

Origins and Fundamentals of Islam
AP World History
Kienast

Islam is a monotheistic religious tradition that developed in the Middle East in the 7th century C.E. Islam, which literally means "surrender" or "submission," was founded on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as an expression of surrender to the will of Allah, the creator and sustainer of the world. The Quran, the sacred text of Islam, contains the teachings of the Prophet that were revealed to him from Allah. Essential to Islam is the belief that Allah is the one and true God with no partner or equal. Islam has several branches and much variety within those branches. The two divisions within the tradition are the Sunni and Shi'a, each of which claims different means of maintaining religious authority. One of the unifying characteristics of Islam is the Five Pillars, the fundamental practices of Islam. These five practices include a ritual profession of faith, ritual prayer, the zakat (charity), fasting, and the hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca). Many Muslims are characterized by their commitment to praying to Allah five times a day. One of the defining characteristics of Islam is the primacy of sacred places including Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Muslims gather at mosques to worship Allah, pray, and study scripture. There is not a sharp distinction between the religious and secular aspects of life in Islam; all aspects of a Muslim's life are to be oriented to serving Allah. Islam expanded almost immediately beyond its birthplace in the Arabian peninsula, and now has significant influence in Africa, throughout Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

Adherents of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims are those who surrender to the will of God (Allah, in Arabic) in every aspect of their lives and enjoy the resulting peace with God and each other. The prophet Muhammad gave the name Islam to the religious movement he founded.

There are several events that could be considered the beginning of Islam, including the life of Muhammad. If we seek the beginning of Islam in a sacred event, then perhaps it lies in the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadar*), when Muhammad received the call to be God's messenger. This article briefly sets the context for this decisive event, and notes its essential meaning in Islam.

In the Islamic worldview, the origins of the faith lie in God's initial creation of the universe and everything in it, including the First Parents, Adam and his wife. For a time, all creatures lived in perfect peace, but then the First Parents were tempted by Iblis or Shayṭan [Satan] and disobeyed God's rules. As a result, Adam and his wife were banished from Paradise, though God reassured Adam that the banishment was temporary. God promised to send messengers to Adam and his progeny, and these messengers would bring God's guidance. Adam was reassured that those who follow God's guidance will have no reason to feel fear or grief (*Surah* 2:31-38).

One of God's most important messengers was Abraham (Arabic, Ibrahim), who was called by God to leave his home in Ur (in present-day Iraq). Abraham (whose name means "Father of Many Nations") is revered in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the ideal model of pure faith in the one true God. Abraham's Islam was exemplary. He followed God's instructions in everything, and was even willing to sacrifice his own son because God had commanded it. The sacred story of Islam tells of how Abraham and his son Ishmael (Arabic, Ismail) built the *Kaaba* (literally "House of God") in Mecca, the center of Muslim worship.

Muhammad, the final messenger sent by God, belonged to the *Quraysh*, the tribe that controlled the sacred sites of Mecca, including the *Kaaba*. At the time of Muhammad's birth, ca. 570 C.E., the culture of the Arabian peninsula was generally animistic and polytheistic. Shrines with idols proliferated, especially in Mecca. The *Kaaba* was filled with idols that had been placed there by the different tribes and clans of Arabia. Allah, which means quite simply "the God," was the highest god, but only one among many.

Still, monotheism was not unknown, as there were Christian and Jewish tribes in Arabia. They too had received guidance from God's messengers, recorded in sacred writings such as the Torah (Moses), the Psalms (David), or the Gospel (Jesus). They were "People of the Book," or people who possessed sacred scripture. But from the perspective of Muhammad and his followers, God's message in these scriptures had become corrupted, whether by time or self-interest. A fresh revelation was needed, one that was incorruptible, and Muhammad was called to deliver it. Although Muhammad was a prophet to the Arabs of the 7th century, the message was timeless and intended for all humankind. It was God's final revelation, and thus Muhammad is called the last prophet, or Seal of the Prophets.

This revelation, which was to become the foundation of Islam, had its beginning in the Night of Power, which many traditional accounts date to the night between the 26th and 27th of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Muhammad often went to the caves of Mt. Hira near Mecca for solitary meditations and vigils, and on this night, he experienced a profound and disturbing vision. There are several versions of the story. They differ in the details, but the meaning is the same. An angelic being, later identified by Muhammad as Archangel Gabriel, appeared to him and commanded him to "recite" in the name of God. Muhammad did not respond immediately, and the angel took him by the throat and shook him as he repeated his command to "recite." Again Muhammad did not react, so the angel choked him until Muhammad agreed to do as he was told. So began Muhammad's years as a prophet, first to the Meccans and ultimately to all of Arabia.

