

Overview of Islam



THE RELIGION OF ISLAM WAS FOUNDED ON THE ARABIAN peninsula in the seventh century by **MUHAMMAD**, the prophet whose teachings transformed the politics, economy, and culture of both Arabia and a vast geographic area extending from Morocco and Spain to the islands of Southeast Asia.

Muhammad was born in approximately 570 to a poor family in the city of **MECCA**, in present-day Saudi Arabia. Before his birth, his mother was told that her son would be a ruler and a prophet and that she should name him Muhammad, which means “the illustrious” in Arabic. According to legend, Muhammad’s birth was marked by miraculous signs: a brilliant star illuminated the sky from east to west, and the child was born perfectly clean, with his umbilical cord already severed. Muhammad’s mother died when the boy was very young, so he lived with various relatives throughout his childhood. One well-known legend chronicles a journey Muhammad took with his uncle on a trade caravan when he was twelve years old. When they stopped in Syria to rest, a tree lowered its branches to provide the boy with shade. A monk witnessed this phenomenon and, upon examining the child closely, found a special mark between the boy’s shoulders that he interpreted as the seal of Muhammad’s prophetic office. The monk warned Muhammad’s uncle to return to Arabia and guard this special boy from those who might attempt to do him harm.

Although Muhammad spent his childhood in poverty and received little formal education, he was known for his purity and righteousness. At his uncle’s suggestion, when Muhammad was twenty-five years old he put his trading skills to use by accompanying the caravan of a wealthy woman named **KHADIJA** to Syria. After successfully completing the trade mission, Muhammad accepted the marriage proposal of Khadija, despite the fact that she was fifteen years his senior, and the couple maintained a union for twenty-five years.

Muhammad lived the life of a prosperous trader, but he also enjoyed solitary prayer and contemplation. Once a year he retired to a cave at **MOUNT HIRA**, outside of Mecca, to spend a month in quiet meditation. When Muhammad was forty years old, he experienced

his first revelation during one of his yearly trips to Mount Hira. While in a sleeplike trance near the end of an evening of meditation, he heard a voice instructing him to read or recite. Lacking any formal education, Muhammad assumed he was incapable of carrying out this command, so he resisted until the archangel Gabriel appeared and commanded him to recite. At last Muhammad acquiesced and began to listen and repeat to himself—in order to commit to memory—the first of the series of revelations that together comprise the **KORAN**, the holy text of **ISLAM**. When he returned from the wilderness, Muhammad told the story to his wife, Khadija, who encouraged him to share it with the rest of his family. He later communicated the messages he had received in the cave to the people of Mecca, much to their alarm and anger.

At the time of Muhammad's revelation, religious culture in Arabia centered on a complex and ever-changing group of gods, demons, and heavenly bodies, a system closely tied to family customs and social and economic status. Not surprisingly, when Muhammad began to speak openly of belief in one god, **ALLAH**, whose commandments applied to all people, he was quickly denounced. (The word *Islam* means “submission to Allah” in Arabic.) By 622, Muhammad, his family, and his small group of followers were forced to flee Mecca for **MEDINA** to the north, then in political turmoil. Muhammad's flight to Medina marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar and is known to Muslims as the **HIJRA**, or migration.

In Medina, Muhammad established order by mediating various long-standing conflicts and developing and enforcing a new constitution that directed all peoples to unite. He also forged a network of alliances and new military maneuvers that allowed him to repel the far more substantial forces that had pursued him from Mecca to Medina. After eight years, he and his followers—now much larger in number—finally returned to Mecca. They went to the **KA'BA**, the principal shrine in Mecca, and destroyed the 360 figures of the various **POLYTHEISTIC** Arabian religions that were housed there. This event marked the conversion of Mecca to Islam.

FOCUS ON

The Ka'ba

The Ka'ba is a cubelike structure made of large stone bricks and cloaked in a black cloth bearing embroidered verses of the Koran. It is the focal point of the **HAJJ**, or pilgrimage.

When Muslims arrive on their pilgrimage, they circumambulate (walk in a circle around) the Ka'ba. During prayer, Muslims throughout the world also turn toward the Ka'ba in Mecca.



