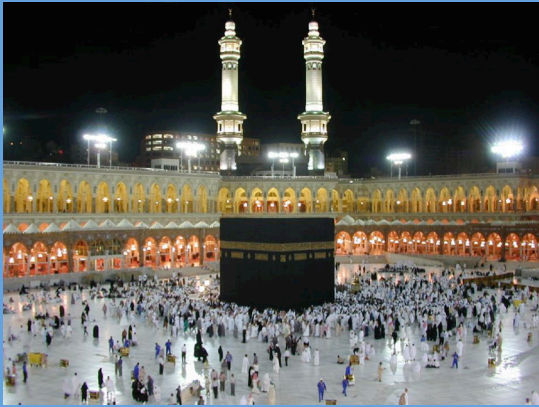


Islam



Introductory materials adapted by Ali Asani, Munjed Murad and Nicholas Boylston from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, Pluralism Project and Religious Literacy Project, Harvard University.

"China," Aftab Uzzaman (2013), a Uyghur girl from Kashgar, China, from Flickr Creative Commons.



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Religion profiles are adapted from *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

A Worldwide Tradition

'Islam' is commonly used as the name of a religion whose followers are referred to as Muslims. In Arabic, however, the word *islām* literally means 'submission (to God)' so that *muslim* refers to 'one who submits (to God)'. Another cognate of the word Islam is the Arabic word for peace, *salām*.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam emerged in the Middle East, but is now truly a world religion. There are more than one billion Muslims across the globe: from Bosnia to Zanzibar and the United States to China. Given its long history and its rich geographical and cultural diversity, any single portrait of Islam would necessarily be incomplete. The diversity of Islam is a part of and a testament to its strength: its message has proven viable and adaptable across the boundaries of time and culture.

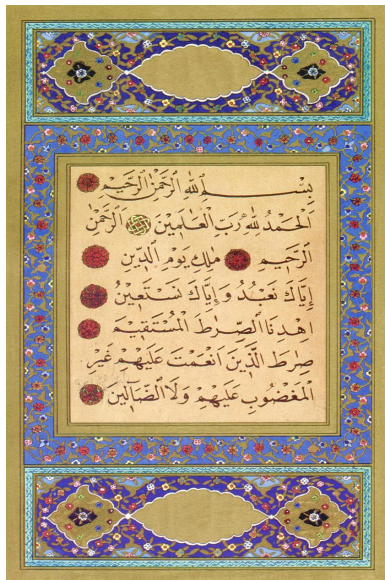
Fundamental to Islamic belief is the concept of one God, who, throughout history, has sent many prophets and messengers to peoples of every culture and nation so that they may guide them to live in accordance with God's will. According to the vast majority of Muslims, God's final prophet and messenger was Muhammad, and God's final revelation was the Quran, regarded as the verbatim word of God. Since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, communities of faithful Muslims have responded to God's word, interpreting the teachings of Islam in each new century and within many cultural contexts.

Quran: The Word of God

The Quran, the holy book of Islam, begins with a short *surah* (chapter) called the *Fātihah*, "The Opening":

In the Name of God,
The Merciful, the Compassionate.
Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
Master of the Day of Judgment.
It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.

Guide us on the Straight Path: the Path of those You have blessed,
Those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.¹



A Quran page showing Surat *Fātiḥah*,
the first chapter of the Quran.
[Wikimedia Commons](#).

Bismillāh-ir-rāḥmān-ir-rahīm
Al-ḥamdu li-llāh-i rabb-il-‘ālamīn
Ar-raḥmān-ir-rahīm
Mālik-i yawm-id-dīn
Iyyāka na‘budu wa iyyāka nasta‘īn
Ihdinā-ṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm
Ṣirāṭ alladhīna an‘amta ‘alayhim
Ghayr il-maghḍūb-i ‘alayhim
Wa lā-dh-dhāllīn

Muslims recite the *Fātiḥah* as part of their prayers every day. According to a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, this *surah* contains the essence of the teachings of the Quran. The word for God in Arabic is ‘Allah’, which is the same word used by Arabic-speaking Christians to refer to God. Muslims understand God to be the Creator and Ruler of the entire universe, the ultimate Judge of all human beings, and to be characterized above all by the qualities of compassion and mercy. God also guides humanity to the path of righteousness through messengers and prophets. According to the Quran, “There is a Messenger for every community,” (Quran, 10:47), and legend has it that there have been 124,000 prophets sent to humanity. Some of these have received revelation in the form of a scripture: to David (*Dāwūd*) was revealed the *Zabūr* or Psalms; to Moses (*Mūsā*) was revealed the *Tawrah* or Torah, Jesus (*‘Isā*) received the *Injīl* or Gospel, and Muhammad received the Quran. For this reason, Muslims refer to Christians and Jews as ‘People of the Book’, for they received a message that was fundamentally the same as that of the Quran. In certain geographic and cultural contexts some Muslims have also included Zoroastrians and Hindus in this category as they consider them to have also received revelation in the form of scripture.

The word Quran literally means ‘recitation’. Muslims believe that the words of the Quran were originally revealed by the Angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) to Muhammad in Arabic, and he then recited them to his followers. In this regard the Quran originally functioned as an aural/oral scripture that was meant to be recited, heard and experienced. The recitation of the Quran (*tilāwah*) is a science, an art, and a form of devotion, governed by *tajwīd*, the rules of pronunciation, intonation, and approach. Competitions and performances of Quranic recitation are held throughout the world. Many Muslims find the aesthetics of the recitation to be a powerful medium that helps them transcend the material and contemplate the spiritual.