This decisive event took place when Muhammad was forty years old, ca. 610, and the revelations continued until his death in 632. The Quran is the record of the messages Muhammad recited in the name of God. It forms the basis of the religion of Islam, which by the time of Muhammad's death had united nearly all the people of the Arabian Peninsula into a single polity with common beliefs and purpose. And it is the inaugural event for the establishment and spread of a religion that is now the second-largest religion in the world, with over one billion followers. Muslims live in almost every country in the world, and are the majority in forty-eight countries stretching from north Africa to southeast Asia, with the greatest populations concentrated in south Asia and Indonesia. Despite the great diversity in languages, customs, lifestyles, and beliefs, Muslims share their love for the messenger and dedication to the message.

When the prophet Muhammad died unexpectedly from illness in 632, divisions arose in the community about the question of succession. Some believed that the Prophet had named his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor, and Ali's descendants after him. Other believed that Muhammad had not named a successor, nor had he established a method of choosing his successor. These two groups eventually grew into the two main groups of Islam, the Shi'a and the Sunni. Shiites and Sunnis share many of the same religious beliefs. Both follow the Quran and observe the five Pillars of Islam. At its core, the distinction between the two groups lies in their beliefs about the proper succession of community leadership. Sunni Muslims accept

the authority of the Prophet's companions, while Shi'i Muslims believe that members of the Prophet's family have the sole legitimate claim to leadership.

Shi'a	Sunni
*believe Muhammad named Ali as successor	*Do not believe Muhammad named successor
*Muhammad's family has sole claim to legitimate leadership	*the Prophet's companions have authoritative leadership
*rely on authoritative teaching of Muhammad's descendants	*rely on consensus (Arabic, ijma) of religious and religious scholars

The Sunnis are the larger of the two groups, representing about 85 percent of the world's current one billion or more Muslims. The word *sunni* derives from *sunnah*, which means "the trodden path." The *sunnah* is the body of custom and tradition regarding the exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, drawn mostly from the *hadith*, the collection of the traditions concerning Muhammad's life, sayings, and actions. Muhammad is considered the very model of Islamic conduct, inspired by God to live wisely in submission to God's will. The *sunnah* is a primary resource for Sunni Muslims in family law and in the ethical conduct of their lives. In addition, the Sunni rely on the consensus (Arabic, *ijma*) of legal and religious scholars, as opposed to the authoritative teaching of the descendants of Muhammad, as the Shi'a do. Sunni Islam is thus a tradition that emphasizes the community's role in providing wisdom about right belief and practice guided by the Quran and the *sunnah*.

Due to the large numbers of adherents, and the geographical and historical reach of Sunni Islam, the tradition necessarily incorporates a wide diversity of theological and legal views, and further diversity based in historical, geographical, and cultural differences. However, there are a number of historical points on which all Sunni Muslims share common ground. One of the most important of these is the rejection of the Shi'a claim that Muhammad chose Ali and his descendants as the sole legitimate heirs of the leadership of the global Muslim community.

Shi'a	Sunni
Use title "imam"	Use title "caliph"
Imam is intercessor	Imam means "prayer leader" (not "intercessor")
Iman is descendant of Muhammad	Imam is not a descendant
Imam is a religious and political leader	Caliph is only a political leader

The Shi'a is the smaller of the two groups, currently representing about 15 percent of the world's Muslims. At the time of Muhammad's death, they were known as the shi'at Ali, or the partisans of Ali. Ali finally became caliph in 656, but was assassinated in 661. When Ali died, the Shi'a thought that Ali's son, Hasan ibn Ali should become caliph, but Ali's enemy Mu'awiyah became caliph instead. After Hasan died, the Shi'a supported his brother Husayn ibn Ali. Husayn and his family were massacred at Karbala in what is now modern Iraq by an Iraqi governor, a tragedy that became the defining moment for the Shi'a. It plays a critical role in Shi'i identity, ritual, and politics. It also won Muslims to the Shi'a cause, especially Muslims disaffected with the Umayyads, and non-Arab Muslims wanting to free themselves from Arab dominance.

The Shi'a prefer the title of imam to the title of caliph. In Sunni Islam, humans are in a direct relationship with God, and the caliph became simply the political leader of the Arab states that emerged after Muhammad's death. A Sunni imam is a prayer leader, but not an intercessor. On the other hand, the Shi'a believe that Islam includes intercession. The rightful successors of Muhammad, the imams, are both the religious and political authoritative leaders of the community, directly descended from the Prophet and divinely inspired. They intercede with God on behalf of Muslims.