



Upper text: "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to God, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship; And Thy aid do we seek. Show us the straight way; The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace; those whose [portion] Is not wrath; And who go not astray."

The Qur'an, Chapter 1  
 "Fatiha" ("Opening Chapter")

# Islam: FAQs

Written by John L. Esposito

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## Why do we need to know about Islam?

- Islam is the second largest religion in the world, after Christianity, and will soon be the second largest in America.
- Muslims are, and will increasingly be, our neighbors, our colleagues and our fellow citizens.
- Our ignorance about Islam distorts our view of one-fifth of the world's population and causes us to misinterpret important events and phenomena in the US and abroad.
- Peace and safety cannot be achieved in ignorance, but can be promoted through knowledge and the understanding that grows from knowledge.

## Are all Muslims the same?

There is one divinely revealed and mandated Islam, but there are many human *interpretations* of Islam. There are Sunni and Shii Muslims, representing 85 percent and 15 percent of the world's Muslims, respectively. Within these two major branches are diverse schools of theology and law; in addition, Islam has a rich mystical tradition. The basic unity of Islamic belief and practice expresses itself in diverse ways within many different cultures around the world.

## What do Muslims believe?

Like Jews and Christians, Muslims are monotheists. They believe in one God, the creator, sustainer, ruler and judge of the universe. Muslims believe in prophets—not just the Prophet Muhammad, but also the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, including Abraham and Moses, and of the New Testament, Jesus and John the Baptist. They also believe in angels, heaven, hell and the Day of Judgment. Islam teaches that God's revelation was received in the Torah, the New Testament and the Qur'an. Thus, Muslims view Jews and Christians as "people of the book," communities of believers who received revelations through prophets from God in the form of scriptures or revealed books.

As Christians view their revelation as both fulfilling and completing the revelation of the Old Testament, Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad received his revelations from God, through the angel Gabriel, to correct human error that had made its way into the scriptures and belief systems of Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, Muslims believe, Islam is not a new religion with a new scripture; rather, Islam is the oldest religion, because it represents the original as well as the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

## How is Islam similar to Christianity and Judaism?

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in contrast to Hinduism and Buddhism, are all monotheistic faiths that worship the God of Adam, Abraham and Moses—creator, sustainer and lord of the universe. All stress moral responsibility and accountability, Judgment Day and eternal reward and punishment.

All three faiths emphasize their special covenant with God, Judaism through Moses, Christianity through Jesus and Islam through Muhammad. Christianity accepts God's covenant with and revelation to the Jews but traditionally has seen itself as superseding Judaism with the coming of Jesus. So, too, Islam and Muslims recognize Judaism and Christianity, their Biblical prophets (among them Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus) and their revelations (the Torah and New Testament).

Peace is central to all three faiths, which use similar greetings: *shalom aleichem* in Judaism, *pax vobiscum* in Christianity and *salaam alaikum* in Islam. All three phrases mean "peace be with you." Yet leaders of each religion—Joshua and King David, Constantine and Richard the Lion-Hearted, Muhammad and Saladin—have engaged in holy wars to spread or defend their beliefs.

## Where do most Muslims live?

Muslims are the majority in 56 countries worldwide, including Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq and Nigeria. In addition, significant Muslim populations can be found in India, China, the Central Asian republics and Russia, as well as Europe and America, where Islam is the second- and third-largest religion, respectively. The majority of Muslims are *not* Arab—in fact, only 20 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims originate from Arab countries. The largest Muslim populations are in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.







## Who are the Muslims in America?

Although estimates vary considerably, it is safe to say that there are at least six million Muslims in America today, making Islam the third-largest religion in the country, after Christianity and Judaism. Muslims have been present in America since the time of Columbus. Moriscos (Spanish Muslims forced to hide their faith) migrated to both Spanish and Portuguese settlements in America. In addition, between 14 and 20 percent of the African slaves brought to America from the 16th to the 19th century were Muslim, although they were forced to convert to Christianity. Other Muslims, particularly Indians and Arabs, also immigrated as free persons during this period and were able to maintain their spiritual, cultural and social identity.