Some years after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, the verses of the Quran were compiled into a written text, arranged in 114 *surahs*, generally in decreasing order of length, with each *surah* representing a chapter or division of the Book. Readers can find a range of themes in these chapters: prayers and praise of God, a recounting of God’s signs in creation, stories of the messengers before

¹ The Quran: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

Muhammad, passages about the Day of Judgment, legal matters, and representations of righteous behavior, such as looking after one's parents, the poor, the sick, the needy and orphans. Quranic teachings are considered to be the core of the Islamic tradition and hence the text has been the subject of many voluminous commentaries by religious scholars. While it is possible to translate the Arabic text of the Quran into other languages, Muslims generally consider translations to be interpretations and not the Quran itself. Since translation can change meanings and complexities that are found in the original and fails to transmit the aesthetic dimensions of the text, it is important to note that no one translation can claim to present the Quran exactly as found in Arabic.

Muhammad: The Messenger of God

For Muslims worldwide, the Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of God and a paradigm of the life of faith. As a result, he and his family are deeply loved and respected. Born in the city of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula in 570 CE, he was raised an orphan in his uncle's house. He married an older woman, the widow Khadijah, a businesswoman for whom he had worked in the caravan trade. As a merchant, he was known by reputation as '*al-Amīn*', the trusted one. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was forty years old, he was selected by God to receive revelation that ultimately established the Muslim faith.

Muhammad would retreat each year to the cave of Hīrā' in a mountain outside of Mecca for periods of quiet reflection. Muslims believe that one night during the lunar month of Ramadan, while Muhammad was in the cave, he was overwhelmed by the presence of the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel commanded him, "Recite!" and twice Muhammad, whom the angel embraced and squeezed until he could bear it no more, said, "I cannot recite." The third time the angel declared: "Recite! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Recite! And your Lord is the Most Bountiful, who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know." (Quran, 96:1-5)² Muslims believe that Muhammad recited this, feeling from that time on "as though the words were written on my heart."³ He ran down the mountain, but heard a voice from the sky: "Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." Looking up, Muhammad saw an angelic form standing astride the horizon, repeating the message.



Miniature of the Prophet Muhammad. Turkish, 16th Century, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Muslims believe that, for some 20 years, Muhammad continued to receive revelations, which he first recited to his wife and followers as a small group of believers began to grow in Mecca. The message he received was a warning of divine judgment and an invitation to return to the monotheism of the earlier prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. These revelations challenged the foundations of

² *The Quran: A New Translation* by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 428.

³ Herbert Berg, *The Blackwell Companion to the Quran*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 187-204.

seventh-century Meccan society. Although Mecca was the pilgrimage center of the polytheistic Arabian religion, the region was home to Christians and large communities of Jews. At the center of Mecca was the Kaaba, a cube-shaped structure believed to have been first built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham as the house of the one God, but which had been turned into a house of numerous idols. In this polytheistic world, Muhammad spoke of *tawhīd*, the unity and oneness of God. Where tribal bonds and blood feuds pervaded the social structure, the Prophet spoke of a universal community, or *ummah*. The revelation the Prophet Muhammad received demanded social justice and reform: alongside exhortations to prayer and the remembrance of God, believers are reminded of the need to care for the poor and the weak.



The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia, Shabbir Siraj, 2005, Flickr Creative Commons.

Muhammad and the growing number of individuals who followed him met with harsh and continual persecution from the Meccan aristocracy because they were perceived as a threat. In 622 CE, the Prophet and his followers emigrated north from Mecca to the city of Yathrib. This event, known as the *hijrah*, marks the establishment of the model Islamic community and thus the beginning of the Muslim 'hijri' calendar. On the basis of the general consensus of the leading tribes of Yathrib, the Prophet became the leader of the town, establishing order and unity in a town suffering from political turmoil. The name of Yathrib was later changed to Medina, short for *Madīnat an-Nabī* "the City of the Prophet." Muslims believe that Muhammad continued to receive revelations from God in Medina, and the message spread. In 630 CE, after a series of military battles and negotiations with enemies in Mecca, Muhammad returned to the city victorious, pardoning those who had oppressed the early Muslims and who had waged war against them. Many Meccans embraced his teachings and he rededicated the Kaaba to the worship of the one God. By the time of the Prophet's death in

632 CE, much of the Arabian Peninsula had embraced his message.

After Muhammad died, his community preserved the memory of what he did and said as the best example of how to live in accord with God's will. The records of the Prophet's words were later collected in books of tradition, or *ḥadīth*; these are a part of the *Sunnah*—the "custom"—of the Prophet, which include his words and practice. The Sunnah serves as a guide for Muslims to follow God's will in daily life. Most Muslims are careful to insist, however, that "Muhammad is only a messenger" (Quran, 3:144), and not a divine being. When Muslims refer to the Prophet Muhammad, to show reverence, his name is often followed in Arabic or English by the salutation, "Peace and blessings of God be upon him." They recite similar salutations after the names of other Prophets including Moses and Jesus.

