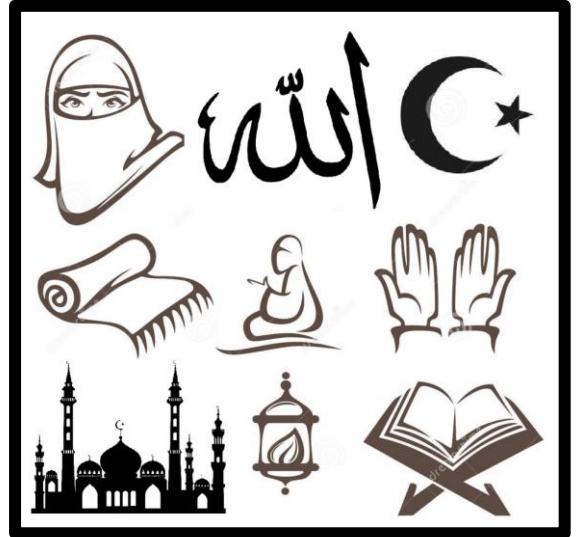


## Islam

Islam is practiced by over 90% of the people in the Middle East and North Africa. It is also the predominant religion in Central Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Southeast Asia and East Africa.

Islam forms a social foundation; it's a complete way of life. The crescent, the star and the color green, symbols of Islam, are found on the flags and currencies of many Islamic countries. There is no central controlling figure for Islam like the Pope for Catholics.

The map on the next page shows where Islam began. At Mecca, a trade crossroads in the desert, an Arab named Muhammad was born in A.D. 570. A thoughtful man who often prayed alone in the desert, in the year 610 Muhammad had a vision in which the angel Gabriel told him he was to become the "Messenger of God." After this vision, Muhammad came to see himself as a prophet whose central teaching was the absolute unity of God – Allah in Arabic. He called on men and women to submit to the will of Allah – the literal meaning of Islam. The word Muslim means "one who submits."

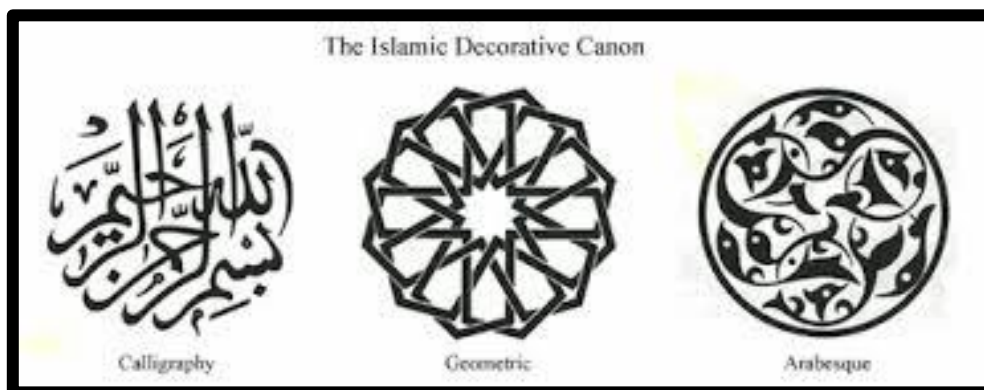


At first, the new religion grew slowly. Some Arabs preferred their many gods to the Allah preached by Muhammad. But as Islam won converts, some Meccans began to worry that Muhammad's monotheistic teaching would undercut the lucrative pilgrimage traffic to the shrines of many Meccan deities and decided to kill him. Muhammad secretly fled Mecca in A.D. 622 with the small band of believers for the neighboring town of Medina-an emigration, or hejira, from which Muslims date their calendar. Eventually, Muhammad and his followers won control of Medina, and in 630, Muhammad returned to Mecca with 10,000 warriors-the most powerful religious and political leader in Arabia.

Under Muhammad's leadership, the basic teachings of Islam were established, which are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. Every Muslim is expected to follow these rules in order to lead an ethical life:

- 1) **Confession of Faith:** the belief that "there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger."
- 2) **Prayer:** Muslims must pray five times per day, facing toward Mecca.
- 3) **Charity:** Muslims must give alms to the poor and support the local mosque by giving a portion of their income.
- 4) **Fasting:** during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, all Muslims must fast during daylight hours, except the very young or sick.
- 5) **Pilgrimage:** If possible financially, each Muslim must make a hajj, or holy pilgrimage, to the city of Mecca.

Muslims are not allowed to eat pork, drink alcohol or gamble. To prevent idol worship, Islamic law forbids its followers from drawing figurative images. This means that no statues or pictures adorn mosques, the Muslim places of worship. Instead they are decorated with beautiful scripts called calligraphy and geometric patterns called arabesques.