The numbers of Muslims in America increased in the late 19th century with the arrival of significant numbers of immigrants from Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Many settled in the Midwest and Canada, found blue-collar jobs and assimilated into American society. After World War II, significant numbers of immigrants from Palestine and elites from the Middle East and South Asia came to America. In recent decades, many students from the Muslim world have come

to study, and many well-educated professionals and intellectuals have come from South and Southeast Asia as well as from the Middle East for political and economic reasons. Many Muslim immigrants have worked hard to sustain their Islamic identity and pass it down to their children, and to establish institutions and community structures—including mosques, Islamic centers, Islamic schools, Islamic publication organizations, interest-free financial institutions and charitable organizations—to support these goals.

About two-thirds of America’s Muslims today are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. The other third is made up of African-American and other converts to Islam. The largest Muslim communities in the United States are in Boston, New York, Detroit, Dearborn, Toledo, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles/Orange County.

## What role does Muhammad play in Muslim life?

During his lifetime and since, Muhammad has been the model for Muslims to follow as they strive to do God’s will. In contrast to what is often a spiritualized Christian view of Jesus, Muslims look upon and love Muhammad as an entirely human figure—but one who had great spiritual as well as political insight and was guided by God. In turn, they look to his example for guidance in all aspects of life: how to treat friends as well as enemies, what to eat and drink, when to wash or pray, how to divide an inheritance, how to make love and war. Muslims’ observations or remembrances of what the Prophet said and did were passed on orally and in writing. These detailed records of Muhammad’s actions, interactions, judgments, decisions and *dicta* provide guidance for Muslims as to what is required to follow the word of God.

As Christians view their revelation as both fulfilling and completing the revelation of the Old Testament, Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad received his revelations to correct human error that had made its way into the scriptures and belief systems of Judaism and Christianity.

## What is Islamic law?

The word *islam* means “surrender [to the will of God],” and the will of God is articulated in Islamic law, whose purpose is to regulate two types of interactions: those between human

beings and God—that is, worship—and those among human beings—that is, social transactions. Throughout history, Islamic law has remained central to Muslim identity and practice, for it constitutes the ideal social blueprint for the believer and provides a common code of behavior for all Muslim societies.

In addition to the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* (example) of Muhammad, Sunni Muslims recognize two other official sources to guide the

development of Islamic law: comparative analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) and consensus (*ijma*). Shii Muslims accept the Qur’an and Sunnah as well as their own collections of the traditions of Ali and other imams.

The Qur’anic texts provide moral directives, laying out what Muslims should aspire to as individuals and achieve as a community. The *Sunnah* of Muhammad, recorded in hundreds of thousands of individual narratives describing the Prophet’s private and public life and his individual and communal activities, illustrates Islamic faith in practice, and supplements and explains Qur’anic principles. *Qiyas* is used





## Is there a difference between Muslims and Black Muslims?

African-American Islam emerged in the early 20th century when a number of black Americans converted to Islam, the religion they believed was part of their original African identity. They rejected Christianity as the religion of white supremacy and oppression; by contrast, Islam offered a brotherhood of believers, the *ummah*, which transcended race and ethnicity.

In the early 1930's, Wallace D. Fard Muhammad drew on the Qur'an and the Bible to preach a message of black liberation in the ghettos of Chicago. He taught withdrawal from white society, rejected the domination of "blue-eyed devils" and emphasized the "religion of the Black Man" and the "Nation of Islam."

Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934. Elijah Muhammad took over and built the Nation of Islam into an effective national movement whose members became known as "Black Muslims." He denounced white society's political and economic oppression of blacks and the

resulting self-hatred, poverty and dependency. By the 1970's the Nation of Islam had more than 100,000 members.

A number of basic beliefs of the Black Muslim movement differed significantly from mainstream Islam. Elijah Muhammad announced that Wallace D. Fard was God and that Elijah Muhammad, not the Prophet Muhammad, was the last messenger of God. The Nation taught black supremacy and black separatism, not Islam's brotherhood of all believers; in addition, the Nation did not follow the Five Pillars of Islam or major Muslim rituals.