Beliefs and Practices

Muslims engage in a variety of devotional practices to increase their God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and to discipline their attitudes toward others. Sunni Muslims have identified what they call the ‘five pillars of Islam’ as a focus for their ritual practices, with some variation in how they are prescribed across Islamic legal schools. They are based on the Quran and Sunnah and were given their defining interpretations by the ‘*ulamā*’ in the first three centuries of Islam. The five pillars are: the *shahādah* (the testimony of the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad); *ṣalāt* (canonical prayer); *zakāt* (alms); *ṣawm* (the fast of Ramadan); and *ḥajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Although categorized in different ways, most Shi’a accept these very same pillars, and many add that the acceptance of the authority and sanctity (*wilāyah*) of the Imams is also a pillar.



Although the canonical prayers, alms, pilgrimage and fast of Ramadan are almost universally shared among Muslims, there is nonetheless much room for diversity in Islamic practice. The canonical prayers can be performed individually or in congregation at the mosque or literally anywhere else. The Friday prayers are a weekly gathering in which Muslims listen to a sermon and pray together. At homes and in the mosque, the sight of Muslims reciting the Quran or using prayer beads for the invocation of sacred litanies or particular praises of God or the Prophet is common. However, mosques are not the only places that Muslims gather to worship, as diverse communities have meeting places suited to their particular needs, including Sufi lodges (*zāwiyah*, *tekke* or *khānaqāh*) and shrines (*maqām*, *dargāh*, *mazār*), Ismaili houses of congregation (*jamā’at-khanah*) and Twelver Shi’ite *husayniyyahs* and *imāambaras*, which supplement or sometimes replace the activities of the mosque.

Worship is of course not limited to any particular space or time, and personal supplications (*du’ā*) are typically made throughout the day regarding both worldly and spiritual topics, and there is a wide range of formalized supplications passed down from the Prophet, the Imams, or other holy figures. Many practice the invocation of a sacred formula, often a Name of God, verse of the Quran or the testification “there is no god but God”. This invocatory practice, called *dhikr*, is the central mystical rite of Sufis, who under the guidance of the Sufi master (*shaykh*) use this practice to cultivate constant remembrance of God. In some Sufi orders, communal practices of invocation are accompanied by music and ritual forms of dance, known as *samā’* or *ḥaḍrah*. Although *dhikr* is most popularly associated with Sufism, it is a common form of worship in many Muslim communities.

Throughout the year, a number of festivities are held, such as the ‘*Eid al-Aḍḥa*, which celebrates the Prophet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his lineage in service of God and is the culmination of the *ḥajj*. In Shi’i communities, certain days throughout the year are dedicated to particular events in the lives of the Imams and commemorated through practices such as fasting, charitable acts, and prayer; the most important of these as mentioned above is ‘*Āshūrah*, which commemorates the martyrdom of

the Prophet's grandson, Husayn, in 680 CE. The attention to sacred times in the Islamic calendar is complemented by the importance of sacred space. Many visit the shrines of prophets and holy figures, as well as sites at which some event in their tradition's sacred history had transpired, seeking a prayer answered or the contemplative ambience of the sacred. This practice is commonly known as *ziyārah*. For most Muslims, the most important *mazār* (place of visitation) is the Prophet's own mosque and tomb in the city of Medina.

Islamic creed has been formulated in many different ways within the Islamic tradition; on many issues there are diverse points of view, yet there is also consistency on many fundamental beliefs. The shared foundations of the Islamic creed include belief in the oneness of God, affirmation of the prophethood of Muhammad as the last messenger sent to mankind, and the expectation of the final return to God. On the basis of Quranic teachings, Islamic belief also recognizes that we inhabit a living spiritual cosmos, containing angels and *jinn*, which interact with humans and have the capacity to worship God. The Quran sees its message as the affirmation of the many revelations that have preceded it; for each civilization there has been a revealed religion that includes both a revelation and a messenger. These central points of Islamic creed are summarized in the Quranic verse: "The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and so have the believers. All of them have believed in Allah, His angels, His books and His messengers, [saying], 'We make no distinction between any of His messengers.' And they say, 'We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the final destination.'" (2:285)

The Islamic tradition has fostered a wide variety of approaches to understanding and conclusions about the nature of God, the world we live in, and the nature of humanity. Various disciplines have emerged that deal with these questions, including a wide variety of theological, philosophical and mystical schools. Over the centuries there has been much discussion of revelation, reason and mystical insights as sources of knowledge, leading to rich traditions of inquiry in both prose and poetry questions such as freewill, the relation of God and creation, and the possibility of a finite being knowing the Infinite. Muslim intellectuals have also engaged in the natural sciences, seeing no conflict between belief in God and study of the natural world, which the Quran declares to be filled with the signs of God. Although the technical discussions of theology, philosophy and mysticism in Muslim cultures required a great deal of specialized training, all strata of society participated in questions of the nature of reality, humanity and the cultivation of character through the composition, recitation and performance of diverse literary forms, in Arabic, Persian and the many vernacular languages of Muslim communities.

