

Founder and History

This well-known, yet widely misunderstood religion emerged in the 7th century AD in Arabia. At that time Arabian tribes were all pagan idol-worshippers.

The founder of Islam was Muhammad (AD 570–632), a man of the Quraish family of Mecca. His parents died in his early childhood. His first wife was Khadijah, a rich widow fifteen years his senior. In 610, at the age of 40, Muhammad began to meditate in a cave and had many revelations. The archangel Gabriel (*Jibril*) appeared to him and dictated the *Qur'an* to him. At first he had doubts about the origin of the visions (was it really God's angel, or the devil?), but Khadijah supported him.

Muhammad began to preach that there is only one God, *Allah* (which means “God”), and that there will be a day of judgment. He also sought the sympathy of other monotheists (Jews and Christians).

Muhammad had a few followers but was persecuted by merchants, so in 622 he had to flee from Mecca to Yathrib (later called Medina). This event, called the *Hijrah* (departure), is the starting point of the Islamic calendar (for example, AD 2011 is 1432 AH). In Medina, Muhammad became a great religious and political leader, accumulating great wealth, an army, and wives (through raids against caravans, battles against Mecca, etc.).

Though Muhammad claimed to be God's final prophet, he was unable to persuade Jews and Christians. So he changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca and chased the Jews from Medina. In 630 Muhammad and his army entered Mecca and signed the so-called Treaty of Hudaibiyah: idols were destroyed (except the Black Stone, a meteorite inside the shrine known as the *Kaaba*), and Muslims were required to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime (a huge business).

Muhammad died without an appointed successor (*caliph*), but the Muslim community (*ummah*) needed a leader and interpreter of the revelations and the traditions. Most leaders thought the caliph should be elected, while others argued he must be a member of the Prophet's family (*Ali*, Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law). This led to a schism, and today roughly 83% of Muslims are *Sunnis*, 15% are *Shiites* (“the party” of *Ali*). The rest belong to mystical (*Sufi*) and sectarian groups of Shiite background (such as the *Druze* in Lebanon and *Alawites* in Syria). The *Ahmadiyya* and *Bahá'í* movements became even more distinct religions, each having its own prophet and revelations.

Islam spread quickly (often by the sword), unified the Arab tribes, and gave birth to great kingdoms (the Arabic Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates until 1301, and the Turkish Ottoman Empire until 1922).

Today Islam has roughly 1.3 billion followers and is present in almost every country. As of 2000, Islamic Law (*sharia*) had been introduced in 49 Islamic nations on different levels. Since the 1970s Islam has experienced great growth in numbers and influence due to high birth rates, immigration from former colonial countries, the conversion of Westerners, the reinterpretation of Islam to modernism, and the activity of religious and political extremists.

Doctrine, Scripture, and Tradition

The word *Islam* means submission to God, and a *Muslim* is someone who submits himself to God. Islamic beliefs are relatively few and simple, and that makes this religion attractive to many. Yet according to researchers of Islam, some 70% of Muslims believe in a mixture of Islamic beliefs, local culture, superstitions, and personal ideas (“folk Islam”).

The six Sunni Muslim “articles of belief” are:

- 1 Belief in Allah (the only God)

- 2 Belief in the Angels (*Malak*) of God
- 3 Belief in the Books of God (*Kutub Allah*)
- 4 Belief in the Prophets of God (*Rasul Allah*)
- 5 Belief in the Day of Judgment (*Yauma 'd-Din*)
- 6 Belief in the Divine Will or Predestination (*Qadar*)—a point omitted by some Muslim scholars.

Compatible Beliefs

Islam holds a number of teachings and traditions in common with Christianity, including:

- There is only one God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful, and the sovereign judge.
- Jesus was sent from God and was holy, without sin; he was born of a virgin; he healed the sick, raised the dead; he is the Word of God; he is alive, because he was taken up to heaven and is coming back to conquer the Anti-Christ (*ad-Dajjal*).
- God communicates his will through prophets and their writings.
- God will judge everyone, and eternal destiny (rewards or punishment) depends on one's faith and deeds.

Conflicting Beliefs

God

Islam proclaims that there is only One True God—Allah. Muslims have 99 “beautiful names” for Allah, and they recite them with the aid of a 33- or 99-bead rosary (*subha*). (Note: The list does not call God “love.”) Islam has an imperfect picture of God which greatly affects the Muslim view of man and salvation also.

Islam denies the Trinity. Muslims actually think that Christians believe in *three gods*, or that the Trinity is God, *Mary*, and Jesus. The very idea of God becoming human is unthinkable for them.