Muhammad died in 632, only two years after his return to Mecca and ten years after the Hijra. In this short period of time, he had managed to establish a major religious movement and the basis for a new community of believers.

Four major concepts are at the center of Islam: God (Allah), the community (**UMMA**), the divine revelation (Koran), and the law (**SHARI'A**).

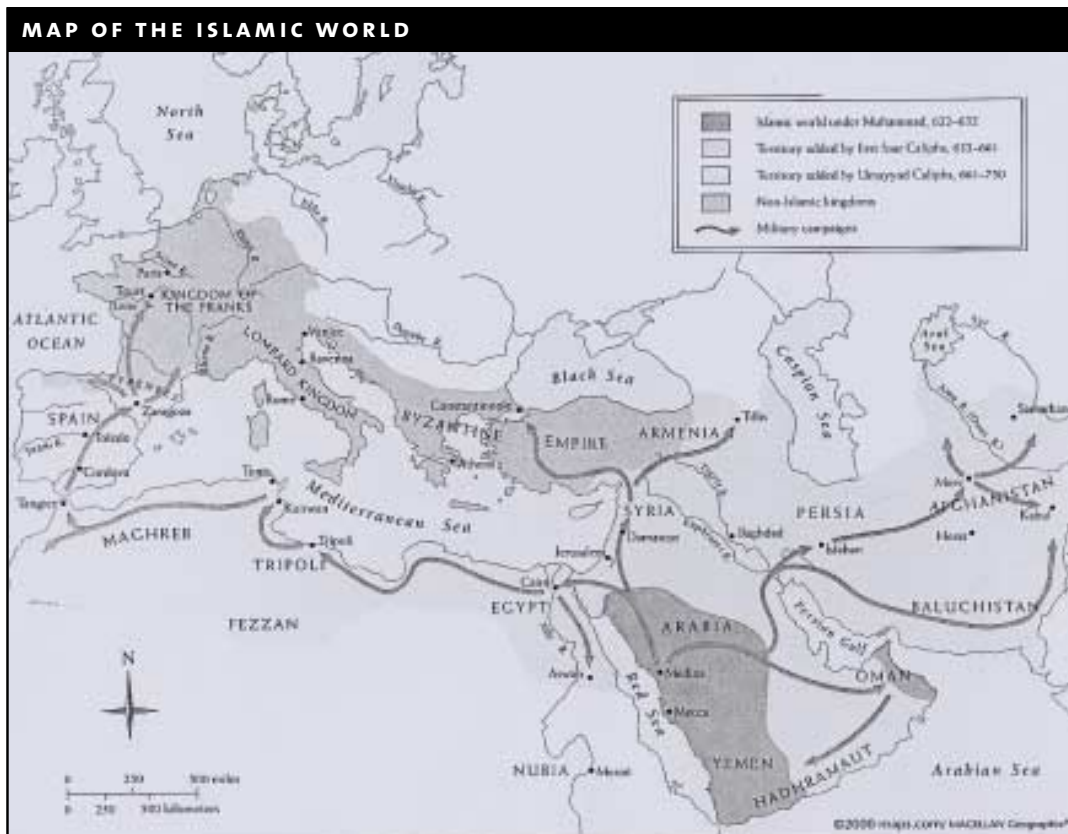
Allah: the Arabic word for *God*; the supreme one. Into a world of polytheistic beliefs and practices, Muhammad brought a universally applicable, **MONOTHEISTIC** faith. In Islam, *Allah* is not simply a name for God; it is a way of describing a universal divine power.

Umma: the Islamic community. Being a Muslim means submitting to one God and becoming a member of the worldwide Islamic community. Although members of this community come from varied backgrounds and cultures, they share belief in Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the **FIVE PILLARS** of Islam (see page 10).

Koran (also Qur'an): the body of divine revelations transmitted orally to the Prophet Muhammad and written down by his followers after his death. Muhammad received God's message in Arabic, so it consequently became the language of the Koran. Each verse was considered a sign of God, and its purity and beauty could not be translated into any other language. So revered is the text that to touch it is a powerful ritual, to memorize it is a **PIOUS** task, and to chant or copy it is a sacred profession. Likewise, before entering a **MOSQUE** or before reading or touching the Koran, one must first ritually wash. The Koran is central to all Islamic teachings and practices (see the Koran on page 23).