One *Ummah* with Many Views

"You who believe, obey God and the Messenger, and those in authority among you. If you are in dispute over any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day: that is better and fairer in the end." (Quran, 4:59)

Muslims are united in one *ummaḥ*, or community, by their common testimony to the unity of God and the prophecy of Muhammad. Within this unity there is also diversity, reflecting differences of interpretation of Quran and *ḥadīth*, which led to debates about the nature of political authority and spiritual leadership and the development of various schools of jurisprudence. Muslims have interpreted the paradigm of the Prophet in many ways, each emphasizing particular aspects of his life

and teachings. These traditions both complement and sometimes contradict each other, thus weaving the rich tapestry of Muslim piety.

Perhaps the most significant division of Muslims is between those groups known as Shi'a and those known as Sunnis. The initial split involved a dispute over who should assume Muhammad's role of leading the community after his death, what type of authority this person should have, and what its scope and basis should be. These differences led to the initial development of varying systems of law and theology.

Drawing on the model of Muhammad's close relationship with God and his mystical experiences and devotional practices, a crystallization of the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam also emerged in the early centuries of Islam. Known today as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), this movement became instrumental in the spread of Islam to all parts of the world. Sufism transcends many of the divisions in Islam, its organizations and artistic expressions inspiring Muslims to greater spiritual awareness.

An important stream of Islamic tradition developed around the model of Muhammad as interpreter of religious and legal doctrine, which came to be called *sharī'ah*, the "path" or "way." *Sharī'ah* represents the moral and ethical values that enable Muslims to follow the will of God in accordance with the paradigm of the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet, a group of scholars, or '*ulamā'*', emerged. Some of these scholars established major schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), the laws derived from the *sharī'ah* that determine how those moral principles should be applied.



Shi'a and Sunni Interpretations



A devotional portrait of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Ahmad al-Shahman, 1990, Wikimedia Commons

The *Shī'at 'Alī* ("the party of Ali," for which Shi'a is an abbreviation) considered certain designated descendants of the Prophet to be the only legitimate successors to Muhammad as political as well as religious leaders of the *ummah*. They believed that Muhammad's *wilāyah* (meaning proximity to God, spiritual grace and authority) and special knowledge to interpret the inner meaning of Quran had been given to Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, who was therefore the most qualified to lead the community. Shi'a Muslims believe that leadership was passed on by the designation of a successor (known as the Imam) within the Prophet's family. According to the Shi'a, a community without the direct revelation of a prophet must always have an Imam who will maintain the revelation and guide the community in applying it to new situations.

The majority of Shi'a, known as 'Twelvers', recognize a line of twelve Imams, the last of whom disappeared in the late ninth century CE. Believed to be identical to the Mahdi ('Rightly-Guided'), awaited by nearly all Muslims, who is expected to return in the Last Days to establish truth and justice on earth. Other Shi'a groups, such as the

Zaydis and Isma'ilis, trace the succession differently. The Zaydis identify themselves as following Zayd ibn 'Ali, the Prophet's great-great-grandson, who considered it incumbent on the Shi'a to rise up against unjust rulers. The Nizari Isma'ilis trace their spiritual succession from Isma'il to the current, living Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, who is their 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter and son-in-law Fatima and Ali, though there are also significant Isma'ili groups that affirm a different lineage.

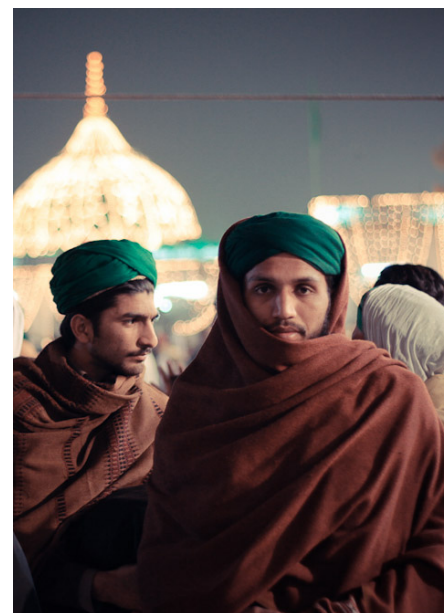
During the course of their history, the Shi'a and their Imams have faced a great deal of persecution from their opponents. The lives and the sufferings of Shi'a Imams are commemorated in story and ritual, as can be seen in the 'passion plays' performed on 'Āshūrah, the 10th day of the lunar month of *Muḥarram*, to recall the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam. Husayn and a small group of family members and loyal supporters were slaughtered in 680 CE at Karbala in modern day Iraq by the troops of the Umayyad ruler, Yazid I, after Husayn refused to accept his authority. The words of their Imams are also a source of law and spiritual guidance for Shi'a Muslims, in addition to the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet.

In contrast to the Shi'i perspective, the majority of the early community as represented by tribal leaders came to recognize Abu Bakr as-Siddiq to be the *khalīfah* (caliph, or successor) of Muhammad. Over time they came to insist that Muhammad had given his authority to the whole community, which could then choose its own leaders. For them, the sources of religious authority were the Quran, the Sunnah or custom of the Prophet, and *ijmā'*, the communal consensus of Muslims. This community thus became known as *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*, 'the people of the Sunnah and the community' or 'Sunnis'. The Sunni caliphs expanded the borders of the early Muslim empire; the Umayyad dynasty assumed the *khilāfah*, or caliphate, after 661 CE and ruled from Damascus. At first the caliphs had authority in both political and religious spheres, but gradually a distinct class of scholars, or '*ulamā'*', would guide the legal and theological life of the Sunni community.