God cannot have a Son, and people cannot become children of God. These ideas are the greatest blasphemy (*shirk*) for Muslims. So God is far above man in every way, and virtually unknowable.

Islam teaches that humans are good by nature, born sinless, and that the present state of humans (living far away from God) is *normal*. People do wrong things but are *not* sinners. They need no savior and atonement is impossible. People should simply follow Muhammad and obey God's laws.

There are many ideas in Islam concerning *how* to get to Paradise, which is a typical nomad's dream of heaven (full of water, food, and women). Some think that if a believer has more good deeds than bad deeds, he or she can earn Paradise; others believe in Allah's total predestination; some hope that Muhammad will intercede for them; others hope that perhaps Allah will simply forgive; some think that they will spend a little time in hell as punishment but later enter Paradise; finally, some hope that those who die in Islamic war (*jihad*) will automatically enter Paradise. No one can be *sure* which idea is true.

Scriptures and Tradition

The Islamic belief in the books of God dictated from heaven doesn't mean that Muslims accept the Bible in its present form. They do believe that Moses or David or Jesus received a book—Moses the Law (*Tawrat*), David the Psalms (*Zabur*), and Jesus the Gospel (*Injil*)—just like Muhammad the *Qur'an*. But they also believe that while Jewish and Christian Scriptures have been totally corrupted over the centuries, the *Gospel of Barnabas* (a medieval forgery now popular

among Muslims) does contain the original message given to Jesus. For Muslims, the Qur'an is God's final and perfect revelation, and it supersedes any other scriptures.

The word *Qur'an* means “[a book] to recite.” Thus, this is not a book to study like the Bible; it is a text to recite. Today Muslims believe it was written in heaven in Arabic by Allah and dictated to Muhammad word-by-word by the archangel Gabriel, and that the text we have today is the exact copy of the heavenly original. Most Muslim theologians even argue that the Qur'an is “uncreated.” Until the 20th century, Muslims rejected the translation of the text (reasoning that if God's revelation is given in Arabic, people should recite and pray it in Arabic), and they still reject any scientific research and textual criticism. They are also warned to wash themselves before touching the Qur'an.

Historians have proven that Muhammad could neither read or write. His revelations were committed to memory by his companions and written on pieces of paper, leather, and stone. The many different texts were collected, sorted, and edited by an appointed follower, Zaid bin Thabit. He completed this task 23 years after Muhammad's death. The sayings, teachings, and prayers were not arranged chronologically; instead, the longer texts seemed more significant, so they are followed by the shorter ones (114 *Suras* altogether). After this compilation process every other text was officially destroyed, though versions of recitation survived till the 10th century because of the deficiency of the Arabic orthography of that time. There were actually three great Qur'an-burnings by Muslim authorities during the first three centuries of Islam (by Uthman in 653, by Al-Hajjaj in 705, and by Ibn Mujahid in 934), so it is now virtually impossible to reconstruct the original text.

The Qur'an contains preaching against unbelievers and idolaters, moral codes for the new Muslim

community, and educational stories from the Bible and the Talmud; but apocryphal stories about Jesus, Christian folk legends, and Arabic folk beliefs are also presented as divine revelations. The biblical stories from Adam to Jesus are never simply retold, but are all changed to fit the model: Muhammad's life and the preaching of monotheism.

Islam denies that there is any human element in the Qur'an, yet it's obvious that Muhammad's sources about Judaism and Christianity were Jewish and (mostly heretical) Christian traders who told him about their beliefs. The New Testament did not exist in the Arabic language, and Muhammad observed other nations having their own scriptures to recite, pray, and sing to the One God—but not the Arabs. Jews and Christians invited him to join them, but to go with either one would require a change in national identity, daily customs, or political interests. He thought it unjust that Arabs had no revelation in their own language through an Arab messenger. (He didn't even mind the idea of a translation, though Egyptian, Syrian, Armenian, and Ethiopian Christians around him all used translations of the Greek New Testament.) Thus, the Qur'an is meant to be an “Arabic” revelation—though not for the Arabs alone. It's also meant to be the ultimate revelation (supporting *and* correcting all prior revelations), for all nations and all peoples to recite—but only in Arabic, if possible.