A key individual who rose through the ranks of the Nation of Islam to national prominence was Malcolm X, who accepted the teaching of the Nation of Islam while in prison. Drawn by Elijah Muhammad's black nationalism, denunciation of white racism and promotion of self-help, Malcolm Little became Malcolm X: ex-smoker, ex-drinker, ex-Christian and ex-slave. A gifted, charismatic speaker, he was the most visible and prominent spokesperson for Elijah Muhammad for some years.

In 1964 Malcolm X undertook the pilgrimage to Makkah. He was deeply affected by what he experienced there—the equality of all believers regardless of race, tribe or nation. Malcolm returned from the pilgrimage as El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a Muslim rather than a Black Muslim, and changed his position on black nationalism. On February 21, 1965 he was assassinated; two members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of the murder.

Besides Malcolm X, Wallace D. Muhammad, son of Elijah

Muhammad, and his brother Akbar Muhammad, a distinguished scholar of Islam who had studied in Egypt and Scotland, questioned and challenged some of their father's teachings and strategy. Both sons were excommunicated. Yet, toward the end of his life, Elijah Muhammad also made the pilgrimage to Makkah and also began to modify some of his teachings. By the time he died in 1975, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation were publicly acknowledged for their constructive contributions to America's inner-city communities.

When Wallace D. Muhammad succeeded his father, he implemented reforms to conform to the teachings of orthodox Sunni Islam. He too made the pilgrimage to Makkah and encouraged his followers to study Arabic in order to better understand Islam. The Nation observed the Five Pillars of Islam in unity with the worldwide Islamic community to which it now belonged. Black separatist doctrines were dropped and the Nation began to participate in the American political process. In the 1980's, Wallace changed his own name to Warith Deen Muhammad and that of the Nation of Islam to the American Muslim Mission, integrating it with the American Muslim community as well as with American society as a whole and the global Islamic community.

While a majority followed Warith Deen Muhammad, media coverage of the Black Muslim movement often focused on the minority led by Louis Farrakhan, who bitterly rejected the changes instituted by both Malcolm X and Warith Deen Muhammad, maintaining that only he and his followers had remained faithful to the original message and mission of Elijah Muhammad.

Farrakhan retained the leadership of the Nation of Islam, as well as its black-nationalist and separatist doctrines. In recent years, however, he has moved closer to orthodox Islam.



to determine parallels between similar situations or principles when no clear guidance is found in the Qur'an or *Sunnah*. The fourth source of law, *ijma*, or consensus, originated from Muhammad's reported saying, "My nation will never agree on an error." This came to mean that consensus among religious scholars could determine the permissibility of an action.

Differences exist between the major Islamic schools of law that reflect the different geographical, social, historical and cultural contexts in which the various jurists were writing. In the modern world, Islamic law faces the challenge of distinguishing the divine prescriptions and eternal principles of the Qur'an from regulations arising from human interpretations in response to specific historical situations.







## Are Sufis Muslims?

**Y**es. Sufis belong to the mystical tradition of Islam known as Sufism. The name is derived from the Arabic word *suf*, meaning “wool,” in reference to the coarse woolen garments worn by the first Sufis. Like mystical movements in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, the Sufi path seeks to discipline the mind and body in order to experience directly the presence of God. Sufism is unlike Christian mysticism in that Sufis view their struggle to find God as one which takes place in the world, as opposed to the Christian monastic tradition of withdrawing from the world in order to find God.

Sufis set as their highest priority the individual spiritual effort of self-sacrifice and discipline in a struggle within oneself against greed, laziness and ego. This struggle is carried out by devoting oneself completely to fulfilling God’s will, studying and meditating on the Qur’an and the Sunnah, performing religious duties, focusing on the centrality of God and the Last Judgment, denying material desires that could distract one from God and carrying out good works.

Sufism began as a seventh-century reform movement in response to the growing materialism and wealth of Muslim society that accompanied the expansion and growing power of the Islamic empire. By following the example of Muhammad in working tirelessly in the world to create the ideal Islamic society, Sufis have often played an important role in the political life of Muslims. For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries, Sufi brotherhoods led Islamic revivalist movements in Sudan, Nigeria and Libya that regenerated society, created Islamic states and fought off colonial powers. The Sufi orders also played an important role in the spread of Islam through missionary work.