Sufism: Seeking God

Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is not a separate sect of Islam, but rather a stream of interpretation emphasizing the interior path of mystical love and knowledge of God. A tradition describes the Prophet's spiritual journey, the *mi'rāj*, in which a celestial steed carried him to Jerusalem, from where he ascended into the highest heavens and came face to face with God. Taking the *mi'rāj* as an archetype of the spiritual journey, Sufism began as an imitation of Muhammad's simplicity and spiritual life in a time when the Umayyad caliphs (661–750) lived extravagantly. Many attribute the origins of the name "Sufi" to the coarse wool (*ṣūf*) garment worn by early ascetics. Others suggest the term derives from the Arabic word for purity (*ṣafā'*).

Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), a woman from the city of Basra, Iraq, is remembered as an important early figure in this tradition whose mystical devotion and love of God were exemplary. There are stories of her walking through the streets of Basra carrying a torch



Sufi gathering in Lahore, Pakistan, Usman Malik, 2012, Flickr Creative Commons.

in one hand and a bucket of water in the other, declaring: “I want to pour water into Hell and set fire to Paradise so that these two veils disappear and nobody worships God out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise, but only for the sake of His Eternal Beauty.”⁴

Sufi rituals focus on the remembrance of God, or *dhikru ‘Llāh*. Dhikr has a variety of expressions, including the chanting of God’s Names and short surahs from the Quran, but also music and dancing. Many of these practices are communal; the term ‘whirling dervish’ for example refers to a member of the Mevlevi Order, followers of the Sufi saint Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), who perform one such communal ritual, which involves a spinning dance combined with inner concentration on the presence of God. Sufism infuses Islam with a spirit of deep devotion and inner piety. Though the majority of Sufis throughout history have followed the *sharī‘ah* with dedication, many Sufis also offer a critique of the emphasis on the legalistic aspects of Islam alone—which Rumi argued were empty without spiritual reflection, as demonstrated by these lines from the his widely influential poem, *The Mathnawī*:

“He observes obedience and fasting and prayer
And devotions and almsgiving and so on
Yet never feels the least expansion of soul.
He performs the devotions and acts enjoined by the law
Yet derives not an atom of relish from them.”⁵

Various orders (sg. *ṭarīqah*) developed around prominent Sufi teachers from the 12th century onward, offering paths and guides for the soul’s journey to God, which reflects the Prophet’s celestial journey, some emphasizing austere discipline while others encouraging ecstatic devotional practices. Within the spiritual life of the orders, the role of the spiritual master (*shaykh* in Arabic, *pīr* in Persian) has always been paramount, as he or she would complement the method and doctrines of the order with individually tailored advice, based on insight into the particular state of the disciple’s soul. Strict adherence to the instructions of the master was the norm, as the disciple endeavored to overcome the limitations and desires of his or her ego and totally submit to God.



Mevlevi dervishes at the tomb of Jalal al-Din Rumi in Konya, Turkey, 2006, Mladifilosof, Wikimedia Commons.

The orders also became important ways for Muslims to organize themselves in society, establishing hostels (*zāwiyah* in Arabic, *khānaqah* in Persian) throughout the Muslim world, and taught their neighbors the way of devotion to God. It was though the influence of either particular charismatic Sufi masters and their disciples or the general influence of Sufism on culture that Islam spread throughout East and West Africa, South and Southeast Asia.

Today some Muslims challenge the legitimacy of Sufi beliefs and practices, such as the level of authority given to Sufi masters, and claim that they are not true representations of Islam, but rather ‘innovations’ that deviate from the original teachings of Muhammad and his companions. Sufism,

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 105.

⁵ *The Masnawi*, translation by E.N. Whinfield (1898) (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2010), p. 104.

however, continues to appeal to many Muslims throughout the world, to bring new Muslims into the *ummah*, to shape Islamic intellectual traditions, and to provide a vehicle for popular expressions of Islamic devotion. Many Sufis perform pilgrimage to shrines of Sufi masters, praying for intercession, aid and closeness to God. This has been controversial to some non-Sufi Muslims who take issue with the idea of requesting anything from the physically deceased. Such disputes regarding Sufism represent one dimension of the internal diversity of the tradition.

Sharī'ah: Following the Straight Path

The Prophet Muhammad was the interpreter of religious doctrine *par excellence* for the Muslim community. In the centuries after the Prophet's death, Muslim rule extended from Spain to the borders of China, and some thought that these rulers had abandoned the ideals of Muhammad's community at Medina. During the life of the Prophet, people began to collect *aḥadīth* (pl. of *ḥadīth*), the sayings of the Prophet as transmitted by his companions. *Ḥadīth* collections form an important part of the Sunnah, the example of the Prophet. Many critics of Muslim rulers were authorities on the Sunnah and respected interpreters of the Quran. These learned persons, collectively called the '*ulamā*', derived legal interpretations (*fiqh*) from the divine plan for humans known as *sharī'ah*. If *sharī'ah* is the totality of God's will regarding human action as represented in the Quran and Sunnah, then *fiqh* is the human endeavor to interpret it. Muslims, seeking to follow God's will in accordance with the example of the Prophet, look to these interpretations in order to best understand how to prepare for and perform devotional acts, regulate marriage and business contracts, and care for the poor. Contrary to popular perceptions of Islamic law, only a small percentage addresses criminal law; the vast majority of *fiqh* is related to ritual law and devotional practice.⁶



A man prays in a mosque in Kabul, Afghanistan, 1988, United Nations Photo, Flickr Creative Commons.

