

Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, with about 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide. Although its roots go back further, scholars typically date the creation of Islam to the 7th century, making it the youngest of the major world religions. Islam started in Mecca, in modern-day Saudi Arabia, during the time of the prophet Muhammad's life. Today, the faith is spreading rapidly throughout the world.

Islam Facts

- The word "Islam" means "submission to the will of God."
- Followers of Islam are called Muslims.
- Muslims are monotheistic and worship one, all-knowing God, who in Arabic is known as Allah.
- Followers of Islam aim to live a life of complete submission to Allah. They believe that nothing can happen without Allah's permission, but humans have free will.
- Islam teaches that Allah's word was revealed to the prophet [Muhammad](#) through the angel Gabriel.
- Muslims believe several prophets were sent to teach Allah's law. They respect some of the same prophets as [Jews](#) and Christians, including Abraham, Moses, Noah and [Jesus](#). Muslims contend that Muhammad was the final prophet.
- Mosques are places where Muslims worship.
- Some important Islamic holy places include the Kaaba shrine in Mecca, the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina.
- The Quran (or Koran) is the major holy text of Islam. The Hadith is another important book. Muslims also revere some material found in the Judeo-Christian [Bible](#).
- Followers worship Allah by praying and reciting the Quran. They believe there will be a day of judgment, and life after death.
- A central idea in Islam is "jihad," which means "struggle." While the term has been used negatively in mainstream culture, Muslims believe it refers to internal and external efforts to defend their faith. Although rare, this can include military jihad if a "just war" is needed.

Muhammad

The prophet Muhammad, sometimes spelled Mohammed or Mohammad, was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 570 A.D. Muslims believe he was the final prophet sent by God to reveal their faith to mankind.

According to Islamic texts and tradition, an angel named Gabriel visited Muhammad in 610 A.D. while he was meditating in a cave. The angel ordered Muhammad to recite the words of Allah.

Muslims believe that Muhammad continued to receive revelations from Allah throughout the rest of his life.

Starting in about 613, Muhammad began preaching throughout Mecca the messages he received. He taught that there was no other God but Allah and that Muslims should devote their lives to this God.

Hijra

In 622, Muhammad traveled from Mecca to Medina with his supporters. This journey became known as the Hijra (also spelled Hegira or Hijrah), and marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Some seven years later, Muhammad and his many followers returned to Mecca and conquered the region. He continued to preach until his death in 632.

Abu Bakr

After Muhammad's passing, Islam began to spread rapidly. A series of leaders, known as caliphs, became successors to Muhammad. This system of leadership, which was run by a Muslim ruler, became known as a caliphate.

The first caliph was Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law and close friend.

Abu Bakr died about two years after he was elected and was succeeded in 634 by Caliph Umar, another father-in-law of Muhammad.

Caliphate System

When Umar was assassinated six years after being named caliph, Uthman, Muhammad's son-in-law, took the role.

Uthman was also killed, and Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was selected as the next caliph.

During the reign of the first four caliphs, Arab Muslims conquered large regions in the Middle East, including [Syria](#), [Palestine](#), [Iran](#) and Iraq. Islam also spread throughout areas in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

The caliphate system lasted for centuries and eventually evolved into the [Ottoman Empire](#), which controlled large regions in the Middle East from about 1517 until 1917, when [World War I](#) ended the Ottoman reign.

Sunnis and Shiites

When Muhammad died, there was debate over who should replace him as leader. This led to a schism in Islam, and two major sects emerged: the Sunnis and the Shiites.

Sunnis make up nearly 90 percent of Muslims worldwide. They accept that the first four caliphs were the true successors to Muhammad.

Shiite Muslims believe that only the caliph Ali and his descendants are the real successors to Muhammad. They deny the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. Today, Shiite Muslims have a considerable presence in Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Other Types of Islam

Other, smaller Muslim denominations within the Sunni and Shiite groups exist. Some of these include:

- **Wahhabi:** This Sunni sect, made up of members of the Tameem tribe in Saudi Arabia, was founded in the 18th century. Followers observe an extremely strict interpretation of Islam that was taught by Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab.
- **Alawite:** This Shiite form of Islam is prevalent in Syria. Followers hold similar beliefs about the caliph Ali but also observe some Christian and Zoroastrian holidays.