In Islam the miracle, the divine revelation, is *a book*: the Qur'an; in Christianity, it's *a person*: Jesus Christ. Besides the Qur'an, Muslims are guided by writings known as the *Sunnah* (“tradition”), composed of *Hadith* (“narrative”) and *Sira* (“journey” or biography). The Hadith collections used even today were compiled in the 9th to 10th centuries, when Muslim scholars tried to separate fake stories from true ones. This huge compilation deals with a wide

range of topics: religion (stories of Muhammad's life, his comments on the Qur'an, pilgrimage, fasting, holy war); family (marriage, divorce, inheritance); economics (contracts, banking); health care (cleanliness, use of fragrances, cleaning of teeth); and more.

Traditions are necessary for interpreting the Qur'an, because they enlighten the situation in which each particular revelation was received. Hadiths do not fully solve the problems of interpretation, though. First, one can see the difference between the Qur'anic texts given in Mecca (610–622) and in Medina (622–632), especially in Muhammad's approach to non-Muslims (first as people to be respected and sought for their support, and later as enemies). This is why both peaceful Muslims and Islamist terrorists can find Qur'anic references to justify either tolerance or brutality toward "unbelievers." Second, in the Qur'an Allah says that he can abrogate a revelation and give another one, as he wills—yet even Muslim scholars are uncertain as to which and how many texts have actually been abrogated by later revelations within the Qur'an (estimates range from a handful to literally hundreds). That's why one Muslim scholar may refer to a certain Qur'anic text while another does not.

The word *sharia*, used for Islamic Law, means "the way to a place rich with water." Sharia is a complex application of the laws of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, prescribing everything from personal hygiene to trade laws and religious rites. Unlike Christianity, Islam is both a religion *and* a civilization; sharia provides a total social system and the way of salvation. In its present form, sharia is rooted in 8th–10th century Middle-Eastern social reality, but for most Muslims it's an unchanging Divine Law. Thus fundamentalist Muslims want to introduce the whole law in every country, liberals think that only a portion of the laws need to be kept in different countries, and modernists

try to modernize the law by reinterpreting it into modern situations.

God's Messengers

According to popular tradition, Allah has sent 124,000 prophets to mankind, but the Qur'an refers only to Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and "Sabaeans," and Islam does not accept *any* religious scripture written before or after Muhammad as reliable revelation. The Qur'an calls Adam the "Chosen of Allah," Noah the "Preacher of Allah," Abraham the "Friend of Allah," Moses the "Speaker of Allah," Jesus the "Word of Allah," and Muhammad the "Messenger of Allah." All the prophets possess the same pedigree (Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael). All are portrayed as able, noble men of God who are always victorious and whose enemies God always puts to shame. That's why Muslims, reading about the failures and sins of Abraham or David in the Bible, and especially the horrible crucifixion of Jesus Christ, think the biblical texts must be corrupted.

Muslims believe that Jesus Christ (*Isa Masih*) could neither be God nor the Son of God, for "sonship" describes a physical relationship, not a spiritual reality. In Islam, Jesus was merely a creature (though had no physical father, for Allah said: "Be!" and he came to existence), a slave and a messenger of God to the Jews only; he was misunderstood, and his teachings were later corrupted by Christians. They teach that He actually survived the cross or was replaced by someone else (such as Judas or a faithful disciple made by Allah to resemble him), because God cannot let his men die in such a shameful way. Jesus even foretold Muhammad as "another comforter."

For Muslims, Muhammad is the ideal man of God and the person nearest to God. Although Muslims never worship him, they do seek to imitate him as closely

as possible (reading the stories in the Hadith and Sira). Shiite Muslims also have their own “saints” to emulate.

God’s Will

God ordains the fate of everyone on Earth. Allah’s will is sovereign, and he can do as he pleases. Before the judgment day no one can be sure whether he or she will get into Paradise. It’s no wonder that Muslims lean toward fatalism. Devout Muslims say *Inshallah* (“If Allah wills it”) with every decision they make.

Islam as a Way of Life

More than a mere belief system, Islam is a complete way of life. Its “Five Pillars” are:

- 1 Affirmation** (*Shahada*)—“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” This creed is repeated constantly by devout Muslims.
- 2 Fasting** (*Sawm*)—Faithful Muslims fast from dawn to sunset every day during *Ramadan*, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar year. During this month, a daily fast begins at dawn and continues until sunset. It is intended as a time of spiritual self-improvement. Sex and eating and drinking are forbidden (faithful Muslims even don’t swallow their saliva).
- 3 Almsgiving** (*Zakat*)—Muslims are expected to give 2.5% of their income to the poor.
- 4 Prayer** (*Salat*)—Muslims are expected to pray five times a day facing Mecca: before sunrise, at noon, in mid-afternoon, at sunset, and after dark
- 5 Pilgrimage** (*Hajj*)—All Muslims who can afford it are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The famous *Kaaba* is a large, cube-shaped shrine in the Grand Mosque in Mecca, towards which Muslims face during their daily prayers.

