

# What do you know about Islam?

Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslim staff and students form a substantial part of the UWS community. Acknowledging and respecting Muslim identities at UWS therefore requires, in part, a better understanding of what Islam and being a Muslim is about.

## About Islam

Islam is both a religion and way of life. The Quran is a record of the exact words revealed by Allah to the Messenger Muhammad and is the major source of faith and practice of Muslims. Other sources of Islam include the Sunnah traditions of Prophet Muhammad. Derived from both the Quran and Sunnah, Sharia refers to the comprehensive Muslim law covering every aspect of individual and collective living.

Muslims are forbidden from forcing their faith onto others as it negates the very idea of free will and choice.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula around 610 CE (AD), covering a period of over 1400 years. Consequently, differences have developed between groups. Islam can be divided into the following principal groups: **Sunni** – mainstream Muslims who rely exclusively on the Quran for guidance

**Shi'ites** – followers of Ali, a successor of Muhammad

**Sufis** – the mystical branch of Islam

**Druzes** – the followers of Darazi

## The Five Pillars of Islam

The framework of Muslim life is comprised of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

### Shahadah (Declaration of Faith)

Shahadah is the declaration of the faithful that there is no God but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger and servant of Allah.

### Salah (Prayer)

There are five prescribed prayers which act as a direct link between the worshipper and God. Prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid afternoon, after sunset and before retiring. Before praying, Muslims go through a routine ritual washing called 'wudu'. Verses in Arabic are quoted from the Quran. All Muslims turn towards the city of Mecca when they pray.

### Zakah (Charity Tax)

Zakah is a portion of one's wealth that must be given to the poor or to other specified causes. The word 'zakah' comes from the verb meaning to purify or cleanse. Zakah is obligatory for all those who are financially able.

### Ramadan (Fasting)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, during this time Muslims must abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to sunset. Fasting is regarded primarily as a method of self purification and understanding the suffering of the poor. Ramadan is the month that the first verses of the Quran were revealed, making it one of the holiest months of the Islamic calendar.



### Hajj (Pilgrimage) to Makkah (Mecca)

The pilgrimage to Mecca is undertaken at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to do so. Pilgrims wear simple garments, eliminating distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before Allah. Considered the 'journey of the heart and soul', the Hajj is the biggest and most important journey in a Muslim's life.

## Islamic Religious Observance

### Place and Style of Worship

The Islamic place of worship is the mosque. However, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere such as home, office, factory and universities. The main part of a mosque is the prayer room which comprises of mats and carpets for use when praying. There are no seats or pews. Before entering the mosque, shoes must be removed and a ritual ablution performed before prayers commence. Men and women pray separately. While there are 5 prescribed prayers each day, midday on Fridays is the most important time for communal prayers usually performed at the mosque.

### Religious Text

The religious text of Islam is Al-Qur'an (also known as the Quran or Koran). According to Islamic learning, this document records God's words sent to Muhammad by divine revelation through the angel Gabriel. The Quran is not the saying and acts of the Prophet Muhammad, rather it is what God said to him and to humanity.

## Islamic Dress Code

Islam requires Muslims to dress in an overall modest and dignified manner. This includes covering certain parts of the body (awrah) when in public. For males, the awrah is from the navel to the knee and for females, every part of the body except the face and hands. Both males and females must wear clothing that is thick enough and loose enough so as not to reveal the person's skin colour or body shape. Colours and style of clothing must be plain enough not to draw attention to oneself.

Hijab – for females, loose clothing together with the headscarf covering the hair, neck and upper chest is known as the 'hijab' and is the most common form of Islamic dress for women.

Burqa – This type of dress covers the face, head and body of the women. The wearing of the 'burqa' is not essential and is not common in Australia.

For Muslim women, modesty in clothing is an expression of their faith and has nothing to do with women's submission to men, furthermore being appreciated for one's intellect and personality as opposed to one's body shape or fashion sense. <http://islam.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://jannah.org/sisters/hijbene.html>

## Dietary Requirements and Restrictions

The term 'halal' refers to food considered lawful according to the Quran. For further information on Islamic dietary requirements, visit the Australian Federation of Islamic Council's website at <http://www.afic.com.au/Halal.htm>

## Significant Religious Dates and Events

The two major religious observances for Muslims are 'Ramadan' and 'Hajj' and their corresponding celebrations are 'Eid al Fitr' and 'Eid al-Adha' respectively.

### Eid al Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast)

This is a feast date commemorating the end of the fast of the month of Ramadan. At Eid al Fitr, people dress in either their best clothes or, if they can afford it, wear new clothes symbolising inner renewal after the fast. Parents, children and friends ask for forgiveness of each other and thank Allah for his blessing.

### Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice)

After the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims worldwide celebrate Eid al-Adha. The festival is celebrated by sacrificing a lamb or other animals, distributing the meat to relatives, friends and the poor. The sacrifice symbolises obedience to Allah and the distribution to others is an expression of generosity.

## Muslims in Australia

- Muslims in Australia began well before European contact with the mainland. As far back as the 17th century, a harmonious relationship existed between Muslim fishermen from South East Asia and Indigenous people from Northern Australia.
- Many of the people from the islands and territories under the British Empire were used as slaves and navigators by the early Australian settlers. Many of these people were Muslims.
- In the 1860s, a large number of Muslim Afghan camel drivers arrived in Australia to work the camel trains. Instrumental in guiding the 'great explorers' through the interior of the continent, many Muslim Afghans eventually settled in The Northern Territory, becoming part of the cameleers.
- The first mosque in Australia (the Adelaide Mosque) was built in South Australia in 1885.
- Muslims have fought for Australia in both world wars.
- Since the Second World War, Muslim migrants along with migrants of many other religions helped build the Australian economy and society.
- In the 1960s, there were a significant number of Muslim migrations from Turkey and Lebanon.
- During the 1990s, a significant number of Muslim refugees and migrants from Africa, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Indonesia and Malaysia settled in Australia.
- Many Muslims in Australia today were born in Australia (over 36%).
- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census, Australia has approximately 340,000 people identified as Muslim, making up approximately 1.7% of the Australian population.



## Respecting Religious and Cultural Diversity at UWS

### UWS Equal Opportunity Policy

It is the policy of the University of Western Sydney to provide equal opportunity for all staff and students regardless of sex, pregnancy, race, marital status, homosexuality, age, family responsibilities, disability, transgender, political conviction or religious belief.

### Multifaith Facilities

Multifaith facilities are available for students and staff on all UWS campuses. For Prayer Room and Meditation Room locations: <http://www.uws.edu.au/students/ods/chaplains>

## References and Further Information

*Australian Federation of Islamic Councils*  
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[http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi\\_guidelines.asp?choice=4](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_guidelines.asp?choice=4)

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*Islamic Holidays*  
<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0760942.html>

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