

Muslim

Islam – literally, ‘peace through surrendering to the will of God’ – is the faith of more than 1.2 billion Muslims around the world, including more than thirty thousand in New Zealand.

New Zealand Muslims have come from many countries – India, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, Fiji, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia, and others. There are now many New Zealand-born Muslims – the children and grandchildren of earlier migrants, as well as indigenous New Zealand Muslims, both Māori and Pākehā. Over the years, Islamic centres and mosques have been established in many New Zealand cities to meet their diverse needs.

When Muslims gather for worship, differences of nationality and ethnicity are unimportant: all are as one within the mosque. Classical Arabic is the language of prayer and of the Islamic holy book, the Qur’an (Koran). However, within the overall framework of Islam, Muslims can and do observe their own cultural practices. For example, while Islam teaches a resigned, dignified acceptance of death, some Muslim cultures are very expressive in the way they mourn, wailing and tearing at their clothes. But where cultural practices conflict with religious practice, they are regarded as *bid’ah* (innovations without basis in the Koran or the tradition of the prophet Muhammad), and religion should take precedence.

There are five pillars that are central to Islam: faith in God, praying five times daily, giving a proportion of one’s wealth in charity, fasting during daylight hours in the month of *Ramadan*, and making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Makkah (Mecca). There are other important laws. For example, Muslims do not drink alcohol or eat pork, and all other meat must be *halal*-killed. They are required to dress modestly. For women, this requirement is interpreted in various ways: some wear Western dress, others cover just their heads, and some cover their faces as well, when outside the home.

Approaching death

In Islam, death is part of God’s plan, and it is a Muslim’s duty to accept it as God’s will. Those mourning a loved one are encouraged to see it as a temporary separation, as everyone will be reunited in the afterlife. Muslims are taught to be prepared to face death at any time: this is one reason why the daily ritual of prayer is so important, as it enables people to regularly atone for their sins and seek God’s forgiveness.

With regard to medical treatment, the supreme sanctity of life takes precedence over everything else. For example, Muslims may take medicine that contains alcohol if they would die otherwise. However, where there is a choice, Muslims would always prefer treatments that do not violate Islamic law.

The daily ritual of prayer remains vitally important when a Muslim is dying, even though the seriously ill are technically exempt. Fellow Muslims helping to care for the dying also need to pray throughout the day: it is appreciated if hospitals can make a prayer mat or private room available. Prayers are said facing Mecca (north-west from New Zealand), and it is essential to wash before praying.

As death approaches, family and friends surround the dying person and recite verses from the Koran that help the person to focus on the afterlife. Although it is not necessary for an imam to be called at this stage, some families may request it. The very last words a Muslim says or hears are often the statements of faith: *la ilaha illallah* ('there is no god but God') and *Muhammadur Rasulullah* ('Muhammad is the messenger of God'). Even if the dying person is no longer able to speak, everyone present recites these words audibly and in Arabic, regardless of their mother tongue.

Sometimes, hospital staff may encounter a dying Muslim patient who is not affiliated with a particular mosque, but would still like fellow Muslims to be present. The local mosque or Islamic centre should be contacted, and members of the community will be happy to visit and support the patient. Among migrant groups, where a dying person may have few extended family members in New Zealand, the wider community willingly takes on their role.

Preparing for the funeral

Preparing the body of a fellow Muslim for burial is an important duty. Muslim communities in New Zealand tend to make all the necessary arrangements themselves, including providing the coffin (which is reused, as most bodies are buried without them) and transporting the body to the cemetery. Often, all that is required from a funeral director is a suitable place for the body to be prepared and to lie before burial.

In death, a person is treated with the same respect they would receive while alive. The body is handled gently and modestly: women are prepared for burial by other Muslim women, and men by Muslim men. The body is washed and perfumed, either at the hospital or at a funeral home. It is then dressed in a plain white shroud comprising three pieces of cloth for men and five for women. The uniformity of the shroud is very significant:

From the earth We have created you
and unto the earth We shall return you
and from it, again,
We will resurrect you once again.

Koran, Taha: 55

Islam believes that a person's wealth or status is of no importance in the next world.

Islam requires that burial takes place as soon as possible after death. In many Islamic countries, this means within twenty-four hours, but this is seldom possible in New Zealand. Where burial must be delayed because of a post-mortem or coroner's inquiry, Muslim families may be distressed, but will accept it as the law of the land.

From the time a death is announced, the bereaved family will be supported and comforted by their community. People gather round, helping with food and other practical matters, and joining the family in prayer and readings from the Koran. While acknowledging the family's great loss, fellow Muslims may also console them with the thought that their loved one is now closer to God.

Burying the dead

Muslims regard participating in a funeral – carrying the coffin, reciting prayers at the graveside, comforting the family – as an honour and a privilege. Before the burial, mourners say the funeral prayer or *salatul janaza*, which asks God to forgive the deceased their sins, and grant them a life of bliss in the next world.

Muslims are always buried: cremation is not permitted in Islam. Coffins are not normally used. The shrouded body is placed, facing Mecca, in a chamber dug at the base of the grave or to one side. The chamber is sealed with a wooden board so that no earth rests directly on the body.

An imam or other pious Muslim places the first three handfuls of earth in the grave, reciting a prayer after each. Then all mourners follow suit. A tombstone may be placed on the grave by relatives, but this is an individual choice.

The same burial service and funeral prayers are usually conducted for infants and stillborn babies.

Although suicide is considered a sin in Islam, normal burial arrangements are usually followed. However, the imam may choose not to lead the prayers.

Islam teaches that in such situations, people are not in a position to judge others: the dead will be judged by God alone.

Beyond death

After the funeral, mourners often gather at the family home and the imam will speak. The focus is not so much on the deceased and their achievements, but on the significance of death. While acknowledging the mourners' grief and loss, the imam urges them to be resigned and patient, knowing that God's will has been done. He counsels them against anger or bitterness, and reminds them that God tests people by giving life and by taking it away.

Although Islam does not specify a set mourning period, individual cultures may observe certain stages. Ideally, the mourning period should not last for more than three days. During this period, the bereaved family usually gathers with friends and community members to recite the Koran and ask for forgiveness for the departed soul. Food may or may not be served; the primary aim is to remember the deceased, and to reflect on the reality of death.

Muslims are taught that the stronger their faith, the easier it is for them to resume normal life after the death of a loved one. It is the responsibility of friends and family to comfort and support the bereaved during this time, with the aim of helping them to carry on as normal.

Information sources: Sheikh Mohammed Amir; Rehanna Ali; 'Death in Islam' by H. S. Adam (from The Undiscover'd Country).