

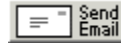
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## Islam

A major

world religion, Islam is based on the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad and was first established in Mecca (now in Saudi Arabia). From the Atlantic Ocean across North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia to the Pacific Ocean, the world's predominantly Muslim nations form a long, continuous band. (Muslims are those who practice the religion of Islam.) Within this band lie the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Persian Gulf states, Oman, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The largest minority populations of Muslims are found in India and in Nigeria. Muslims also live in the United States, Europe, and many other countries throughout the world. Altogether there are more than 1 billion Muslims around the world.

The word Islam means “surrender” or “submission,” submission to the will of the one God (in Arabic, Allah). Muslims are those who have submitted themselves. The basic creed of Islam is brief: There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.

One night in the year 610, Muhammad received the first of many revelations from God. Delivered by the angel Gabriel, the message sent to Muhammad told him that there was but one God, not many gods, as most Arabs believed. This God was creator of the world, and He would one day judge humankind. This was no novel message: Judaism and Christianity were already spreading the idea of one God. Muhammad saw his task, therefore, not as something new, but as a continuation and conclusion. He was the last in a succession of prophets—stretching from Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, to Jesus—who proclaimed the oneness of God, or Allah (see [Muhammad](#)).

But Islam was never incorporated into either Judaism or Christianity. It remained a separate religion and soon emerged as a new empire and a new civilization. The revelations that Muhammad received were collected into the Koran, the holy book of Islam that directed Muhammad's followers in what to believe and how to live (see



**A minaret towers over a mosque near Edirne, Turkey**

A minaret towers over a mosque (Islamic house of worship) near Edirne, Turkey. Five times every day a religious official called a muezzin climbs to the balcony on the minaret to call Muslims to prayer. (Credit: Villota/Photo Researchers)

[Koran](#)).

Because Muslims believed that everything Muhammad said and did was inspired by Allah, many reports of his sayings and deeds were collected as Hadith. At first these were just remembered and spread by word of mouth. Later they were captured in writing, to serve as an additional guide for believers, along with the Koran.

## Basic Beliefs

Islam teaches that there is one God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. God is compassionate and just. Because He is compassionate, He calls all people to believe in Him and worship Him. Because He is also just, on the Last Day He will judge every person according to his deeds. On the Last Day, all the dead will be resurrected and either rewarded with heaven or punished with hell.

Humankind is regarded as the crown of creation, entrusted by God with management of the whole created order. Yet humanity is also seen as weak and prone to disbelief in God and to disobedience to His will. Humanity's weakness is pride: It does not realize its limitations and views itself as self-sufficient.

To compensate for this frailty, God has sent prophets to communicate His will. These prophets, all mortal humans, were elected messengers to whom God spoke through an angel or by inspiration. Unfortunately for humankind, most of the prophets have been ignored. People, deluded by Satan, or the Devil, continued to disbelieve in Allah. In spite of this, God is always ready to pardon individuals and restore them to the sinless state in which they started life.

The life of each Muslim is primarily within the community of the faithful but also includes the larger world of creation including all human beings: All are declared to be "brothers to each other," with the mission to "enjoin good and forbid evil." Muslims are expected to establish social and economic justice. They are also expected to carry their message out to the rest of the world.

In the early Islamic community, this carrying of the Koran's message brought conflict with those who opposed it. The Muslim community was told to defend itself in the form of jihad, or holy war. Muhammad told them that the greater jihad is an internal struggle against evil and oppression and that the lesser jihad was the struggle against external evil and oppression. The intent was not to force conversion on anyone; this was forbidden by the Koran.

According to the Hadith, Muhammad identified certain essential principles in his teachings to serve as anchoring points for the Islamic community. These have come to be called the five pillars of Islam. The five pillars are the basic creed (*shahadatain*), prayer (salat), pilgrimage (or hajj), fasting (*saum*), and the *zakat* (or charitable contribution).

## Basic Creed

The first pillar is profession of faith. "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God" is the core assertion upon which membership in the community depends.

