



# Overview of Islam

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This is not intended to be a treatise on all aspects of Islam. Rather, in the context of exploring the existence of this religion as a comparison to Christianity, it will provide a very brief overview that may be helpful to those for whom Islam is not their religion of practice.

## **History<sup>1</sup>**

The second half of the sixth century was a period of political disorder in Arabia and communication routes were no longer secure. Religious divisions became an important cause of crisis. In addition to Judaism becoming the dominant religion of Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen, Christianity took root in the Persian Gulf.

While much of Arabia remained polytheistic, in line with broader trends of the age, there was yearning for a more spiritual form of religion. Many were reluctant to convert to a foreign faith, but those faiths provided intellectual and spiritual reference points. As a result, the old pagan vocabulary of Arabic began to be replaced by Jewish and Christian loan-words from Aramaic throughout the peninsula.

On the eve of the Islamic era, Quraysh was the chief tribe of Mecca and a dominant force in western Arabia. To counter the effects of anarchy, they upheld the institution of "sacred months" when all violence was forbidden and travel was safe. The polytheistic Kaaba shrine in Mecca and the surrounding area became a popular pilgrimage destination, which later, had significant economic consequences for the city.

According to tradition, the Islamic prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca around the year 570. His family belonged to the Quraysh. When he was about forty years old, he began receiving what Muslims consider to be divine revelations delivered through the angel Gabriel, which would later form the Quran, enjoining him to proclaim a strict monotheistic faith, warn his compatriots of the impending Judgement Day, and castigated social injustices of his city.

Muhammad's message won over a handful of followers and was met with increasing opposition from notables of Mecca. In 618, after he lost protection with the death of his influential uncle Abu Talib, Muhammad took flight to the city of Yathrib (subsequently called Medina) where he was joined by his followers. Later generations would count this event, known as the hijra, as the start of the Islamic era.

In Yathrib, where he was accepted as an arbitrator among the different communities of the city. under the terms of the Constitution of Medina, Muhammad began to lay the foundations of the new Islamic society, with the help of new Quranic verses which provided guidance on

matters of law and religious observance. The surahs of this period emphasized his place among the long line of Biblical prophets, but also differentiated the message of the Quran from Christianity and Judaism.

Armed conflict with Meccans and Jewish tribes of the Yathrib area soon broke out. After a series of military confrontations and political maneuvers, Muhammad was able to secure control of Mecca and allegiance of the Quraysh in 629. In the time remaining until his death in 632, tribal chiefs across the peninsula entered into various agreements with him, some under terms of alliance, others acknowledging his prophethood and agreeing to follow Islamic practices, including paying the alms levy to his government, which consisted of a number of deputies, an army of believers, and a public treasury.

## **Denominations**

### Distribution of the Denominations

90% of Muslims are Sunnis and 10% are Shi'ites. Regardless of the numbers, this does leave room for discrimination. Islamic peoples are deeply rooted with their religion; for example - suicide bombers dying for their faith because they believe it will take them to Paradise. Sunnis view Shi'ites as heretics and in Saudi Arabia; Shi'ites are powerless and retain absolutely no rights. This creates a problem. Other Arab countries with Sunni majorities have followed suit.

In nations where Sunnis are the majority, they can virtually have their way with the Shi'ites. But strangely enough, in Iran and Iraq the tables are turned. Iran is 90% Shi'ite and 10% Sunni while Iraq is 60% Shi'ite and 40% Sunni. Numbers like these are the ones that create problems. The Sunnis in Iran are at a disadvantage and oppressed while their neighbors are allowed freedom in majority Sunni countries.

## **Similarities<sup>2</sup>**

The terms Sunni and Shi'ite are thrown around on news reports and you hear them all the time now, thanks to the war in Iraq. Though they are both sects of Islam, integrally, they are almost two different religions.

There is a substantial common denominator between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. All Muslims believe that Allah chose a man named Muhammad as the Prophet of Islam, and that, with Allah's blessings and continuous revelations, Muhammad guided the Muslims to lead life according to the Qur'an, a collection of divine revelations, and the "Hadith" (the sayings, teachings, and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, which serve as a supplement to the Qur'an). In a short period of 22 years, from 610 to 632 A.D., he succeeded in leaving a great political and spiritual legacy that ultimately led to the establishment of Islamic civilization.

All Muslims believe that piety, righteous observance of the principles of the Qur'an, and striving for goodness in daily life are the greatest virtues of human beings. Both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims agree on the need for a strong ethical and moral code to regulate human behavior in all its manifestations. Social justice is also believed to be a fundamental right.

Sunnis and Shi'ites share the belief that there are five pillars of Islam:

- (1) the unity of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad,
- (2) the five obligatory prayers,
- (3) fasting,
- (4) charity, and
- (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Both groups also believe that the Qur'an has a Divine source, and that Allah's prophetic missions concluded with Muhammad.

