of intimacy in that people stand right next to one another, shoulder to shoulder, with no buffer space. You simply line up in whatever order you arrived. **It fosters a sense of cohesion among the "ummah" or community during prayer.**



When Muslims go to the hajj they wear **special garments** and are later buried in those same garments when they die. They are laid in the tomb, facing Mecca, dressed as a pilgrim.



**Ramadan is famous for fasting but it is also very communal.** Devotees share a sense of struggling together through an ordeal and then end the fast every evening with family and often with the larger community at the iftar meal. Ramadan ends with Eid-al-Fitr, a day of feasting and the second biggest sacred day in Islam. The day often creates a sense of having been renewed through personal sacrifice.

**Mosques around the world have two types of décor,** based on two types of revelations. First is **calligraphy** which records the writings from the Qur'an, one of the revelations from God. The second décor is **geometric patterns** to reflect the second revelation, which is creation itself. Creation is also a revelation and is orderly and hence the mathematics of geometric patterns reflects this orderliness.



# Discovering Our Misconceptions

Sometimes what we think we know isn't accurate. We're all susceptible to misconceptions and it is good practice to check our assumptions.

## **Misconception: Muslims pray facing the east.**

Muslims actually pray **facing Mecca**, which is in Saudi Arabia. In North America, you face east. In South Africa, you would face north, west from India and south from Norway. If you're in Mecca itself? You face the kaaba, the sacred building and central place of worship for Muslims.

## **Misconception: Muslims' beliefs about being gay are...**

The catch is **there is no single answer**. Some Muslims disapprove of gay relations, some are accepting, and some are themselves gay. Muslims, Hindus, atheists all have varied views on feminism, the environment and politics. Every group, every community is internally diverse.

Beware of what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the "Danger of a Single Story."

**No community is a monolith.**

**Misconception: Women wear headscarves to submit to their husbands.** Some Muslim women wear the **hijab**, doing so in submission to Allah. But views vary. Some follow it as God's command, some are less observant, and some believe it has human origins. While some governments forcibly impose dress codes, the Qur'an says "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and so **many Muslims believe it should be a woman's decision**.

## **Misconception: Islam seems to be a violent religion.**

Every religion has violence and goodness in its history. Broken societies produce more violence and Muslim extremists – the Taliban, ISIS, suicide bombers – are all recent inventions in societies that suffered colonialism.

Less often heard: **Muslims are likely the most victimized religious group** from China's Uyghurs to Myanmar's Rohingyas. Even Muslim extremist groups' number one victim is ordinary Muslim families trying to stay safe.

**Misconception: Shariah Law is what they have in Afghanistan.** There is no singular thing called "shariah" or "shariah law." It's like saying "Western law" – do you mean Dutch or Canadian? City bylaws or federal statutes? American laws in 1840 or 2020? The versions that receive the most media attention (e.g. such as in Afghanistan) are considered extremist corruptions by many Muslims and are also very new and inconsistent with how shariah was traditionally practiced.

# Want to learn more?



For more than 20 years Encounter World Religions has provided religious literacy and inclusion programs as well as consulting services to help businesses, organizations and institutions create welcoming workplaces.

Our popular talks, **The Religiously Literate Leader**, and **Religious Literacy and the Welcoming Workplace** are excellent foundations for building religious literacy for your Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging initiatives. Our **Discovering Identities** series invites deeper, focused exploration of the world's major religions.

This guide is a small taste of what is covered in our talk on Islam.

We also offer engaging in-person and virtual programming for individuals who want to dig a little deeper.

Our **Discovery Week**, held in Toronto each summer, is an entertaining and enlightening tour of 11 religions and more than 20 site visits. It's like traveling the world in a week.



**All of Encounter's programs are taught from a non-sectarian perspective and are welcoming to all.**

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We also invite you to connect with us on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.



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