- **Nation of Islam:** This mostly African-American, Sunni sect was founded in the 1930s in Detroit, Michigan.
- **Kharijites:** This sect broke from the Shiites after disagreeing over how to select a new leader. They are known for radical fundamentalism, and today are called Ibadis.

Quran



The Quran.
Nazaruddin Abdul Hamed/EyeEm/Getty Images

The Quran (sometimes spelled Qur'an or Koran) is considered the most important holy book among Muslims.

It contains some basic information that is found in the Hebrew Bible as well as revelations that were given to Muhammad. The text is considered the sacred word of God and supercedes any previous writings.

Most Muslims believe that Muhammad's scribes wrote down his words, which became the Quran. (Muhammad himself was never taught to read or write.)

The book is written with Allah as the first person, speaking through Gabriel to Muhammad. It contains 114 chapters, which are called surahs.

Scholars believe the Quran was compiled shortly after Muhammad's death, under the guidance of Caliph Abu Bakr.

READ MORE: [Why the Quran Was a Bestseller Among Christians in 18th Century America](#)

Islamic Calendar

The Islamic calendar, also called the Hijra calendar, is a lunar calendar used in Islamic religious worship. The calendar began in the year 622 A.D., celebrating the journey of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina.

The Islamic calendar indicates the proper days of Islamic holidays and celebrations, including the period of fasting and prayer known as [Ramadan](#), which occurs during the ninth month of the calendar.

Islam Symbols

As in many religions, there is no single image or symbol of Islam that is universally accepted by all Muslims worldwide.

The crescent moon and star has been adopted in some predominantly Muslim countries as a symbol of Islam, though the crescent moon and star image is believed to pre-date Islam and was originally a symbol of the Ottoman Empire.

In some other applications, such as the [International Red Cross and Red Crescent](#) humanitarian aid movement, a red crescent indicates that followers of Islam are respected and treated accordingly.

The color green is also sometimes associated with Islam, as it was reportedly a favorite color of Muhammad's and is often featured prominently in the flags of predominantly Muslim countries.

Five Pillars of Islam

Muslims follow five basic pillars that are essential to their faith. These include:

- **Shahada:** to declare one's faith in God and belief in Muhammad
- **Salat:** to pray five times a day (at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening)
- **Zakat:** to give to those in need
- **Sawm:** to fast during [Ramadan](#)
- **Hajj:** to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during a person's lifetime if the person is able

Sharia Law

Islam's legal system is known as Sharia Law. This faith-based code of conduct directs Muslims on how they should live in nearly every aspect of their lives.

Sharia law requires men and women to dress modestly. It also outlines marriage guidelines and other moral principles for Muslims.

If crimes are committed, Sharia law is known for its harsh punishments. For example, the punishment for theft is amputating a person's hand. Adultery can carry the penalty of death by stoning. However, many Muslims do not support such extreme measures.

Muslim Prayer

The prophet Muhammad is credited with building the first mosque in the courtyard of his house in Medina. Mosques today follow some of the same principles he established in 622 A.D.

Muslim prayer is often conducted in a mosque's large open space or outdoor courtyard. A mihrab is a decorative feature or niche in the mosque that indicates the direction to Mecca, and therefore the direction to face during prayer.

Men and women pray separately, and Muslims may visit a mosque five times a day for each of the prayer sessions. In addition to hosting prayers, mosques often function as public gathering places and social centers.

Muslim Holidays

The two major Muslim holidays are:

Eid al-Adha: celebrates the Prophet Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for Allah.

Eid al-Fitr: marks the end of Ramadan—the Islamic holy month of fasting.

Muslims also celebrate other holidays, such as the Islamic New Year and the birth of Muhammad.

Islam Today

In recent years, Islam's supposed association with terrorism and mass murder has sparked a political debate in many countries. The controversial term "radical Islam" has become a well-known label to describe the religion's connection to acts of violence.

Recent surveys have found that in countries with high Muslim populations, the majority of Muslims have overwhelmingly negative views of terrorist groups like [ISIS](#).

While Muslims aim to clear up misconceptions about their faith, the religion continues to spread rapidly. Today, Islam is the world's fastest growing religion. Experts predict Islam will surpass [Christianity](#) as the largest religion by the end of the century.

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