The word *jihad* means “striving”, especially “in the way of Allah”, or for the cause of Islam. In one Hadith, Muhammad—returning home from a battle—says, “We arrived from the lesser struggle to the greater struggle.” The interpretation is that “greater jihad” is the personal struggle to do God’s will and resist temptation, while the “lesser jihad” is the defense of the universal Muslim community in the event of attack by non-Muslims. In Islam, religion and state are not to be separated; national self-defense and defense of the religion are one and the same issue. In the Muslim mind, political, physical, moral, and spiritual issues are close to each other: a military attack, an ideological influence, or public ridicule touches the same sensitive area. However, this sensitivity is quite one-sided. Muslims regard the 7th- to 10th-century military expansion of the Arabs as a series of *political* conquests, not as “spreading Islam by the sword.” On the other hand, they also refuse to call these conquests “war”: they were merely “openings” of new territories *for Islam*.

Muslims are usually totally imbedded in Islamic culture. Even on their deathbeds they are asked: (1) Who is your God?—*Allah*. (2) Which is the true religion?—*Islam*. (3) Who is the final Prophet?—*Muhammad*. (4) Which is the right direction to pray?—*Mecca*.

Muslim society has a very ideological nature: Islamic law is God’s law, and Muslims want to develop states based on God’s law, not on human ideas like Western capitalism or socialism. Thus, Muslims simply *cannot* change their religion. In some countries, “apostate” Muslims are killed or are allowed to be killed by local authorities, or are imprisoned or declared insane and expelled from the country. In Muslim-majority countries, indigenous Christians (and Jews) have lived in a “protected” or “guilty” (*dhimmi*) status for centuries, and even today many are virtual second-class citizens.

A relatively new phenomenon is the conversion of Westerners to Islam. Attractive features include the internationalism of the Muslim community, the seeming simplicity of Islam as a religion, and its generally clear moral standards. Islam offers the natural man a guideline for life without the need to confess one's sins, and conversion without needing a Savior.

Evangelism Do's and Don'ts

Followers of near- and far-eastern religions are generally very sensitive in cultural matters. If we are *insensitive*, this can seriously hinder our testimony. On the other hand, the love of Christ enables one to become a "Muslim" (one who submits to God) for a Muslim.

Witnessing

- In general, men should not witness to Muslim women, nor women to Muslim men.
- Conservative Muslim women are not used to making decisions; normally their fathers, brothers, and husbands decide for them. Many Muslim women are steeped in folk Islam; at times of illness or stress they turn to Muslim "holy men" who pray over them and give them charms to wear. Muslim women can be pleased when a Christian woman prays over them in the name of *Isa Masih*. Positive experiences can open a door.
- If a Muslim asks "Are you a Christian?", ask in return: "What do you think a Christian is?" After listening to his/her definition you can correct his/her view, for they often identify Christianity by non-Christian Westerners' lifestyles, the Vatican, or TV preachers, but never by the New Testament.
- In some Islamic countries Westerners can't initiate discussions about their faith with Muslims—yet Muslims can ask questions, and one can answer. One must *live* the Gospel first and be *available* for Muslims!

Meeting Muslims

- Men should not shake hands with women, and women should not normally shake hands with men (unless the men initiate).
- During the Muslim's five daily prayer times you should not shake hands with them at all, because doing so can make the Muslim ritually unclean, and he must restart his purification.
- Muslims are usually unwilling to visit churches, but you can invite them to your home to get acquainted.
- If Muslims visit your home, ask them what they are and are not allowed to eat; your home, kitchen, dishes, and glasses need to be very clean!
- Muslims also like to invite people into their homes; if you arrive, always ask where to sit (and *never* take the favorite chair of the head of the family).
- If seated, don't cross your legs, and never show the soles of your feet.

Women and Dressing

- Observant Muslim women usually follow their husband's guidance and despise or pity Western women because—according to Muslim standards—they dress and behave like prostitutes. (Others are secretly very envious of them because of the freedom Muslim women seldom experience.)
- Muslim women—even those living in the West—usually dress very conservatively. Christian women meeting Muslims should also be conservative: no short skirts, shorts, or sleeveless blouses! When mixing with Muslim women, use the most conservative Muslim lady as a guideline.

Eating Customs

- During the month of Ramadan don't eat in front of a Muslim unless he is eating, too!