The legal methods and rulings of leading Sunni '*ulamā*' came to act as precedents for the community of scholars and judges, and there gradually developed a number of accepted schools of interpretation of the *sharī'ah*, of which four in the Sunni world remain. Named after the great scholars whose legal precedents they take after, they are the *Ḥanafī*, *Mālikī*, *Shāfi'ī*, and *Ḥanbalī* schools. The basic sources of *fiqh* are the Quran, the Sunnah, *ijmā'* (the consensus of the community), and *qiyās*, or reasoning by analogy. The Shi'a developed their own schools of interpretation, the most prominent of which is the *Ja'farī* school. The Quran and Sunnah, as interpreted by their Imams, are important sources for their *fiqh*. In addition, they emphasize '*aql*, or intellect, as a source.

The '*ulamā*' arose as a creative and corrective force, addressing the moral, ethical and social problems of their day. They later established traditional schools (sg. *madrasah*) throughout the Muslim world for advanced study of law, philosophy, theology, arts and sciences. These became models for the European university system. One of the most famous is the 10th century al-Azhar university in Cairo, which continues to serve as an educational center and source of religious authority for Sunni Muslims around

the world. Other important madrasas include Zeitunah in Tunisia and Nizamiyyah in Iraq. Shi'i 'ulamā' acquire their training and knowledge at a *hawzah*, or a Shi'i center of higher theological learning. The most renowned of these *hawzahs* are in Qom (Iran) and Najaf (Iraq).

Fiqh, or the human endeavor to understand the *sharī'ah*, is in a constant state of change as Muslims pose new questions to jurists. According to many Sunni legalists, while less emphasis is placed on independent interpretive reasoning (*ijtihād*), since major issues have been resolved by earlier 'ulamā', scholars today provide religious rulings to make sense of new contexts, such as, "Is it permissible to work as a waiter if I must serve alcohol?" or "Is it permissible to become an organ donor?" Shi'a schools, however, place a high value on independent reasoning, and the Shi'a scholars arguable play a much more significant role in interpreting *sharī'ah* in their communities, as Twelver Shi'a in particular believe that it is necessary to follow the interpretation of a living scholar. This helps to explain certain divergences between Sunni and Shi'i *fiqh*.

Continuously, Islamic law is culturally and historically interpreted, and 'proper' interpretation is itself often debated within and among Muslim communities across the globe. For example, in many parts of the Ottoman Empire Christians and Jews often chose to use Islamic courts to adjudicate domestic disputes, believing that they would get a fairer hearing there than they may through the alternative legal systems available. Diverse legal opinions and perspectives were one factor that contributed to the spread of Islam, as well as its adaptivity among divergent cultures.

In contemporary times, Islamic law continues to shape the devotional lives of many Muslims and regulate marriage, divorce, banking and other social and business contracts. In some countries, it has been interpreted as a rigid set of religious laws that serves as an influence within the national legal system or operates as an independent, parallel court system, and in some contexts it has been problematically adopted and imposed by non-state actors. Ultimately, it remains diverse and sometimes strongly contested. For example, some women and men in Saudi Arabia challenge interpretations of the *sharī'ah* that have been codified as laws barring women from driving cars. Most Muslims decry the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* that the Taliban imposed in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have practiced beginning in late 2014. In Malaysia, a group called the Sisters in Islam is actively challenging the interpretation of the *sharī'ah* practiced there as one that is biased against women and families and not an accurate representation of the Quran and Sunnah. These are some examples of efforts to revisit *sharī'ah* to address new situations.

The Expansion of Islamic Civilization

One of the distinctive features of the Islamic tradition is its rapid expansion into a large and diverse civilization, soon becoming divided into several centers of political authority. Although the Prophet's activities were mostly limited to the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, after his death the first four 'Rightly Guided' caliphs sent armies to conquer Syria, Egypt, Iraq and parts of Persia, which were then within the declining Byzantine and Persian empires. The Umayyad caliphs, ruling from 661-750 CE in Damascus, then further expanded the boundaries of Muslim rule to Spain in the West and to India in the East. Muslim rulers, soldiers, traders, Sufis, scholars, poets and architects all contributed to the shaping of distinctive Islamic cultures in North Africa and Spain, Persia and India.

The Abbasid Dynasty overthrew the Umayyads in 750 CE and ruled from Baghdad until the 13th century. Though its political power declined after the 9th century, the caliphate remained an important symbol of Muslim unity. Classical Islamic civilization—the major *ḥadīth* collections, legal schools, theological debates, Sufi orders, and traditions of Persian and Arabic poetry—flourished under the Abbasids.

The Fatimids established their dynasty in North Africa in 909 CE, conquering Egypt in 969. From their newly-established capital city of al-Qahira (Cairo), the Ismaʿili-Shiʿa Fatimids, who rivalled the Sunni Abbasids in Baghdad, created educational and cultural institutions, such as al-Azhar, and established themselves in trade. At its peak, Fatimid influence reached from the borderlands of India in the East to the Atlas Mountains in the West.

