

Becoming a Muslim

Summary: To mark their commitment to embrace Islam, a new Muslim performs the cleansing of their entire body. They then recite the statements of shahadah in front of two witnesses, proclaiming that “there is no god but God and Muhammad is God’s Messenger.” Da’wah is the effort to present information about Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims.

Muslims believe that human beings, like all created things, are born “muslim,” submitted to the will of their creator. It is only upbringing and environment, therefore, that cause people to stray from the “straight path,” the *sirat al-mustaqim*. The majority of Muslims in the United States today were born to Muslim parents. A significant number, however, “embraced” Islam as teenagers or adults. The term “convert” is rarely used by American Muslims; the embrace of Islam is often considered a “reversion,” a coming back to who they really are, rather than a “conversion.” Accordingly, those who come to Islam as teenagers or adults are often called “new Muslims.”

The majority of new Muslims are African American men and women, but there is increasing diversity, with a significant Euro-American population entering the faith as adults, and a growing number of Hispanics as well. Current estimates place the rate of conversion to Islam among Americans at over 135,000 people each year. American Muslims today come from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

One of the first Americans to have embraced Islam was Muhammad Alexander Webb, who represented Islam at Chicago’s World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893. Born in New York and raised as a Presbyterian, Webb first learned about Islam while serving as U.S. Consul in the Philippines. Webb’s studies and observances of Muslim life in the Philippines prompted him to formally embrace Islam. Webb founded the American Islamic Propaganda Movement after embracing Islam, and devoted the remainder of his life to bringing other Americans to Islam. Webb wrote, “The essence of true faith in Islam is resignation to the Will of God. Its cornerstone is prayer. It teaches universal fraternity, universal love, and universal benevolence, and requires purity of mind, purity of action, purity of speech and perfect physical cleanliness. It, beyond doubt, is the simplest and most elevating form of religion known to man.”

Traditional requirements for entering Islam are few. First, the person embracing Islam performs a ritual cleansing of the entire body as an act of purification. Then, in the presence of two Muslim witnesses, she or he recites the two testimonies of the *shahadah*: 1) There is no God but God, and 2) Muhammad is God's Messenger. Many new Muslims choose to adopt a new Arabic name to symbolize their new identity with the Islamic heritage. Most Muslim communities of significant size offer classes called *ta'lim* to teach new Muslims about the Qur'an and *hadith*, the life of the Prophet, and especially the performance of *salat* (ritual prayer). They learn at least enough Arabic to recite a few short *surahs* of the Qur'an and say the proper praise formulas and responses during individual and congregational prayers.

The *da'wah* (literally "invitation," meaning mission or outreach) programs of Muslim organizations and local *masajid* seek to provide accurate information on Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, encouraging people to consider adopting Islam as a way of life adequate to face the problems and pressures of contemporary American society. With significant success in the African American community, several groups have begun to publish pamphlets addressed to Hispanic Americans and Native Americans. Other groups, such as the Pakistan-based Tablighi Jama'at, concentrate their efforts on reviving the spiritual lives of Muslims who are no longer active in their communities. Still others offer resources for new Muslims to connect with the community and explore their faith as with the Rhode Island Council for Muslim Advancement which has organized an online support group for women called "Talking Islam."