## Prayer



Islam recognizes two forms of prayer. One is the personal, devotional, and spontaneous type (*dua*), not bound by any rituals or formulas. The other is ritual, often congregational, prayer (salat), with specific words and postures, to be offered five times a day: at dawn, midday, midafternoon, sunset, and before going to bed. Before prayer, ablutions are performed by washing the hands, feet, and face. A person called the muezzin calls for prayer and chants from a raised platform or minaret tower at the mosque (the house of communal worship). Congregational prayer is started with the imam, the prayer leader, standing at the front of the mosque facing Mecca, the holy city of Islam. The congregation is lined up in rows behind him. (There are no seats in a mosque.) Each prayer consists of several units, during which the individual is either

### **The mihrab in the 'Amr Mosque in Cairo are focal**

The mihrab (prayer niche) and the minbar (pulpit) in the 'Amr Mosque in Cairo are focal points of public worship. (Credit: Lehnert Landrock)

standing, kneeling, or prostrate. At every change in posture, "God is great" is recited.

The chief day of communal worship is Friday. Believers gather at the mosque to pray, listen to portions of the Koran, and hear a sermon based on the text. The sermon may have moral, social, or political content. It should be noted that Islam has no ordained clergy such as exists in the Christian churches, but there are men specially trained in religion, tradition, and law. Theoretically, anyone considered competent can be called upon to deliver the Friday sermon.

## **Pilgrimage**

The hajj is an annual Muslim rite that every believer is expected to take part in at least once in his lifetime, if he or she is physically and financially able to do so. It is also an important act of religious worship and devotion. From the seventh to the tenth day in Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic (Arabic lunar) calendar, thousands of Muslims converge on the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia to visit the holy shrine of the Kaaba in the Great Mosque. Tradition has it that the shrine was built by Abraham, considered by Islam, Judaism, and Christianity to be a prophet and the founder of the faith (see [Abraham](#)). The pilgrimage culminates with the feast of sacrifice, one of the two major festivals that are celebrated during the Islamic (Arabic lunar) year.

For centuries, the pilgrimage has brought together thousands of Muslims from many countries and has provided a valuable link between the centers of Islam. It also gives the believers a sense of belonging to a vast world community. In the 20th century all Muslim countries sent official delegations to the hajj, providing for an interchange of ideas on all sociopolitical issues facing the Muslim peoples. In the late 20th century some 2 million pilgrims undertook the hajj each year.



**The Kaaba, the holiest shrine in the Islamic world**

The Kaaba, the holiest shrine in the Islamic world, is located in the Great Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. (Credit: Karim Sahib/AFP/Getty Images)

## **Fasting**

In the second chapter of the Koran is the statement "Fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you." Because the Koran was first revealed to Muhammad in the month of Ramadan, the whole month was set aside as a period of fasting. During each day, from dawn to darkness, all eating, drinking, and smoking are forbidden. Those who are ill or on a journey may postpone the fast until a "similar number of days later on," according to the Koran. The second major festival of the Islamic (Arabic lunar) year begins at the termination of the fast and lasts several days.

## **The Zakat**

The last pillar is an obligatory tax called the *zakat*, a contribution made by Muslims to the state or to the community. An act of religious devotion, payment of the tax is made for the benefit of the poor and needy of society.

## **Divisions and Schools of Thought**

The second chapter of the Koran says: "There shall be no compulsion in religion. True guidance is now distinct from error. He that renounces idol worship and puts his faith in Allah shall grasp a firm handle that will never break. . . . As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false gods."

Islam has always been characterized by diversity with unity. As the above verses suggest, once the believer has made his allegiance to Allah as the one God, he is a Muslim and trusts in God to guide him in his beliefs and actions. The consensus of the community should keep him from straying far afield into erroneous practices. There has been no inordinate fear of differences in beliefs and practices, such as developed in

Christianity. Muhammad himself was quoted as having said, "Difference of opinion in my community is a manifestation of divine mercy."

This is not to suggest that there were not, in the long history of Islam, periods of persecution over differences in belief and practice; there have been people in every religion who have regarded themselves as arbiters and enforcers of truth. But such occasions have been far fewer than in most other major beliefs.

The major divisions in the history of Islam arose over questions of leadership of the Muslim community, called the caliphate, not over issues of doctrine. Only later did there emerge sects based on divergent emphases in doctrine and practice. Yet all have continued to recognize each other as Muslims on the basis of allegiance to Allah.

The seeds of division were sown early. Muhammad's death left the community without a commonly accepted leader, or caliph (from *khalifah*, meaning both "successor" and "deputy"). The leadership crisis was compounded by the fact that it came at a turbulent time, when Muslim armies were already beginning the century of conquests that would create a vast new empire (see [Caliphate](#)).