## Differences

The differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam originated in a historical dispute over the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. On Muhammad's death in 632 A.D., the "Majlis al-Shura" (assembly of advisors), comprising the most devoted and highly knowledgeable Muslims, selected Abu Bakr as the first Caliph, or leader, of the Muslims. Abu Bakr was one of the close companions of Muhammad, and the father of Muhammad's second wife. This action by the assembly indicated that leaders were to be selected by Muslims on the basis of their *piety and merit*, and ruled out the idea of a bloodline succession to the Prophet in the religious and political governance of Islam.

Most Muslims accepted the selection of Abu Bakr as the first legitimate Caliph, who would rule according to the practices established by the Prophet. On major worldly issues concerning which there was no direct reference in the Qur'an, the Prophet had taken advice from the assembly of advisors, so it seemed the appropriate body to decide the issue of the succession.

The first Shi'ites were a small group of Muslims who opposed the selection of Abu Bakr as the first Caliph. They rallied around the person of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who had married the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. They supported Ali and the concept of a legitimate *bloodline succession* to the Prophet Muhammad in both religious and temporal matters. Ali achieved this through his marriage to Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. Ali had, in fact, been one of the prominent members of the consulting body which selected Abu Bakr as the first Caliph of Islam. But given the tribal traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, the selection of Abu Bakr was regarded by some Muslims as denying the right of Ali to succeed the Prophet and serve as a leader or Imam in religious and political matters.

The schism led to the creation of two major branches of Islam, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The supporters of Ali were called Shi'ites. Distinguished authorities on the Arabic language define the word "Shi'ite" as meaning a group of people that develops consensus on an issue. Etymologically, the word's meaning is confined to the helpers, supporters, and partisans of a person but, by and large, the word is applied to the followers of Ali and his eleven male descendants. The Shi'ite's have a strong identification with suffering and martyrdom.

The supporters of Abu Bakr were Sunnis. The word "Sunni," which means "orthodox," is applied to Muslims who are part of the main branch of Islam and belong to one of the four schools of jurisprudence, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shaf'i. Although Ali is highly regarded by Sunni Muslims, they reject the Shi'ite conception of the (blood) succession to Muhammad.

Simply stated, the Sunnis believed in 'capability' and the Shi'ites believed in 'blood' when handing down political power, a tradition still practiced in Muslim nations.<sup>3</sup>

It has been offered that the Islamic denominational differences are somewhat similar to the differences between Catholics and Protestants in Christianity. The Shi'ite's have a supreme religious leader (similar to the Pope) who is considered to be a descendant of Ali. The Sunnis do not have one religious leader; instead, have distinguished scholars and jurists who issue opinions (pastors and ministers).

## **Doctrine of Sharia**

*Sharia* ("the way" or "the path") refers to the sacred law of Islam. All Muslims believe *sharia* is God's law, but have differences among themselves as what it exactly entails. Modernists, traditionalists, and fundamentalists all hold different views of *sharia*, as do followers of the different schools of Islamic thought and scholarship. Even different countries and cultures have varying interpretations of *sharia*.<sup>4</sup>

Muslims believe all *sharia* is derived from two primary sources: the divine revelations set forth in the Qur'an, and the sayings and example set by the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in the *Sunnah* (Muslims use this term to refer to the sayings and living habits of Muhammad).<sup>5</sup> *Fiqh* (meaning "jurisprudence") interprets and extends the application of *sharia* to questions not directly addressed in the primary sources by including secondary sources. These secondary sources usually include the consensus of the religious scholars embodied in *ijma* (consensus)<sup>6</sup> and analogy from the Qur'an and Sunnah through *qiyas* (the process of analogical reasoning in which the teachings of the *Hadith* [narrations originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad]<sup>7</sup> are compared and contrasted with those of the Qur'an)<sup>8</sup>.

Shia jurists replace *qiyas* analogy with *aql* (the process of using intellect or logic to deduce law)<sup>9</sup>. Where it enjoys official status, *sharia* is applied by Islamic judges (*qadis*). The Imam has varying responsibilities depending on the interpretation of *sharia*. While the term "Imam" is commonly used to

refer to the leader of communal prayers, the Imam may also be a scholar, a religious leader, or a political leader. *Sharia* deals with many topics addressed by secular law, including crime, politics and economics, as well as personal matters such as sexuality, hygiene, diet, prayer, and fasting.