Shari'a: Islamic religion and law that governs every aspect of a Muslim's life. Before the establishment of Islam, society was based largely on unwritten rules and tribal and family customs, so the introduction of the concept of obeying a common set of religious laws presented a radical shift. Despite varying interpretations of some aspects of Shari'a, Muslims of all backgrounds are united by following the five elements of the Islamic faith, deemed the Five Pillars. In addition to the Koran, the **HADITH**, a compilation of the Prophet's deeds and words as recollected and recorded by his followers, functions as an additional guide for leading a proper Islamic life.

After the Prophet Muhammad's death, Islam spread rapidly from Arabia in much the same way that Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism did: via trade, migration, and religious conquest. Today Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, with between 850 million and one billion followers worldwide, the majority of whom reside in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Clear cultural differences exist between the various Islamic countries and among the **SUNNIS** and **SHI'IS**, followers of the two main traditions of Islam (see page 13), but Muslims throughout the world are unified by the religion's daily practices and the Five Pillars of Islam.



The Five Pillars

The unifying principles of the faith by which all Muslims abide are called the Five Pillars.

1. Profession of Faith

All Muslims learn to recite “There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger” to proclaim God’s divinity and omnipotence and to emphasize that an ordinary man was chosen as a vehicle for God’s revelation to humanity. (This phrase appears in the large zigzag pattern of the textile on page 42.)

2. Prayer

Muslims are called to prayer (see below) five times each day: before sunrise, at noon, in the afternoon, after sunset, and at night. When they pray, Muslims must face Mecca and perform a prescribed number of salutations by bowing with their hands near the sides of their heads. They recite the phrase “**ALLAH’U’AKBAR**” (God is great), followed by the opening chapter of the Koran. Islamic prayer may also include more informal, voluntary prayers as the act of conversing with God.

3. Alms

Providing assistance to others in the community is a central element of Islam; according to the Koran, “charity puts out sin as water puts out fire.” The giving of alms is an act of voluntary charity for Muslims but is also considered a form of religious tax that is collected and redistributed. To give as much as 20 percent of a person’s wealth to the poor is considered a loan to Allah that will be repaid many times over. Paying this religious tax symbolizes support for the Muslim community.

4. Fasting

During **RAMADAN**, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (see page 12), Muslims are not to eat or drink from dawn to dusk. Far from seeming like deprivation, fasting is viewed by Muslims as an opportunity to experience poverty and hunger while at the same time learning dedication and self-discipline. For Muslims, fasting is believed to free individuals from material desires and make them more conscious of the plight of the poor.

5. The Hajj

During the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims make a pilgrimage to Mecca in order to pay respect to the most sacred site in the city, known as the Ka’ba (see page 7). Every Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to make this sacred journey at least once in his or her lifetime. Each year thousands of people from around the world converge on this holy site for nine days in order to complete their pilgrimage, or Hajj. When journeying to Mecca, pilgrims wear simple clothes made of two pieces of unstitched white cloth that render all pilgrims equal and symbolize their common intent—to surrender absolutely to Allah. By adopting this common garment, the faithful remove distinctions of class and nationality and are symbolically united in their intent to absolutely surrender to God.



The Call to Prayer

In many Islamic communities, Muslims are reminded of the time to pray by a call. The opening chapter of the Koran follows the initial call, which was historically chanted from a **MINARET**, or tall tower near or attached to a mosque. The call is as follows:

*God is most great. God is most great.
God is most great. God is most great.
I testify that there is no god except God.
I testify that there is no god except God.
I testify that Muhammad is the
messenger of God.
I testify that Muhammad is the
messenger of God.
Come to prayer! Come to prayer!
Come to success (in this life and
the Hereafter)!
Come to success!
God is most great. God is most great.
There is no god except God.*

The first person asked by the Prophet to carry out the call to prayer was a slave named **BALAL**, who was freed by Muhammad and, by virtue of his upstanding character and pure heart, rose very high in spiritual rank.