- Remember that pork, alcohol, and dogs are “unclean” in Islam.
- Never use the *left* hand to eat or to offer things to the people around the dining table.

Civil Topics in Conversation

- Avoid politics, because in Islam politics and religion are one: political conflicts are seen as cultural *and* religious conflicts; this topic can stop normal conversation.
- Realize that in Arabic, “Christian” and “Westerner” mean the same thing. Most Muslims believe that Western culture is Christian. By watching television and videos they conclude that the “Christian world” is immoral and consider Islam to be superior to Christianity. On this topic, you can freely express your sadness concerning the state of Western society and morals, explaining the difference between true and nominal Christians.

Religious Topics in Conversation

- Never assume that you know what an individual Muslim believes: instead, *ask* what he or she believes!
- Never attack Muhammad personally, but also never accept him as a prophet!
- Don’t attack the Qur’an, but instead “advertise” the Bible—its historical reliability, its great guidance in everyday life, etc.
- Though the Qur’an contains some passages which speak very highly of the Bible, never use the Qur’an as a Gospel tool, as if it had any authority in your eyes!
- Avoid referring to Jesus as “the Son of God” or to yourself as a child of God. If you must mention it, emphasize that Christians mean “sonship” in a spiritual sense.
- Muslims always give titles to those they revere, so refer to Jesus (the Messiah) by His Arabic title, *Isa Masih*.

- Show practical respect to books that Muslims consider holy (the Qur’an and the Bible). Do not use a marked or highlighted Bible, don’t carry or handle it below your waist, don’t place another book (or anything else) on it, and don’t set it on the floor.
- Never walk or stand in front of a praying Muslim. When praying, stand or kneel; among conservative Muslims, remove shoes before praying with or for them.
- When talking about the Gospel, emphasize the everyday application of the faith, too (relationship between husband and wife, raising children, working, etc.). Also let the Muslim first explain the meaning of terms like sin, gift, grace, punishment, or eternal life, after which you can carefully explain the biblical meaning of each term before using it!
- The *JESUS Film* in Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, or languages from predominantly Muslim countries can be very attractive to them, especially for women. *More than Dreams* is a collection of videos dramatizing true stories of Muslims converting to Christianity. Good Christian music also can communicate more than talk (there are many Arabic-language Christian CDs).

Christian Apologetics

Muslims hope that Christians will accept Muhammad as a prophet. Some Qur’anic passages claim that Muhammad was prophesied in the Bible, but Muslim scholars today disagree concerning which Bible passage might speak about him. Most argue in favor of Deuteronomy 18:18, which tells of a prophet like Moses (he is Jesus the Christ!), and the “other comforter” in John chapters 14–16 (he is the indwelling Holy Spirit!), etc.

Books for Further Study

Note: The inclusion of a work here does not necessarily mean that CFAR endorses of all its contents or other works by the same author(s) or publisher.

A Christian Guide to the Qur'an: Building Bridges in Muslim Evangelism by Raouf and Carol B. Ghattas (Kregel, 2009)

A Muslim's Heart: What Every Christian Needs to Know to Share Christ with Muslims by Edward Hoskins (Dawson, 2003)

Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross by Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb (Baker, 1993)

Breaking the Islam Code: Understanding the Soul Questions of Every Muslim by J.D. Greear (Harvest House, 2010)

Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam by Fouad Elias Accad (NavPress, 1997)

Encountering the World of Islam, ed. by Keith E. Swartley (Authentic, 2005)

Engaging Islam by Georges Housney (Treeline Publishing, 2010)

Holy Books Have a History: Textual Histories of the New Testament and the Qur'an by Keith E. Small (Avant, 2009)

Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror by Mary Habeck (Yale, 2006)

My Year Inside Radical Islam: A Memoir by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross (Tarcher, 2007)

Reaching Muslims: A One-Stop Guide for Christians by Nick Chatrath (Monarch, 2011)

Reasoning from the Scriptures with Muslims by Ron Rhodes (Harvest House, 2002)

Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity by Nabeel Qureshi (Zondervan, 2014)

The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis by Robert R. Reilly (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2011)

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 by Lawrence Wright (Vintage, 2007)

The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam & Christianity by Chawkat Moucary (InterVarsity, 2002)

The Truth about Islam: The Noble Qur'an's Teachings in Light of the Holy Bible by Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman (P&R, 2004)

The Unseen Face of Islam: Sharing the Gospel with Ordinary Muslims at Street Level by Bill A. Musk (Monarch, 2003)