

DIVERSITY IN ISLAM

As in most religious traditions, there is great diversity of belief and practice within Islam. At 1.6 billion, Muslims represent 23% of the world's population.ⁱ The Sunni and the Shi'a are two groups of Muslims with the largest number of adherents. Though they share many of the same beliefs, there are important differences in their views of religious leadership and interpretations of Islamic law.

One meaningful distinction derives from an early difference in how each group viewed the proper way to choose the community's leader. The Shi'a believe that the Prophet appointed his cousin and son-in-law as his successor. Thus, for the Shi'a, the leader of Muslims can only be someone descended directly from the Prophet Muhammad; this leader receives his Divine appointment from the previous leader (Imam), who names him. In contrast, the Sunni believed that the Prophet's companions had the power to select a leader. Today, there is no central leader of the Sunni community. Rather, the most qualified person in a community is chosen as the head of spiritual life.ⁱⁱ

DIVERSITY

Diversity in Islam or, indeed, in any religious tradition involves diversity of beliefs and practices. Here, we focus on different ways of defining the faith, religious beliefs and practices among Muslims (Islam's adherents). This fact sheet does not focus on the wide diversity of political beliefs that can be found within these groups of believers (i.e., conservative, liberal, moderate, extreme).

Sunni: By far the majority within Islam, the Sunni constitute approximately 87-90% of all Muslims.ⁱⁱⁱ Sunni religious leaders are the imams who act as prayer leaders. While the Shi'a also call their prayer leaders "Imam," they also use the term for their hereditary leader, who is regarded as divinely appointed.

Shi'a: Comprising about 10-13% of Islam's total population, the Shi'a depart from the Sunnis mostly over the institution of leadership.^{iv} Shi'a Imams, as direct descendants from Muhammad, are the political-religious leaders of the community and are viewed as divinely appointed, therefore, free from error. As such, the Shi'ite Imam is the final authority in matters of religion as well as politics.

Within the Shi'a, there are several different groups including the Twelvers (Ithna 'Ashari), the Ismailis and the Zaydis, who differ in their beliefs about the number of the Imams after the death of Muhammad. Ithna 'Ashari and a branch of Ismaili, for example, believe that there is a Hidden Imam who was occulted (and never died), but will return to earth as a savior. In contrast, one branch of the Ismailis recognize the person designated as Aga Khan as their living Imam, and a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad.

As a persecuted minority throughout much of Muslim history, many Shi'a view their history as a struggle to overcome oppression and to restore justice to the world.

Although Sunnis and Shi'a adherents have coexisted peacefully, there have been periods of conflict over their divergence after the Prophet's death and differences in their religious practice. Today, tensions between Sunnis and Shi'as in parts of the Middle East often center on issues involving political power rather than religious beliefs.

Other Diverse Groups Within Islam (Not All Encompassing)

Sufi: Sufism is a mystical or spiritual dimension of Islam in which believers seek a direct, personal experience of God. It attracts Sunnis, Shi'a and non-Muslims. Most Sufis emphasize a master-disciple relationship with a teacher and belong to Tariqas, or orders, which have (in almost all cases) a teacher who traces his or her roots to the Prophet. As with many other observant Muslims, many observant Sufis are dedicated to the worship of Allah and abstain from worldly pleasures,^v

Ahmadiyya: The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is the only Islamic faith group that believes the Messiah has already come, in the person of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the late 19th century. There are millions of Ahmadiyya Muslims around the world.^{vi} Because of their belief that there were prophets after Muhammad, there is debate within the Muslim community about whether the Ahmadiyya are to be considered Muslims. This is similar to debates that exist in other religious traditions.

Ibadi / Kharijite: The Kharijites, or "those that seceded," believed that the caliph (their religious and civil leader) can be from the least esteemed class within society, as long as he is pious and capable of exercising authority with justice. Today, the only surviving branch of the Kharijites is known as Ibadism. Most Ibadi Muslims live in Oman and Northern Africa.^{vii}

BELIEFS

There are five core beliefs laid out in the Qur'an that the majority of Muslims share. There is little variation among the different Islamic groups in these core beliefs.

The first and most fundamental belief within Islam is in the oneness of God (Allah in Arabic) and of Muhammad as his final messenger. Acceptance of this foundational belief is through the shahadah (i.e., the "confession of faith"), which – by its recitation – makes one a Muslim and a member of the Islamic world community. With this comes an obligation to follow the codes of conduct and worship detailed in the holy writings.

The other four major beliefs are:

- Belief in all God's messengers, which includes belief in Muhammad, and also in Jesus, Moses, and Abraham, among others, as divinely inspired teachers;
- Belief in God's holy scriptures, as revealed to the messengers (i.e., the Torah, Psalms, Gospels, and Qur'an);
- Belief in a final day of judgment when all people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, will be held accountable for their actions and judged by Allah;
- Belief in angels, who are responsible for implementing the laws and workings of nature.