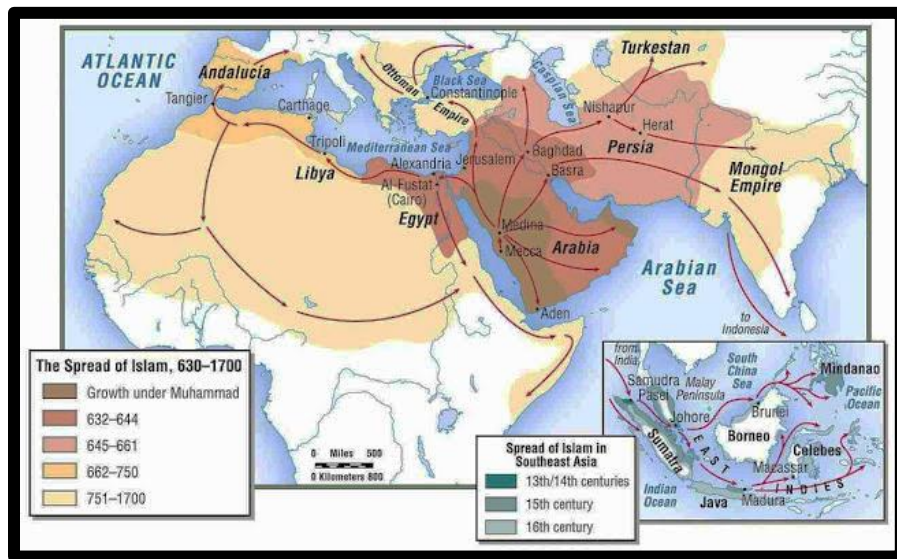


The Qur'an emphasizes that men and women are equal before Allah. However, it also stresses that the genders should conform to traditional roles. Therefore, since the family is patriarchal; women and children must obey the male head of the family. In some stricter societies courtship is limited, teenage boys and girls are not allowed to socialize, marriages could be arranged and polygamy (up to four wives) is allowed. In these situations and in more traditional, fundamentalist societies, women have few rights, and in some countries, they are still required to wear veils in public and practice seclusion in the home, which is called purdah.

### The Diffusion of Islam

After Muhammad's death in A.D. 632, leaders called caliphs carried on his mission. Under the first four caliphs, Muhammad's teachings were compiled into the Muslim holy book known as the Qur'an (sometimes spelled Koran) and the new religion spread like wildfire. In just 20 years, Arab armies, skilled in desert warfare and enflamed with zeal for jihad or holy war, swept over the wide flat deserts of the Middle East and North Africa.

From 661 to 750, a new dynasty of caliphs directed the Muslim empire from Damascus in what is now Syria. Under their leadership, a second wave of military conquests shook the world. Parts of Central Asia and India came under Islamic control. Then the Muslims crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and pushed into Spain and southern France. Finally 100 miles outside of Paris, the Muslim warriors were stopped in the Battle of Tours (Poitiers) and pushed back into Iberia.



### The Golden Age of Islam and Beyond

In 750, yet another dynasty of caliphs-the Abbasids-shifted the capital once again, this time to Baghdad in modern-day Iraq. For the next 500 years, while European culture was in decline during the Dark Ages, the Abbasids preserved-and translated into Arabic-Greek science and philosophy and Persian literature and history. In addition, they made significant contributions of their own, especially in the field of mathematics, astronomy, architecture, medicine and geography (Oh, yes!)

During this cultural flowering, Islam continued to spread to ever more distant realms. Now, however, it was transmitted more often through trade than by warriors. Camel caravans carried the faith across the Sahara Desert to Mali, Songhai and Bornu in West Africa. Merchant ships transmitted it to East Africa and those parts of Southeast Asia today known as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The word Muslim is a religious term while the word Arab is a cultural term dealing mainly with language. Historically Islam has been associated with Arab culture. Mecca is in Arabia, Mohammad was an Arab and the Qur'an was not allowed to be translated out of Arabic for fear that the words of Allah would be corrupted. Most Arabs are Muslims but most Muslims are not Arabs! In time, a number of non-Arabic ethnic groups embraced Islam and forged their own Muslim empires: the Mughals in India; the Safavids in Persia (now Iran); the Ottoman Turks in Asia Minor and southeastern Europe.

Today the era of vast empires unified by Islam has passed. Yet Islam remains the heart of most Middle Eastern cultures. And outside this core region, the Muslim faith continues to expand. According to some estimates, it is the fastest growing religion in the world.