

Islam is the religion of 1.3 billion people. Today, one out of every five people alive considers themselves a follower of Islam. Next to Christianity, Islam is the world's second largest religion. The word *Islam* is an Arabic word that simply means "to submit, surrender or commit oneself." Those who adhere to Islam, regardless of their nationality, are known as Muslims. The word *Muslim* means "the one who submits."

The Origin of Islam

The religion of Islam began with a man by the name of Muhammad. Muhammad was born in A.D. 570, into a violent, pagan and polytheistic culture in the city of Mecca, (in modern day Saudi Arabia, see map to right). One night in 610, while contemplating inside a cave on the outskirts of Mecca, Muhammad was supposedly visited by the angel Gabriel (the same angel that appeared to Daniel and the Virgin Mary in the Bible). According to Muhammad, that night began a series of angelic visitations and revelations that soon after became the teachings of Muhammad and subsequently the text of the *Qur'an*, the sacred book of Islam.

By the end of the first decade of Muhammad's preaching, several hundred families were convinced that he was a prophet of God. Having converted to monotheism, they were a minority and persecuted by those who would not convert. So in 622, Muhammad and his followers fled 250 miles north to the city of Yathrib (later renamed *Medina*, "city of the prophet") a friendlier city to the North. Eight years later, in 630, Muhammad and his army of 10,000 men went back and conquered Mecca. He proceeded to the Ka'bah, the main sanctuary in Mecca (see photo to right), and ordered that all the idols be destroyed and that it be dedicated to Allah. In 632 Muhammad died a sudden but natural death at the age of 63 in the city of Medina.



An artist's depiction of Muhammad (A.D. 570-632)

Within a century of Muhammad's death Muslim armies spread the Islamic Empire across North Africa, to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in southern France and Spain, up into Central Asia and into the confines of China. Were it not for a victorious battle ("the Battle of Tours" in France) led by Charles Martel in 732, all of Europe may have fallen to Islam. It was there that Martel, a ruler of the Franks (a tribe of Germany) defeated the advancing Muslim armies and ended Islam's advance into Europe.

Divisions in Islam

Islam succeeded in uniting an Arab world of separate tribes and castes, but disagreements concerning the succession of Muhammad caused a division in Islam between two groups, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The Sunnis (85 to 90 percent of all Muslims) believe the successor to Muhammad was to be elected democratically from among Muhammad's closest followers. The Shi'ites (10-13 percent of all Muslims) thought Muhammad's successor should be related to Muhammad. The disagreement

continues to this day. Other sects include the ultra-conservative, puritanical, and often terrorism friendly Wahhabi. Wahhabism began in the eighteenth century under the teachings of 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who stringently opposed all practices not sanctioned by the Qur'an. The movement known as The Nation of Islam was founded around 1930 by Wallace Dodd Fard in Detroit Michigan. It is now led by Louis Farrakhan and is considered heretical by orthodox Muslims.

Five Main Muslim Beliefs

There are five basic beliefs that all Muslims hold to. They are set forth by the Qur'an in sura 2:177 which states, "righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets."

1. Belief in One God

For Muslims there is only one true God, whose name is Allah. The word *Allah* is an Arabic word that literally means "the God." The Qur'an teaches that Allah is a just, all-knowing, mighty, compassionate, merciful, sovereign, loving creator and judge.

2. Belief in the Prophets

Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last of some 124,000 prophets that Allah sent to mankind. The Qur'an teaches that Allah's prophets included men mentioned in the Bible. Men like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, and even Jesus among others (sura 6:84-86). Although Muslims revere Muhammad, and believe he lived an exemplary life, they do not worship him or believe that he was divine. To the Muslims, he was merely a man and mouthpiece for God like the others. They do believe that having come last, Muhammad's teachings supersede the others'.

Who is Jesus to the Muslims?

The Qur'an speaks of Jesus (referred to as *Isa*) often. It speaks of His birth to the virgin Mary (sura 3:46-48), His holy life, His wise teaching and love, and His many miracles (sura 5:110). Yet the Qur'an seeks to strip Jesus of His true identity by demoting Him to a mere human (see 2 Corinth-ians 11:4). In fact, to believe that Jesus is divine, i.e. God's Son, is to be guilty of the greatest sin a person can commit in Islam, the sin of *shirk* (suras 112:1-4; 4:48; 4:171).

3. Belief in Angels

Muslims believe angels are immortal, sexless, created beings, who function as guardians, recorders, and messengers for Allah. Muslims believe that each person has two angels, one on his right who records his good deeds and one on his left who records the bad deeds (sura 50:17). Prominent among the angels are Michael and Gabriel (Jibril), who is often called "the Holy Spirit" by Muslims. The Qur'an also speaks of Satan, referred to as *Iblis*. He is the leader of the fallen angels, who was expelled from heaven when he refused to bow down before Adam and

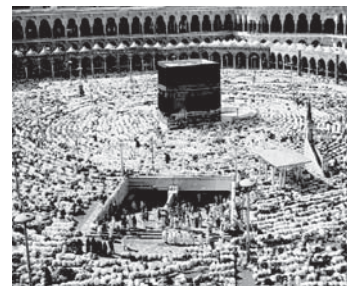


Muhammad was born in Mecca. His body was buried in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

