



Islam

By Merry Wiesner-Hanks, PhD

Prophet Muhammad founded the Islamic faith in the seventh century. A hundred years later, it was a widespread faith with a core set of values and practices. But it had also adapted to local cultures in many different regions. Today there are 1.8 billion Muslims connected in a network of belief and community.

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Introduction

Islam was founded by the religious reformer and prophet Muhammad (ca. 570-632 CE). Muhammad was a merchant born in Arabia, who began to experience religious visions at the age of forty. Muhammad called his description of his revelations his Qur'an, or "recitation." His followers memorized his words and compiled his teachings into a text after his death. Muslims regard the Qur'an as the direct words of God to his prophet, Muhammad.

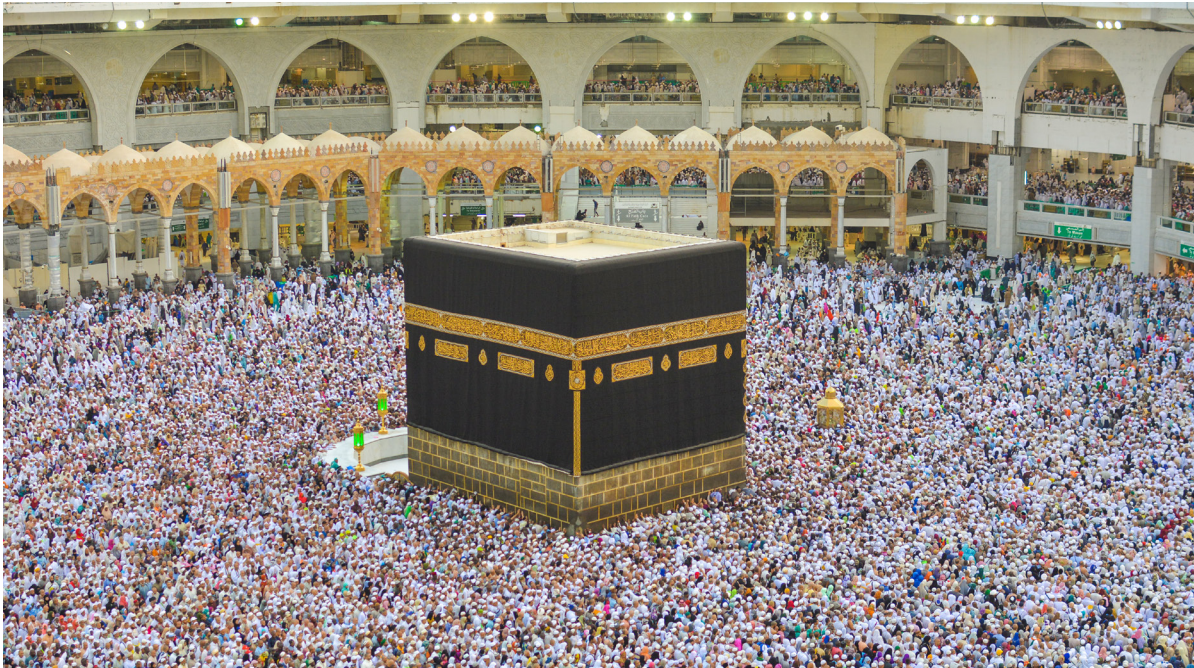


This eleventh-century Qur'an, now in the British Museum, was designed for reading aloud, which was and is an important part of Muslim worship. The small marks indicate proper pronunciation and pauses. By LordHarris, CC BY-SA 3.0

Muhammad's visions ordered him to preach a message of a single God. He began to preach in his hometown of Mecca. He gathered followers, but also met resistance, so in 622 he migrated with his followers to the city of Medina. This event is termed the *hijra* and marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. There, Muhammad was more successful. He gained converts and formed the first *umma*, a word meaning "those who obey God's will." This community united followers from different tribes. Muhammad returned to Mecca at the head of a large army. He soon united the nomads of the desert and the merchants of the cities into an even larger *umma* of Muslims. By the time Muhammad died in 632, Muslim forces had conquered all of the Arabian peninsula. The religion itself came to be called Islam, which means "submission to God." Mecca became its most holy city.