As a result of these core beliefs, Muslims have other beliefs as well, including:

The word *Islam* itself means surrender and, within the religion, this means the believer's complete submission to the will of Allah, the one absolute and utterly transcendent God. Allah, for Muslims, is the sole creator, sustainer, and restorer of the world.

Both Sunni and Shi'a believe Allah's will is revealed in the Qur'an, which was transmitted through his final prophet, Muhammad. In addition, Muslims recognizes the Hadith (sayings and actions reported to have been

by the Prophet). Through these, Muslims recognize Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as prophets, and believe that Muhammad’s revelation, as the final revelation, seals the messages of the prophets who came before.

The world community of believers in Islam is called the Ummah, and one can join it by accepting the oneness of God and that Muhammad is his final messenger. Great emphasis is placed on membership in the Ummah, and participation is demonstrated, for example, when every worshipper faces Mecca during prayer.

Complete submission in Islam also includes responsibility for one’s piety, which is to pervade all aspects of life—social, political, and private. Muslims have a system for worship and for life (Sharia), which includes almsgiving, dietary restrictions, systems for purification and prayer, social relations, and the relationship between individuals and government.

When a person declares that s/he is a Muslim (through the shahadah or confession of faith), s/he undertakes obligations, detailed below. One of these obligations is called zakat (regulated sharing of wealth with those in need). This practice is a sacred act, set forth in the Qur’an (22.78) and placed on an equal footing with prayer. It helps to free the individual from selfishness and greed. Muslims are not allowed to earn a living through any unlawful means, such as gambling, cheating, or stealing, because such ill-gotten wealth is unacceptable to Allah and cannot count toward the required zakat.

While Islam considers itself the one true religion, it accepts Jews, Christians, and Hindus and Zoroastrians as “people of the book” who have access to salvation through submission to their own path. Islam recognizes that there have been many prophets, several books of revelation, and more than one legal system that has urged a belief in one God and ethical behavior. Each of these other groups, according to Islamic theology, will be judged in light of the knowledge their respective prophets revealed.^{viii}

PRACTICES

The common practices of most Muslims are best summarized as^{ix}:

1. Confession of faith (shahadah) in Allah and his prophet, Muhammad.
2. Ritual Prayer (salat). Muslims offer five formal prayers daily, always facing Mecca.
3. Giving alms to the poor (zakat).
4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan (sawm).
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).

Jihad, understood to mean armed conflict, is often referred to as if it were a core belief of Islam, but it is not an accurate understanding of this concept. Jihad means to “strive or struggle” in the way of God – a human struggle to improve oneself in faith and behavior. All practicing members of the Muslim community are thus expected to engage in this struggle through education, preaching, and example.

For Muslims, awareness of Allah pervades all aspects of life. As one verse of the Qur’an states: “He is closer to human beings than their jugular veins” (50:16). Prayer is seen to be as practical and necessary as eating or breathing. Muslims may pause in their work, studies, or other daily routines to take time for regular prayer.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Glossary of Islamic Terms](#) – Offers brief explanations of several important concepts.

[The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity](#) – Offers quantitative data and analysis of 38,000 face-to-face interviews with Muslims in 39 countries about the similarities and differences across the Muslim faith.

[Islam: Empire of Faith](#) – Web companion to PBS’s feature on the history and evolution of Islamic culture. There is also a section of educational resources and lesson plans.

[Encyclopedia Britannica: Islam](#) – Offers a detailed explanation of the history of Islam, core ideas of Islamic faith, a breakdown of diversity in Islam and a thorough look at different trends in Islamic thought.

[The Muslim Veil: A Guide](#) – Discussion of the hijab, burqa, niqab and keffieh, and movements to ban them.

[The Islamic Dress Code](#) – Explanation of the modest attire worn by many Muslims.

ⁱ “The Global Religious Landscape: Muslims,” Pew Research Center, 18 December 2012, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-muslim/#ftn8>>.

ⁱⁱ Imam Shamsi Ali, Personal Interview, 8-12 July 2011. Hussein Rashid, Personal Interview, 7 November 2011; February 17, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Global Religious Landscape: Muslims,” Pew Research Center, 18 December 2012, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-muslim/#ftn8>>. “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, 7 October 2009, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>>.

^{iv} “The Global Religious Landscape: Muslims,” Pew Research Center, 18 December 2012, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-muslim/#ftn8>>. “Mapping the Global Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, 7 October 2009, <<http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>>.

^v “Sufism,” Oxford Islamic Studies online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2260?_hi=6&_pos=2>. “Sufism,” BBC Religions, 8 September 2009, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sufism_1.shtml>.

^{vi} “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community: An Overview,” Al Islam, <<http://www.alislam.org/introduction/index.html>>.

^{vii} “Kharijite Islam,” Globalsecurity.org, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-kharijite.htm>>.

^{viii} Religion at Work, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, 2010, <<https://www.tanenbaum.org/religion-at-work>>.

^{ix} These practices are often called the Five Pillars in Sunni Islam. Other groups have additional Pillars, which they also follow.