In 1258 The Mongols from Central Asia swept across the eastern Islamic heartland to Syria, ending the Abbasid *khilāfah* at Baghdad. Many of the invaders adopted Islam and the Persian language. Their descendants ruled Persia and central Asia for centuries, developing Persian culture and art. In the aftermath of the Mongol invasion, new empires emerged.

The Ottoman Turks, based in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) after 1453, established a vast empire that lasted from the 14th century until World War I. Supporters of Sunni Islam and Sufi orders, they were known for both military and architectural achievements. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughals ruled northern India, where the flourishing Indo-Muslim culture produced beautiful architecture, painting, and Sufi poetry. The Safavids championed Shiʿism in Persia from 1499 to 1722, encouraging Islamic art and philosophy.

Under each of these empires, transregional Islamic culture mixed with local traditions to produce distinctive forms of statecraft, theology, art, architecture and science. Many scholars argue that the European Renaissance would not have been possible without the creativity and myriad achievements of Muslim scholars, thinkers, and civilizations.

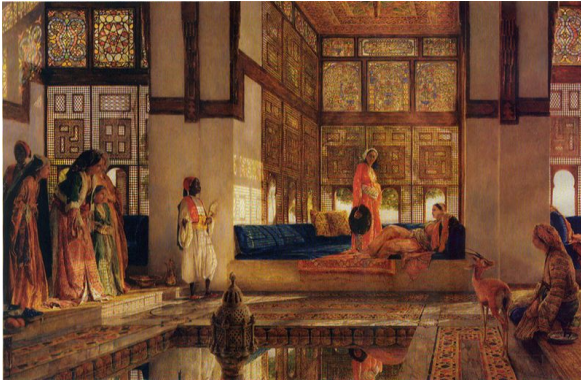
In the course of its history Islam spread beyond the Middle East to other regions of the world, most notably South and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa through merchant communities and Sufi orders (sing. *tariqah*), with Muslim empires arising as native rulers converted to Islam and sought to expand their borders. Reform movements that linked together religious and social concerns were particularly instrumental in spreading Islam, which became especially significant in the 18th century through the contemporary era.



Sayyida Roqiya Niasse, daughter of the West African Sufi leader Ibrahim Niasse, Joseph Hill, 2009, Flickr Creative Commons.

The Rise of European Colonialism

During the period of European colonial expansion, from the 17th through the 20th centuries, non-Muslim merchants and missionaries, soldiers and colonial administrators came to dominate much of the Muslim world. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and French all developed colonial empires, and the Chinese and Russians also expanded their territories into Muslim-majority regions.



John Frederick Lewis, 'The Reception', 1873, [Wikipedia Commons](#)

By the 20th century, only frail Ottoman and Persian dynasties maintained power, and only a few areas such as Afghanistan and central Arabia avoided colonial domination. The French ruled much of North Africa and parts of West and Central Africa. The British controlled Muslim areas of Africa (including Egypt) and of Asia (including India with its large Muslim minority) and parts of Southeast Asia. The Dutch ruled most of present-day Indonesia, while the Spanish controlled parts of North Africa and the Philippines. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismembered and parceled out to Britain (the Persian Gulf region, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq) and France

Such foreign domination was not only humiliating for many Muslims, particularly social elites, but also threatened the very foundations of Islamic society, as European rulers replaced traditional Muslim educational, legal and governmental institutions with Western ones. Europeans undermined the religious ethos of Muslim territories by privileging Christian-influenced, secular and materialistic cultural values and by encouraging ethnic, national and religious divisions in the *ummah*.

The new conditions of the experience of the dominance of the European colonial powers had a significant impact on a number of very different movements of reform and revival in the Islamic world, redefining what it meant to be Muslim in this new context. The struggle to understand how God would allow Muslims to become subjugated to foreign, non-Muslim powers contributed to the emergence of three major perspectives: Salafism, modernism and messianism.

Even before the arrival of colonial powers into the Islamic world, some scholars from diverse backgrounds were arguing that the faith and practice of Muslims had become distanced from the original message of the Quran and the Prophet, as the masses had adopted devotional practices, of which the devotion to saints is the most commonly mentioned, that they saw as unjustified innovations. They also felt that scholars had begun to give more importance to the centuries of scholastic tradition than to the original texts of the religion. For many, the failure of Muslim societies to resist colonialism was a sign of God's displeasure in the corruption of the last religion, and therefore the correct response was to return to the era of the first Muslim community. Now referred to as 'Salafis', a reference to the *salaf* or early companions of the Prophet, those who hold this perspective are interested in the 'correct' practice of Islam and reject anything they perceive to be innovations inconsistent with their interpretation of the model of the early Muslim community, focusing on Sufism and Shi'ism in particular. Such reformers often look to the Quran and Sunnah as the only authoritative sources for Islamic law, but, to varying degrees, they ignore the inherent pluralism and the continued discourses of the *shari'ah* system in favor of a single interpretation of those sources. Some examples of

these diverse movements are the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, and the Jama'a-i Islami of Pakistan.