4. Belief in the Holy Books

Muslims believe that God has given four books to mankind: the Law of Moses, the Psalms of David, "the Gospel of Jesus" and the Qur'an (see suras 3:3, 84; 2:87, 136; 4:163; 5:46). Supreme among them all is the Qur'an. The reason Muslims believe that the Qur'an has superseded all previous revelation is because the Qur'an says these other books have been corrupted (I'll respond to this charge in a minute). Muslims believe that Allah gave the Qur'an to the angel Gabriel, who in turn dictated it to the Prophet Muhammad in intervals over a period of twenty-three years (610-632). Muhammad never wrote down the revelations. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad's revelations were memorized by his listeners or were written down by his scribes. The entire text of the Qur'an was finally collected in an official, authorized version after Muhammad's death during the rule of Islam's third caliph, (an Islamic spiritual and political ruler), Uthman ibn Affan, who reigned from 644-656. At his command, the different versions of the Qur'an that were in circulation were recalled and burned.

The Qur'an is slightly shorter than the New Testament. It is broken up into 114 chapters called *suras*, each of which is divided into a number of verses, or *ayat*. The chapter



Thousands of Muslims pray to Allah around the Ka'bah in Mecca, an ancient stone temple that Muslims believe Abraham and Ishmael built to Allah.

titles are taken from images or events included in the suras. The suras are not placed in any chronological or logical order. For the most part, the chapters are arranged according to length. With the exception of the very first sura, which functions as a short introductory prayer, the longer suras are towards the front, and the shorter ones are in the back. In addition to the Qur'an, Muslims look to the *Hadith*, a collection of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad as recorded by his companions. The Hadith are considered authoritative and instructive as commentaries and applications of principles found in the Qur'an.

5. Belief in the Final Judgment

The Qur'an teaches that all human beings will be physically resurrected on "the Last Day" to spend eternity in heaven (sura 4:57) or hell (sura 4:56; 14:48-51). When Allah assembles people in His presence, he will judge them with absolute justice. A scale will be used to balance the individual's good deeds against his or her bad deeds. Sura 23:102-3 says, "Then those whose balance of good deeds is heavy, they will attain salvation: But those whose balance is light, will be those who have lost their souls, in Hell will they abide." According to Islam, everything a person has done, including intentions and desires, will be accounted for on this day.

The Muslim's Five Most Important Practices

Beside the major *beliefs* or doctrines in Islam, there are also five foundational *practices* that every Muslim must observe. These are called "The Five Pillars of Islam." They are: **1. Confession.** To become a Muslim one must confess aloud and publicly "There is no God but Allah,

and Muhammad is his prophet." This declaration of faith is called the *shahada* and is repeated constantly by faithful Muslims.

2. Prayer. Muslims are required to pray at five specific times a day, facing the city of Mecca. Prayer times are at daybreak, noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset and early evening. On Fridays the male community is required to be present at the *mosque* ("a place for prostration before God") at noon to participate in prayer and to listen to a teaching from the Qur'an. Women are allowed to attend but are required, for modesty's sake, to stand in the back separated by a curtain or in a side room. The community leader, the *imam*, is considered a teacher and prayer leader.

3. Almsgiving. It is required that Muslims give one-fortieth (2.5%) of their finances to help the poor and the cause of Islam. Giving for the Muslim is closely connected to their salvation. Sura 2:277 states, "Surely they who believe and do good deeds and keep up prayer *and* pay the poor-rate they shall have their reward from their Lord, and they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve." Some Islamic states collect the money but generally most Muslims give through leaving their money in the metal box at their local mosque.

4. Fasting. Fasting is an annual lifelong requirement for Muslims. In the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims fast from sunrise until sundown (sura 2:183-185). Ramadan is the month that Muslims believe Muhammad first received the revelation of the Qur'an. During this time Muslims must abstain from all food, drink, smoking, and sexual relations. Those who are sick, elderly, or on a journey, and women who are pregnant or nursing are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year. If they are physically unable to do this, they must feed a needy person for every day missed.

5. Pilgrimage. It is required within Islam that all who are physically and financially able, go to Mecca at least once in their lifetime (sura 2:196). While in Mecca, Muslims are required to circle the Ka'bah seven times and run seven times between two hills, amongst other activities.

Are Allah & the God of Christianity the Same God?

In many ways Allah sounds similar to the God of the Bible. However, there are some major differences. Unlike the God of the Bible, the Qur'an teaches that Allah is not triune in nature (Father, Son & Holy Spirit); he has no Son, nor does he offer redemption or forgiveness to man through a vicarious, atoning death on the cross.

Although Allah is described as loving, his love is described much differently than the love that the God of the Bible shows. The Qur'an says that Allah only loves those who do good (see Sura 2:195, Sura 5:13, Sura 61:4, etc.) The Qur'an states over and over again that Allah does *not* love sinners. Here are just a couple of examples: "Allah does not love any ungrateful sinner" (Sura 2:276); "surely Allah does not love the unbelievers" (Sura 3:32); "surely Allah does not love him who is proud" (Sura 4:36); "surely He does not love the extravagant" (Sura 6:141). How different the God of the Bible is. He loves