Sufism remains a strong spiritual presence and force in Muslim societies today.

## Why does Islam separate men and women?

**M**any, though not all, Muslim societies practice some gender segregation, the separation of men and women in public spaces. Thus, in many mosques men and women have separate areas for prayer or are separated by a screen or curtain, and unmarried men do not mix with unmarried women except in very specific contexts, such as a meeting between two potential spouses that occurs in the presence of a chaperone.

The practice of separation has both religious and cultural origins. Muhammad’s wives were told to keep themselves apart from society. In the Qur’an (Chapter 33 Verses 32–33) we see, “O wives of the Prophet! You are not like any of the other women. If you fear God, do not be complaisant in speech so that one in whose heart is a sickness may covet you, but speak honorably. Stay quietly in your homes and do not display your finery as the pagans of old did.” Verse 53 tells

Muslim men, “And when you ask (his wives) for anything you want, ask them from before a screen. That makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs.”

The practice of segregation is also tied to the concept of women as a source of sexual temptation for men. Social interaction between unrelated men and women is regarded as potentially leading to immoral sexual activity. Because modesty and chastity are prized virtues in Islam, some Muslims therefore believe that unrelated men and women should have no contact with each other.

Opinions today vary about the necessity of separation of the sexes. Many Muslims continue to hold fast to the belief that women are the culture-bearers of Islam, as well as the source of male honor, but they also believe that the requirements of modesty can be met through appropriate dress and the limitation of interaction with unrelated males.

## Why don’t Muslims practice separation of church and state?

**W**hile Christians believe in rendering unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, Muslims believe that their primary act of faith is to strive to implement God’s will in both their private and public lives, calling all to worship God, promoting what is good and prohibiting what is evil. In their view, religion cannot be separated from social and political life because religion informs every action that a person takes.

The Qur’an proclaims that, like Jews and Christians before them, Muslims have been called into a covenant relationship with God, making them a community of believers who must serve as an example to other nations (Chapter 2 Verse 143) by creating a moral social

order. The Qur’an states, “You are the best community evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” (3:110).

In the ideal Islamic state, the political authority carries out the divine message. Such a state is a nomocracy, a community governed by God’s law, and not a theocracy or autocracy that gives power to the clergy or ruler. It should provide security and order so that Muslims can carry out their religious duties. Legal processes in a truly Islamic state implement rules and judgments from the *Shariah*, rather than creating new legislation.





## Does the Qur'an condone terrorism?

The Qur'an does not advocate or condone terrorism. Islam, like all world religions, neither supports nor requires the illegitimate use of violence or acts of terrorism. Islam does permit, and at times requires, Muslims to defend themselves, their families, their religion and their community from aggression.

The earliest Qur'anic verses dealing with the right to engage in a defensive *jihad*, or struggle, were revealed shortly after the emigration of Muhammad and his followers to Madinah in flight from their persecution in Makkah. At a time when they were forced to fight for their lives, Muhammad is told: "Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God'" (Chapter 22 Verse 39). The defensive nature of *jihad* is clearly emphasized in 2:190: "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors."

The Qur'an also provided detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of wars: who is to fight and who is exempted (48:17, 9:91), when hostilities must cease (2:192) and how prisoners should be treated (47:4). Most important, passages such as Chapter 2 Verse 294 emphasized that the response to violence and aggression must be proportionate.

However, Qur'anic verses also underscore that peace, not violence and warfare, is the norm. Permission to fight the enemy is balanced by a strong mandate for making peace: "If your enemy inclines toward peace, then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God" (8:61), and "Had God wished, He would have made them dominate you, and so, if they leave you alone and do not fight you and offer you peace, then God allows you no way against them" (4:90). From the earliest times, it is forbidden in Islam to kill noncombatants.

But what of those verses, sometimes referred to as the "sword verses," that call for killing unbelievers, such as "When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush" (9:5)? This is one of a number of Qur'anic verses that are selectively cited to demonstrate the supposedly violent nature of Islam and its scripture. In fact, however, the passage above is followed and qualified by, "But if they repent and fulfill their devotional obligations and pay the *zakat*, then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind" (9:5). The same is true of another often quoted verse: "Fight those who believe not in God nor in the Last Day, Nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and His Apostle, Nor hold the religion of truth (even if they are) of the People of the Book," which is often cited without the line that follows, "until they pay the tax with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29).