The first three caliphs, Abu Bakr (Muhammad's father-in-law), 'Umar, and 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, had all been close companions of the Prophet. 'Uthman was a member of the important and wealthy Umayyad clan at Mecca and a son-in-law of Muhammad. His murder in 656 led to his replacement by another son-in-law of the Prophet, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and to a civil war among Muslim factions. His murder in 661 again opened the question of whose right it was to be caliph. It also was the occasion of the first and only major division in Islam—between the Sunnites and the Shi'ites, the latter the followers of 'Ali.

## Sunnah

The term means "well-trodden path." This branch of Islam, to which the Sunnites, the great majority of Muslims, belong was defined in the decades of the earliest schisms. The conflicts over leadership, belief, and practice enabled the Sunnites to develop what they believed to be correct religious positions, based on the Koran and the sayings (Hadith) of the Prophet and in reaction to what they regarded as sectarian points of view. Sunnah regards itself as orthodox Islam, representing the consensus of the Islamic community against wayward positions.

While condemning schisms and sects, the Sunnites also developed the contrasting trend of toleration in order to embrace the widest range of views that could be accepted as orthodox, in accordance with Muhammad's statement on the virtue of diversity. This toleration made it possible for diverse sects and schools of thought to coexist within the larger community of Islam. No group would be excluded unless it specifically renounced Allah and Muhammad. This toleration was the answer of Sunnah to those who were trying to narrow the concept of Islam according to the use of selective passages in the Koran or the Hadith.

## Shi'ah

After the murder of 'Ali, his followers, called the Shi'ites, demanded that the rule of the community be restored to the family of 'Ali. By his marriage to Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, he was a kinsman of the Prophet; and the Shi'ites claimed the divine right of the family of Muhammad to rule.

In the course of its history, Shi'ah developed some distinctive doctrines and a number of sects. Probably out of its reverence for 'Ali, it came to regard the community leader, the imam, as an infallible being who alone knew the hidden and true meaning of the Koranic revelations. Orthodox Shi'ites recognize 12 imams in their history, the last of whom (named Muhammad) disappeared in the 9th century. Orthodox Shi'ites believe that the 12th imam will return near the end of time to inaugurate a reign of truth and justice. Until he returns, all law and doctrine are interpreted by scholars called *mujtahids*.

Since the divine knowledge was mediated through the infallible teachings of an imam, the Shi'ites believed (in contrast to the Sunnites) that all knowledge derived from fallible, human sources was useless. It was not what the community thought, but what the imam proclaimed that counted. This narrowed the scope for toleration of divergent views.

Another major difference from Sunnite emphasis was the emergence of a “passion history” among the followers of Shi'ah, comparable in many ways to the Passion plays about the life of Jesus. The violent death in 680 of 'Ali's son, Husein, is celebrated annually with orations, plays, and processions. These celebrations have influenced Sunnite believers in Afghanistan and India, who participate in similar passion plays. The influence of Shi'ah is also felt in the veneration in which all Muslims hold 'Ali and his family and in the respect that they show for his descendants.

In addition to the main body of Shi'ite believers, there are a number of sects that have broken away. The largest group is the Isma'ilis. The difference originates in the identity of the seventh imam. The main body of Shi'ah accepted Musa, but the Isma'ili recognized instead his brother Isma'il. Since his disappearance, they await his return and hence are usually called Seveners, instead of Twelvers, the name applied to orthodox Shi'ites. The seven imams recognized by the Isma'ilis are, in a sense, higher in excellence than the Prophet because they receive their teachings directly from God Himself. Isma'ilis may be found mainly in East Africa, Yemen, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

The Isma'ilis are divided into two groups: the Nizaris and the Musta'lis. The head of the Nizaris is the Aga Khan, believed to be a direct descendant of 'Ali. The Musta'lis live mostly around Mumbai (Bombay), India, and have their own spiritual head.

A number of other sects arose out of the Shi'ite movement: the Nusayris, the Zaidis (Yezidis), and the Druzes. Only the Druzes have any considerable following, mostly in Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the West Bank, and Syria (see [Druze](#)).

There is also a worldwide non-Muslim religion that grew out of Shi'ism in Iran in the 19th century. The Baha'i faith was inspired by a Shi'ite Muslim named 'Ali Mohammad; it was later founded by his follower Baha' Allah (see [Baha'i faith](#)).