In contrast to the Salafis, others saw western dominance to be the result of a technological and cultural progress that was worthy of imitation. Colonial rule introduced Western education, nationalism and certain technologies to much of the Muslim world, and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries many Muslims travelled to Europe to study in Western universities. However, many modernist Muslim reformers did not idealize the West, lamenting the changes in their societies that they attributed to western materialism, yet also being frustrated with what they considered to be a failure on behalf of the traditional '*ulamā*' to provide a meaningful response. Scholars such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) argued for greater emphasis on reason, in the modern western sense of the term, in developing an interpretation of Islam that could adapt to the needs of the times. Despite differing attitudes towards the modern West, the revivalist interests of modernists and of Salafis, along with their criticisms of the centuries of Islamic scholarly tradition, led to considerable overlap between these trends.

The dominance of the colonial powers had another meaning for several charismatic Muslim leaders in the 19th and 20th centuries, heralding the end of the world described vividly in the Quran. A number of individuals claimed to be the awaited Mahdi, and thus to be the representative of the Prophet that would lead the world to justice, including the Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), whose movement was eventually quelled by the British in 1898, and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) in British-ruled India, whose followers today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, number in the millions.

Salafism, modernism and messianism have led to great changes in what it means to be Muslim for large numbers of people around the world. However, this is not to say that all Muslims fit into these three categories. Indeed, the beliefs, ways of life, and scholarly traditions of traditional Islam continue to exist across the Islamic world, no doubt adapting to the changing conditions of the modern world yet maintaining a greater continuity with their past than any of these three trends. In response to these three trends, many conservatives and traditionalists reasserted the authority of the '*ulamā*' and the need for recourse to tradition.

In the early 20th century, further changes in the understanding of what it meant to be Muslim were brought about by the rise of nation states in the wake of independence movements in many Muslim countries, inspired to varying degrees by both the revival of Islamic principles and institutions and by Western-style nationalism. Muslims have adopted many different models for their post-colonial states, with the founders of each state coming up with their own approach to the role that Islam should play in a modern polity. The early leaders of modern Turkey, primarily Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938), declared a secular state in 1923 in which Islam would not play any role, abolishing the caliphate, replacing the Islamic court system and legal interpretation with a European-style law code, and outlawing Sufi orders. In contrast, after World War II, Pakistan was created as a homeland for the Muslim minority communities of the Subcontinent, initially welcoming diverse ways of practicing Islam and other faiths, but becoming an Islamic republic promoting a single interpretation of Islam in the 1980s under the military regime of Zia ul-Haqq. Some Islamic reform movements have adopted an ideology of political revolution, fusing particular interpretations of Islamic tradition with modern ideologies and political structures. The revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 is one example of this type of movement, and drew on influences including Shi'i theology and Marxism. It is

important to note that these movements are not monolithic but location-specific. However, in general the modern nation state has emerged as a new type of authority that has a role in defining what Islam means.

Resurgence and Migration: The Muslim World Today

Muslims today listen to and interpret the divine word of the Quran, and strive to live their lives according to the *shari'ah* and a diverse set of ritual practices. Muslims also follow the model of the Prophet, and some pursue the inward path of Sufi teachings. These are the facets of traditional Islam largely held in common across time and place in the Muslim world. Today in the post-colonial era, the Muslim world is expanding and experiencing the challenges of both resurgence and worldwide migration.

Whereas in the 20th century Islam had played an important role in the development of nation states in the Islamic world, in the last few decades certain groups have begun interpreting Islam as a political ideology to undermine the nation state, as radical groups such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) have dominated global headlines with terrorist acts perpetrated against Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They typically conceive of the world in terms of a 'clash of civilizations', in which they serve as the vanguard of Islam against an unjust, corrupting, and materialistic West, although individual reasons for joining such groups vary widely. Their actions have been roundly condemned by governments, religious groups (including most Muslims), and citizens across the globe, though many urge attention to the conditions that have given rise to these groups, including the legacies of colonialism, the lingering tensions between Israel and Palestine, and the negative consequences of globalization.

However, such radical groups only represent one approach within a wide spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum, Sufi orders continue to serve as important social institutions which exert spiritual influence and, at times, political influence. In Senegal for example, it has been estimated that 90 per cent of the Muslim population (which makes up around 92 percent of the total population) belong to a Sufi order, and leaders of the *Murīdiyyah* order in particular have a significant, though often indirect, influence in the sphere of government. Additionally, prominent transnational orders, such as the *Bā'Alawiyyah* based in Yemen, connect thousands of Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula to Indonesia and the United States with a transnational identity and a message of devotion and love for God and the Prophet.



Abida Parveen, renowned singer of Muslim devotional poetry. 2007. Tore Urnes.

In the post-colonial context, migration has also reshaped the Islamic world. The number of emigrants from predominantly Muslim countries to Western Europe and the Americas has increased significantly in the past thirty years, with the exodus including highly-educated professionals, laborers, students and political refugees. There are now thriving Muslim communities and magnificent mosques in Paris, London and Rome, as well as New York,

Vancouver and Mexico City. Immigrant Muslims, however, have often faced considerable hostility, the product of both racial and religious prejudice in their new homes.



Drawing of Abdulrahman Ibrahim Ibn Sori, who was a Muslim prince in West Africa and made a slave in the United States. Wikimedia Commons.

In the United States, recent immigrants of all backgrounds mix with second and third generation American Muslims, converts from other faiths, and an African American Muslim community with historic roots that go back to transatlantic slavery. This mixing is encouraging the growth of a uniquely American expression of Islam, which in turn mixes with other expressions as ideas, opinions, and knowledge is exchanged—an experience that may potentially prove as true of Islam