## Is Islam compatible with democracy?

In pre-modern times all the world's religions supported monarchies and feudal societies and then moved to accommodate modern forms of democracy. Similarly, Muslims today are debating the relationship of Islam to democracy. While most wish for greater political participation, government accountability, freedoms and human rights, there are many different ways to achieve these goals.

There are various reactions to democratization in the Muslim world. Some argue that Islam has its own mechanisms and institutions that do not include democracy. Others believe that democracy can only be fully realized if Muslim societies restrict religion to private life.

Still others contend that Islam is fully capable of accommodating and supporting democracy. They argue that traditional Islamic concepts like consultation (*shura*) between ruler and ruled, community consensus (*ijma*), public interest (*maslaha*) and interpretation (*ijtihad*) can support parliamentary forms of government.

Many believe that, just as the modern democracies of America and Europe accommodate diverse relationships with religion, Muslims too can develop their own varieties of democratic states that are responsive to indigenous values.

## What does Islam say about poverty and social justice?

The social order prescribed by the Qur'an and Sunnah emphasizes the themes of social justice, the responsibility of all Muslims—particularly the wealthy—to care for the less fortunate and oppressed, and the right and responsibility of the

Muslim community to defend itself from aggression. Women, orphans and the poor enjoy special protection in the Qur'an. Redistribution of wealth is prescribed through the requirement that Muslims pay *zakat*, or alms tax, of 2½ percent of their total wealth. Usury, defined as the collection of interest in any amount,

is forbidden because it serves as a means of exploiting the poor. False contracts were also denounced. The new social order called for by the Qur'an derived from the principle that the purpose of all actions was to fulfill God's will, rather than to follow one's own desires or those of the tribe.







## Why do Muslims say they are descended from Abraham?

Both the Qur'an and the Old Testament tell the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. While some Jews and Christians are descended from Abraham and his wife Sarah through their son Isaac, certain Arab Muslims trace their lineage back to Ismail, Abraham's first-born son by his Egyptian servant, Hagar. In a religious rather than genealogical sense, Muslims thus see themselves, as well as Jews and Christians, as "children of Abraham."

## How did Islam originate?

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam originated in the Middle East, where monotheism had flourished for many centuries. In the sixth century of our era, Makkah was emerging as a new commercial center with massive new wealth but also with a growing division between rich and poor that challenged the traditional system of Arab tribal values and social security. This was the time and the social environment in which the Prophet Muhammad received his divine revelation and called all to return to the worship of the one God and to a socially just society. Muhammad is thus not considered the founder of a new religion but rather a religious reformer.

The revelations Muhammad received emphasized social justice, corrected distortions of God's revelations in Judaism and Christianity, and warned that many had strayed. The revelations called on all to return to what the Qur'an refers to as the "straight path" of Islam, the path of God, which was being revealed one final time through Muhammad, the last or "seal" of the prophets.

## How do Muslims pray?

Five times each day, hundreds of millions of Muslims face Makkah to pray—at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening. These five obligatory prayers are performed in Arabic, regardless of the native tongue of the worshiper. Each part of the prayer has its function within this daily ritual; the whole is designed to combine meditation, devotion, moral elevation and physical exercise. Prayers can be performed individually or in congregation.

Preparing to pray, Muslims perform a ritual ablution, or cleansing, to ensure that they are in a state of spiritual and physical purity. First, they cleanse their minds and hearts of worldly thoughts and concerns, concentrating on God and the blessings he has given them; second, they wash hands, face and feet and their arms up to the elbow, and then say, "I bear witness that there is no god but God; He has no partner; and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger." This purification process is as spiritual as it is physical, as can be seen in the fact that the worshiper is permitted to use sand symbolically if water is not available. The objective is to enter the presence of God with a clean mind and body.

Worshippers begin by raising their hands and proclaiming God's greatness ("Allahu akbar!"—"God is most great!"); then, folding their hands over stomach or chest and standing upright, they recite what has been described as the essential message of the Qur'an, the opening discourse of Chapter 1 Verses 1 through 7, which is translated on page 21.