The total Shi'ite movement comprises probably less than 10 percent of the Islamic world. The greatest concentration is in Iran, where Shi'ah has long been the national religion and where 90 percent of the population is Shi'ite. It is in Iran that the conflict between the Shi'ites and the Sunnites became explosive in the late 20th century. Since the 1979 takeover of the government of Iran by the Islamic fundamentalist leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers, other Muslim nations in the Middle East have feared that their governments would be subverted by Shi'ite fundamentalism. (See also [Iran](#); [Khomeini](#), [Ayatollah Ruhollah](#).)

## Sufism

Early in the history of Islam there emerged groups who were not satisfied with the outward observances and rituals of religion. They wanted, instead, a religion of inner experience, an asceticism that renounced the luxuries of the world and devoted itself purely to obedience to God. By the 8th century, these groups became known as Sufis, probably from the garments of wool (*suf* in Arabic) that they wore.

Sufism evolved through three phases: asceticism, the rejection of worldliness; ecstasy, the desire for communion with God; and the cognitive (knowing), by which the believer sought a higher knowledge than that granted to the average Muslim. Because Sufism developed largely within the Sunnite branch of Islam, it helped balance the expansion of the Shi'ite movement that also had high regard for such exceptional divine knowledge.

Sufism remained a parallel development within Sunnah until the 11th century, when the theologian al-Ghazali made a formal attempt to merge the doctrines of mysticism with the orthodox consensus of the community that was the Sunnah. He told the other theologians that unless they created a “science of the heart” for all believers, the doctrines of Islam would be nothing more than outward formalities devoid of any inner life or meaning.

## American Muslim Mission

A distinctive development of Islam emerged in the United States early in the 20th century. Known as the American Muslim Mission, Black Muslims, or the Nation of Islam, it originated as an African American religious and nationalist movement. Its original main thesis was that all nonwhite races should ideally form



one nation.

The movement was established in 1930 by W.D. Fard, also known as Wallace Fard Muhammad. The organization then had its headquarters in Detroit. His followers accepted him as an incarnation of Allah, or God. When he disappeared mysteriously in 1934, he was succeeded by Elijah Muhammad (born Elijah Poole). He moved the organization to Chicago.

The Nation of Islam grew slowly but took advantage of pent-up frustrations of African Americans by offering them a militant creed. Elijah Muhammad encouraged blacks to give up Christianity, which he said was a tool used by whites to oppress blacks. The movement provided its followers with a community of common religious, cultural, and economic interests. Elijah Muhammad's teachings stressed black nationalism and economic self-sufficiency. Local mosques and individual members were encouraged to start businesses. The organization itself owned farmland and businesses, and it maintained schools for children and adults. Members were not supposed to participate in the country's affairs or serve in the military. Elijah Muhammad kept tight control of the organization, but after his death in 1975 the leadership was divided.

In the 1960s the mission got the unofficial name Black Muslims after publication of a book by C. Eric Lincoln entitled *The Black Muslims in America* (1961). During this decade of the civil rights movement, the Nation of Islam gained national prominence through one of its most eloquent spokesmen, Malcolm X. He attracted his own significant following and after a while broke with the national leadership. He was assassinated by fellow Black Muslims in February 1965, causing a setback in the organization's popularity (see [Malcolm X](#)).

Throughout the late 1970s the movement was led by Elijah Muhammad's son, Wallace Dean Muhammad—later known as Warith Deen Muhammad—and in 1980 adopted the name American Muslim Mission. Warith Deen Muhammad taught and established that the Koran and the sunna (practices of the Prophet Muhammad) were the main authorities to guide the mission's community life and development. He strongly encouraged educational and economic establishment. During this time color consciousness, racism, and the deification of Fard were repudiated. Warith Deen Muhammad then announced in 1985 that the mission was being dissolved so its members could become part of the worldwide orthodox Islamic community.

Several black nationalist segments of the organization retained both the name and the original beliefs of the Nation of Islam. The largest and most prominent splinter group was led by Louis Farrakhan, who had served as the national spokesman for the Nation of Islam after the assassination of Malcolm X. Farrakhan, like Elijah Muhammad, emphasized economic independence and black self-identity. Based in Chicago, Farrakhan's Nation had success in combating the drug abuse prevalent in public housing projects in many American cities.

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