Religious ideas

Islam proved to be highly appealing to people both inside and outside Muslim states. This was partly because of the straightforward nature of its teachings. The Qur'an has only a few central teachings: God, or Allah in Arabic, is all-powerful and all-knowing. Muhammad, Allah's prophet, preached his word and carried his message. All Muslims have the duty to try to submit to God, spread God's rule, and lead a virtuous life. This duty is known as *jihad*.



[The Ka'aba](#), the black stone building at the center of the most important mosque in Mecca, is the holiest site in Islam. Today more than 2 million visitors come to Mecca every year during the five-day period of pilgrimage. By Adli Wahid, CC BY-SA 4.0.

According to the Muslim *shari'a*, or sacred law, there are five essential practices every Muslim should follow. These are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. First, all Muslims must declare faith in God and in Muhammad as God's prophet. Second, they must regularly pray at home or in mosques. Third, they must fast during the sacred month of Ramadan. Fourth they must give to the poor. Fifth, they must make a journey to Mecca, if possible. In addition, the Qur'an forbids alcohol and eating certain foods, such as pork.

Muhammad's death split his followers over who should lead after him. A permanent division within Islam was formed. There was a larger group known as Sunnis and a smaller group known as Shi'a. However, this split did not halt the spread of Islam.

The eighth century saw the beginning of a movement within Islam known as Sufism. This movement emphasized personal spiritual experience. Sufis taught that the word of God could come not only to scholars studying the Qur'an, but also to certain holy individuals who could unite with God. Sufis lived a simple lifestyle, and some were poets. Many people came to regard them as saints, and made pilgrimages to shrines dedicated to them. Sufis developed their own rituals, often involving music and dance.

Society and family life

The Qur'an and other sacred texts of Islam recommend marriage for everyone. Most teachers, judges, and religious leaders in Muslim societies were married men. As elsewhere, marriages in Muslim societies were generally arranged by the family. The Qur'an stated that men could only have up to four wives and they must be treated equally.

The Qur'an declares that men and women are fully equal in God's eyes. Both are capable of going to heaven and responsible for carrying out the duties of believers. But the Qur'an does set up clear differences between men and women. For example, it sets a daughter's share of inheritance at half that of a son's. However, Muslim law did allow women more rights to property than was common in other law codes of the time.

Women played a major role in the early growth of Islam. However, after the first generation, the seclusion of women became more common. Women were expected to remain at home much of the time. They were allowed to pray in public, but separately from men.

Unlike many other religions, Islam gave merchants considerable respect. Muslim merchants developed a number of business practices that would later spread widely. One such practice was the *sakk*, an order to a banker to pay money held on account to a third party. The English word “check” comes from this Arabic term.

Political developments and the spread of Islam

During the century after Muhammad’s death, Islam spread widely. Muslim rule expanded from the Iberian peninsula in the west to Central Asia and the Indus River in the east. In time, however, the Muslim state broke apart. Regional dynasties established their own Muslim states in Spain, North Africa, Egypt, and elsewhere.

Despite these divisions, Islam continued to spread steadily. Most often, it spread along trade routes. During the ninth and tenth centuries, Turkic peoples in Western and Central Asia converted to Islam. In the thirteenth century, many Mongols did as well. Merchants and teachers carried Islam to West Africa, and to the East African Swahili coast. Marriage between Muslim traders from distant lands and local women was often essential to Islam’s growth.

When people converted to Islam, they often blended in their existing religious ideas and rituals. As a result, a wide range of Islamic practices developed. For example, in Arabia, Persia, and South Asia, women’s presence in public was restricted. But in Western Africa, Southeast Asia, and the central Asian steppes, women often worked, socialized, and traveled independently. This diversity has continued until today.

Primary source: The Qur’an

The Qur’an is organized into chapters called *suras*, which are divided into verses. Below is an English translation of the first sura, which is recited in daily prayers and on other occasions.

Praised be God, Lord of the Universe, the Kind, the Merciful and the Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone We do worship and from You alone we do seek assistance. Guide us to the right path, the path of those to whom You have granted blessings, those who are neither subject to Your anger nor have gone astray.

Sources

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The Ka'aba, the black stone building at the center of the most important mosque in Mecca, is the holiest site in Islam. Today more than 2 million visitors come to Mecca every year during the five-day period of pilgrimage. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Kaaba_during_Hajj.jpg#/media/File:The_Kaaba_during_Hajj.jpg



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