After reciting another, individually chosen, verse from the Qur'an, Muslims bow and proclaim "Glory to God in the Highest" three times; returning to the upright position, they say, "God hears the one who praises Him," and "Our Lord, all praise belongs to you!"

The next phase of worship is commonly called "prostration" in English, although it does not involve lying down at full length. Muslims first repeat "Allahu akbar!" Then they fall to their knees, placing their hands flat on the ground and bringing their foreheads down between their hands to touch the ground. While in this position, Muslims recite three times: "Glory to the Lord Most High!" After this, they stand up and repeat the entire cycle of prayer.

Prayer also includes sitting on the heels and reciting a formula known as "the witnessing," because it contains the declaration of Muslim faith: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." The witnessing is followed by asking God's blessings for the first and last of God's prophets, Abraham and Muhammad.

Prayer ends with an invocation of peace. Worshipers turn their heads right and left and say, "May the peace, mercy and blessings of God be upon you." Although these words are addressed to their fellow believers sitting beside them, Muslims also believe that they are addressing their own guardian angels,

who remain over their shoulders as they pray. After completing the obligatory prayers, Muslims can privately petition God regarding their individual needs.





## Are Women Second-Class Citizens in Islam?

The status of women in Muslim countries has long been looked to as evidence of “Islam’s” oppression of women in matters ranging from the freedom to dress as they please to legal rights in divorce. The true picture of women in Islam is far more complex.

The Qur’an declares that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; man and woman were created to be equal parts of a pair (Chapter 41 Verse 49). The Qur’an describes the relationship between men and women as one of “love and mercy” (30:21), so that men and women are to serve as “members of one another (3:195), as “protectors, one of another” (9:71). They are to be like each other’s garment (2:187).

Men and women are equally responsible for adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam. Chapter 9 Verses 71–72 states, “The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another; they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil; they observe regular prayers, pay *zakat* and obey God and His Messenger. On them will God pour His mercy: for God is exalted in Power, Wise. God has promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein.” This verse draws added significance from the fact that it was the last Qur’an verse to be revealed that addressed relations between men and women. Some scholars argue, on the basis of both content and chronology, that this verse outlines the ideal vision of that relationship in Islam—one of equality and mutuality.

Women have been assigned second-class status in Muslim society

based upon a misinterpretation of the Qur’an’s Chapter 4 Verse 34, which says “Men are the guardians of women, (on the basis) that God has granted some of them merits greater than others and (on the basis) that they spend of their property (for the support of women).” However, contemporary scholars have noted that the “guardianship” referred to in this verse is based upon men’s socioeconomic responsibilities for women. It does not say women are incapable of managing their own affairs, controlling themselves or being leaders, nor does it say that all men are superior to, preferred to or better than all women.

Another justification of second-class status for women may have been derived from the Qur’anic stipulation (2:282) that two female witnesses are equal to one male witness. If one female witness errs, the other can remind her of the truth. Over time, this was interpreted by male scholars to mean that a woman’s testimony should always be given half the weight of a man’s. Contemporary scholars point out that the verse specifies witnessing in cases of a written transaction, contract or court case. At the time the Qur’an was revealed, most women were not active in business and finance, and a woman’s expertise in these fields was likely to have been less than a man’s.

Another area in which gender discrimination has been apparent historically is in the matter of divorce. The Qur’an, however, guarantees women equality with respect to the right of divorce. The Qur’an also restricts the

practice of polygamy. Chapter 4 Verse 3 commands, “Then marry such of the women as appeal to you, two, three or four; but if you fear that you cannot be equitable, then only one.” A corollary verse, 4:129, states, “You will never be able to treat wives equitably, even if you are bent on doing that.” Contemporary interpreters have argued that these two verses together prohibit polygamy and that the true Qur’anic ideal is monogamy.

The 20th century has brought numerous significant reforms for women’s rights in both the public and the private spheres. In the overwhelming majority of Muslim countries, women have the right to public education, including at the college level. In many countries, they also have the right to work outside the home, vote and hold public office. Particularly notable in recent years have been the reforms in marriage and divorce laws. 🌐



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