### **Equality of Men and Women in Islam**

So their Lord accepted their prayer: That I will not waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female, the one of you being from the other; they, therefore, who fled and were turned out of their homes and persecuted in My way and who fought and were slain, I will most certainly cover their evil deeds, and I will most certainly make them enter gardens beneath which rivers flow; a reward from Allah, and with Allah is yet better reward.<sup>10</sup>

Surely the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and the patient women and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember-- Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward.<sup>11</sup>

Sharia (Islamic law) provides for differences between women's and men's roles, rights, and obligations. Majority Muslim countries give women varying degrees of rights without regards to marriage, divorce, civil rights, legal status, dress code, and education based on different interpretations. Scholars and other commentators vary as to whether they are just and whether they are a correct interpretation of religious imperatives. Conservatives argue that differences between men and women are due to different status, while liberal Muslims, Muslim feminists, and others argue in favor of other interpretations. Some women have achieved high political office in Muslim majority states.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Islamic Women Employment<sup>13</sup>**

In the 12th century, the famous Islamic philosopher and qadi (judge) Ibn Rushd, known to the West as Averroes, claimed that women were equal to men in all respects and possessed equal capacities to shine in peace and in war, citing examples of female warriors among the Arabs, Greeks and Africans to support his case. In early Muslim history, examples of notable female Muslims who fought during the Muslim conquests and Fitna (civil wars) as soldiers or generals included Nusaybah Bint k'ab Al Maziniyyah, Aisha, Kahula, and Wafeira.

A unique feature of medieval Muslim hospitals was the role of female staff, who were rarely employed in hospitals elsewhere in the world. Medieval Muslim hospitals commonly employed female nurses. Muslim hospitals were also the first to employ female physicians, the most famous being two female physicians from the Banu Zuhr family who served the Almohad ruler Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur in the 12th century. This was necessary due to the segregation between male and female patients in

Islamic hospitals. Later in the 15th century, female surgeons were illustrated for the first time in Şerafeddin Sabuncuoğlu's *Cerrahiyyetu'l-Haniyye* (Imperial Surgery).

#### Gender Roles in Islam<sup>14</sup>

The Qur'an expresses two main views on the role of women. It both stresses the equality of women and men before God in terms of their religious duties (i.e. belief in God and his messenger, praying, fasting, paying zakat (charity), making hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca/ Medina)) and places them "under" the care of men (i.e. men are financially responsible for their wives).

In one place it states: "Men are the maintainers and protectors of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women)." [Qur'an 4:34]

The Qur'an explains that men and women are equal in creation and in the afterlife. In Surah An-Nisa' 4:1, it states that men and women are created from a single soul (nafs wahidah). One person does not come before the other, one is not superior to the other, and one is not the derivative of the other. A woman is not created for the purpose of a man. Rather, they are both created for the mutual benefit of each other.

#### Terminology

##### Caliphate<sup>15</sup>

The term "caliphate" refers to the first system of governance established in Islam. The most common translation for the word which appears in the Qur'an is "vicegerency" (or caretaker). It is a constitutional republic, which means that the rulers are bound by a set of laws which they cannot break at a whim and the people have the right to appoint their leader through their local leaders. Should the elected leaders divert from their obligations as vicegerents, the people have the right to remove them.

##### Imam

An Imam is an Islamic leadership position. It is most commonly used in the context of a worship leader of a mosque and Muslim community by Sunni Muslims. In this context, Imams may lead Islamic worship services, serve as community leaders, and provide religious guidance.<sup>16</sup> For Shi'ites, they believe that the Imams are the true Caliphs or rightful successors of Muhammad, and are possessed of divine knowledge and authority. Shi'ite Imams have the role of providing commentary and interpretation of the Qur'an as well as guidance to their followers.<sup>17</sup>

##### Ulama

A Cleric (Ulama) are part of the educated class of Muslim legal scholars who are polymaths<sup>18</sup> engaged in several fields of Islamic studies. They are well versed in fiqh (jurisprudence) and are considered the arbiters of sharia law, being Islamic lawyers, and are considered the foundation of the law. A female Islamic scholar is known as an alimah.<sup>19</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Islam)
  - <sup>2</sup> <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/viewSubCategory.asp?id=754>
  - <sup>3</sup> [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/386764/sunnis\\_vs\\_shiites\\_why\\_did\\_they\\_fight.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/386764/sunnis_vs_shiites_why_did_they_fight.html)
  - <sup>4</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia>
  - <sup>5</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunnah>
  - <sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ijma>
  - <sup>7</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadith>
  - <sup>8</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qiyas>
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aql>
  - <sup>10</sup> Al-Qur'an, A Contemporary translation by Ahmed Ali, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993, Al-Imram 3:195, pages 71-72.
  - <sup>11</sup> Al-Qur'an, A Contemporary translation by Ahmed Ali, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993, Al-Ahzab 33:35, page 358.
  - <sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Islam)
  - <sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Islam)
  - <sup>14</sup> <http://islam51.blogspot.com/p/gender-roles-in-islam.html>
  - <sup>15</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caliphate>
  - <sup>16</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imam>
  - <sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imamah\\_\(Shia\\_doctrine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imamah_(Shia_doctrine))
  - <sup>18</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polymath>
  - <sup>19</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulama>