In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to God, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship; And Thy aid do we seek. Show us the straight way; The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace; those whose [portion] Is not wrath; And who go not astray.

The Qur'an, Chapter 1
"Fatih" ("Opening Chapter")

Islam

An Introduction

Facts about Islam and Muslims
Masterpieces of Islamic Art
Islamic Cultural Timeline
Notable Muslims
Recommended Further Readings

A special pull-out section from
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A limited number of copies of "Islam: An Introduction" is available upon request for use in your class or community group at no charge. Make your request to:
Edna Catchings, Special Requests, P.O. Box 2106, Houston TX 77252.
What is the Qur'an?

Qur'an is the holy book of Muslims. It is meant for all humanity for every part: not for a religious minority but for all religious believers. The Qur'an is considered by Muslims to complete God's earlier revelations to the Prophet Moses and Jesus. In practice, there is only one version of the Qur'an, unchanged since Muhammad received it. A number of his followers had carefully memorized the revelation word-for-word—an achievement still common among serious scholars—and the text we know today was written down by the year 651. The Qur'an is also considered to be intranslatable, because no other language can convey all that the Arabic of the Qur'an can convey. Thus Muslim scholars regard versions of the Qur'an in other languages as interpretations rather than true translations, and in Arabic literature there is no work whose eloquence, clarity and erudition approach those of the Qur'an.

What is the Ka'bah?

The Ka'bah is the black cubical stone structure in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Makkah. Muslims believe it was built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham (Abraham) and his son Ismail (Ishmael). The Ka'bah is empty, and it is not entered except for a ritual cleaning each year. A black cloth covering, called the kiswa, embroidered in gold with Qur'anic calligraphy, is made for it each year. When Muslims pray, wherever in the world they are, it is the direction of the Ka'bah that they face. During the Hajj, pilgrims circle the Ka'bah seven times in a ritual called the tawaf, or circumambulation, which is also performed throughout the rest of the year.

How do Muslims practice their faith?

Islam, in Arabic, means “submission,” meaning submission to the will of God. It also means “peace,” the peace one finds through submission to God's will. Muslims accept five primary obligations, commonly called the “Five Pillars of Islam.” In practice, of course Muslims can be seen observing all of these to varying degrees, for the responsibility of fulfilling the obligations lies on the shoulders of each individual.

The profession of faith (shahadah): This is a simple statement: “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”

Prayer (salah): Muslims pray five times a day—at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening—facing toward the Ka'bah, the House of God, in the Great Mosque in Makkah. They may pray wherever they are when prayer-time arrives, in any clean place, preferably in the company of other Muslims. On Fridays at noon, Muslims are encouraged to pray as a gathered community in congregational mosques. There is a sequence of physical postures, fixed by tradition, for ritual prayer, and the prayers are said in Arabic regardless of the local language.

Charity (zakah): A fixed proportion of a Muslim's net worth—not just his or her income—is prescribed as a donation for the welfare of the community, whether that community is made up of Muslims, non-Muslims or a mixture.

Fasting (saum): Every day from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims must abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual contact; even more than at other times they must also avoid cursing, lying, cheating and otherwise abusing or harming others.

Pilgrimage (Hajj): The journey to Makkah is obligatory for every able-bodied Muslim who can afford to make it. Pilgrimage need be made only once in a lifetime, but it can be made several times if a Muslim wishes. The Hajj proper is made between the eighth and 13th days of Dhu al-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, and every pilgrim carries out specified rituals at specific times. At any other time of year, Muslims can perform similar prayers and rituals and thus complete the 'Umrah, or "lesser pilgrimage."
Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous among you. Mankind was indeed created from a single pair, male and female, and made into nations and tribes that may know each other, not that they may despise each other. Verily the most honored are the most righteous among you.
Who was the Prophet Muhammad?

Muhammad was the prophet through whom, Muslims believe, God sent his last revelation to humankind.

Muhammad was born around the year 570 in the Arabian city of Makkah, a city built on trade and on the flow of pilgrims to the Ka'bah, the shrine believed to have been erected by Adam, and which was then filled with idols from many cultures.

Muhammad was orphaned at age six. In his 20's, he went to work for a widow named Khadijah, who ran trading caravans. Working for her, he traveled widely and earned a reputation for trustworthiness. Later, and in spite of a considerable age difference, he married Khadijah.

In his late 30's, Muhammad took to meditating alone in a cave on Mount Hira, a few hours' walk outside the city. There, one day during the month of Ramadan, he heard a voice ordering him to "Recite!"

Three times, Muhammad replied that he could not: He was illiterate. But each time the command was repeated, and finally Muhammad received the first revelation:

"Recite: In the name of your Lord who created, Created man from a clot. Recite: And your Lord is Most Bounteous, Who taught by the pen, Taught man that which he knew not."

The voice—it revealed itself as the Angel Gabriel—told Muhammad that he was to be the Messenger of God, and the revelations continued at irregular intervals for the 22 remaining years of Muhammad's life. The total of these revelations is the Qur'an, a word that means, literally, "recitation."

At first, Muhammad told only his wife and his closest friends of his experience. But as the revelations kept coming, they enjoined him to proclaim the oneness of God publicly—something that took courage, because most Makkans believed there were many gods (polytheism).

It was the eloquence of the revelations, and the ease with which listeners recognized in them true words of God, that led to the emergence of Muslims. But Muhammad also faced opposition from Makkan polytheists: To them, Muhammad's monotheism was a threat to their control of the Ka'bah—and the pilgrimage trade. In the early fall of 622, Muhammad and his followers emigrated from Makkah north to the town of Yathrib (later renamed al-Madinah). This emigration—known as the hijrah—marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, because it was in Yathrib that the followers of Muhammad's teachings developed a society organized along the reformist lines of God’s revelations.

In 630, after a series of battles, Muhammad peacefully reentered Makkah, where he cleared the Ka'bah of idols. Two years later, he took ill, and died on June 8, 632. His close companion, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, told the grieving Muslim community, "Whoever worshiped Muhammad, let him know that Muhammad is dead, but whoever worships God, let him know that God lives, and dies not."

What is Islam?

Islam is the religion, and the way of life, of about one-fifth of the world's population. Its adherents, called Muslims, believe Islam is God's final message to humankind, a reconfirmation and perfection of the messages that God has revealed through earlier prophets.

What do Muslims believe?

The central Muslim belief is that there is only one God, unique, incomparable, eternal, absolute and without peer or associate. He cannot be perceived in this world but through His works.

Other important tenets of Islam are that God is the Creator of all that exists; that His will is supreme; that He has sent messengers to humankind, of whom Muhammad was the "seal"—that is, the last; that the Qur'an is the very Word of God; that angels, immortal creatures, exist, as does Satan; that humans are responsible to God for their actions; and that, on Judgment Day, an all-knowing and merciful God will judge all mortals according to their deeds in this life.

10 Masterpieces of Classical Islamic Art

"Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art," wrote Ruskin. "Of the three the only trustworthy one is the last." The objects listed below, chosen by historians of Islamic art Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair, are only 10 pages from the vast "manuscript" of Islamic civilization, but they offer a sample of the riches of the whole.

1. The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 692. The first great work of Islamic architecture. It was built over the rock from which the Prophet Muhammad made his miraculous ascent to heaven, which is described in Chapter 17 of the Qur'an.

2. The Malwiya minaret, Samarra, Iraq, mid-ninth century. This 50-meter (160') helicoidal tower of sun-dried and baked brick may have been modeled on ancient ziggurats. It symbolizes the power of Islam at the zenith of the Baghdad-based Abbasid caliphate.
The Islamic Calendar

The Islamic calendar is based on the lunar year of 12 full lunar cycles, taking exactly 354 and 11/30 days. Modern scholars are

This system is derived from the Hijri, the Islamic calendar, which is the basis for the Islamic lunar calendar. The Hijri year is based on the migration (Hijra) of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD. The Hijri year starts on the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar, which is called Muharram.

Why are modern numerals called "Arabic numerals"?

The Arabic word *jihad* means "to struggle or strive, to exert oneself for a praiseworthy aim." This term is used in the context of striving for self-improvement, betterment of one's own traits and imperfections, and becoming a better person in God's sight. The idea is to carry out this struggle for the sake of Islam, such as working for the betterment of Muslim society or trying to persuade non-believers, by tongue or pen or example, to embrace Islam.

Arabic Writing

Most scholars believe that Arabic developed from Nabataean and/or Arabic dialects spoken in northern Arabia and much of the Levant during the early centuries of the Islamic period. The Arabic alphabet is more complex than the Roman alphabet, with each Arabic letter having up to four forms, depending on whether the word is written in one line or more than one line.

The Qur'an manuscript, Baghdad, 1307. This is arguably the finest display of the calligrapher's art. The paper was polished to an impeccable smoothness, allowing the pen to glide effortlessly across a pearly surface. This was a multivolume manuscript for an anonymous patron, and it is now dispersed. The colophon is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

8. The Ardebil Carpets, Iran, 1539–40. These two enormous carpets were worked in 10 colors of silk and wool. Each has more than 25 million knots, making them one of the most splendid examples of the weaver's art. This one is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the other is in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

9. The Selimiye Mosque, Edirne, Turkey, 1574. The breathtaking interior of the mosque is the masterpiece of the Ottoman architect Sinan, who created a huge and uninterrupted space under a towering dome. The centralized space of the prayer hall literally and symbolically embraces the community of believers and unites them under God's radiance.

10. The Taj Mahal, Agra, India, 1647. This enormous white marble monument is set in a garden along the banks of the Jumna River, centerpiece of a complex designed to evoke the gardens of paradise that await believers.

Cultural Timeline of the Islamic World

**Elsewhere**

- Hagia Sophia, Constantinople 532
- Tang dynasty, China 618
- Woodblock printing, China 650
- Lindisfarne Gospels 650
- Battle of Poitiers, France 732
- Charlemagne crowned in Rome 800
- Polyphonic music 855
- Climax of Mayan civilization 1000
- Normans invade Britain 1066
- First Latin version of Qur'an 1143
- Oxford University founded 1167
- Magna Carta 1215
- Marco Polo leaves Venice 1268
- Black Death reaches Europe 1348
- Chaucer's Canterbury Tales 1400
- Gutenberg prints Europe's first book with movable type 1445
- Columbus sets sail 1492
- Michelangelo's David 1504
- Magellan's voyage 1519
- Accession of Elizabeth I 1558
- Shakespeare's Hamlet 1601
- Pilgrims arrive in Massachusetts 1620
- Galileo's Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems of the World 1632
- Newton's Principia Mathematica 1687
- First direct English version of Qur'an 1734
- United States Declaration of Independence 1776
- Battle of Waterloo 1815
- Accession of Queen Victoria 1837
- Dickens's Oliver Twist 1838
- Wright brothers fly 1903
- First World War 1914-1918
- Second World War 1939-1945

**Islamic World**

- 570 Birth of Prophet Muhammad, Makkah
- 610 Muhammad's first revelation
- 622 Muhammad and Muslims emigrate to Madinah; Year 1 of Muslim calendar
- 630 Muslims return to Makkah
- 632 Death of Muhammad
- 632-661 Rule of the "rightly guided" caliphs
- 643 Al-Fustat (Old Cairo) founded
- 661 Umayyad caliphate established, Damascus
- 691 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem
- 706 Great Mosque of the Umayyads, Damascus
- 711 Muslims enter Spanish Peninsula from Morocco
- 715 Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem
- 750 Abbasid caliphate founded, Iraq
- 785 Mosque of al-Mutawakkil begun, Samarra, Iraq
- 850 Earliest Arabic treatises on the astrolabe
- 862 Qarawiyin Mosque founded, Fez
- 879 Mosque of Ahmad ibn Tulun, Cairo
- 900 Composition of The 1001 Nights
- 936 Madinat al-Zahra palace complex, Córdoba
- 972 Al-Azhar University founded, Cairo
- 1001 Ibn al-Bawwab produces earliest still-extant Qur'an copy on paper, Baghdad
- 1010 Firdawsì presents Shahnama at Ghaznavid court, Persia
- 1062 Marrakesh founded
- 1099 First Crusade begins in Jerusalem
- 1117 Salah al-Din returns Jerusalem to Muslim rule
- 1237 Yahya al-Wasit illustrates al-Harir's Maqamat, Baghdad
- 1258 Mongols sack Baghdad
- 1325 Ibn Battuta leaves Tangier
- 1362 Mosque of Sultan Hassan, Cairo
- 1370 Timur (Tamerlane) begins rebuilding Samarkand
- 1429 Ulugh Beg completes astronomical observatory, Samarkand
- 1453 Ottomans begin rule from Constantinople
- 1474 Mosque of Qa'itbay, Cairo
- 1492 End of Muslim states in Spain
- 1498 Vasco da Gama and his Arab navigator sail to India from Portugal
- 1526 Mughal dynasty established in India
- 1617 Sultan Ahmet ("Blue") Mosque, Istanbul
- 1638 Shah Mosque, Isfahan, Iran
- 1647 Taj Mahal
- 1802 Napoleon orders publication of Description de l'Egypte
- 1821 Jean-François Champollion deciphers hieroglyphics
- 1869 Suez Canal opens
- 1908 Hijaz Railway from Damascus to Madinah
- 1912 Tutankhamun's tomb opened
- 1932 Saudi Arabia founded by 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud
- 1945 Arab League founded
- 1967 Aqsa Mosque established
- 1968 Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North
- 1970 Hassan Fathy's Architecture for the Poor
- 1979 Edward Said's Orientalism; Abdus Salam wins Nobel Prize for Physics
- 1983 Muhammad Yunus founds Grameen Bank, Bangladesh
- 1988 Naguib Mahfouz wins Nobel Prize for Literature
- 1998 Petronas Towers, world's tallest building, opens in Kuala Lumpur
- 1999 Ahmed H. Zewail wins Nobel Prize for Chemistry
Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, ca. 570-634: One of the first followers of the Prophet who, in 632, became the first of the four "rightly guided" caliphs.

'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 592-644: Second of the four "rightly guided" caliphs. He originated most of the major political institutions of the Muslim state and helped stabilize the rapidly expanding Arab empire.

Uthman ibn Affan, d. 656: Third of the "rightly guided" caliphs, married successively to two of the Prophet's daughters. Elected caliph in 644, he ordered the official collation of the Qur'an.

'Ali ibn Abi Talib, ca. 596-661: Cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet's daughters. Elected caliph in 644, he founded the Abbasid empire, he ruled during its apogee, as 'Ali ibn Abl TaUb, ca. 596-661: Cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet's daughters. Elected caliph in 644, he founded the Abbasid empire, he ruled during its apogee.

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, 1058-1111: Persian astronomer, jurist, philosopher and mystic; Al-Ghazali to the West. Author of some 70 works, al-Ghazali won early fame as a lawyer in Baghdad but later relinquished his post to pursue the nature of knowledge.

Omar Khayyam, ca. 1048-1125: Persian mathematician, astronomer and poet best known for the Rubaiyat; also helped reform the solar calendar.

Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, ca. 820-883: Mathemetician, astronomer, geographer of Baghdad. He introduced algebra and Indian/Arabic numerals—as well as the words algebra and algorithm—to Europe in the 12th century.

Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad al-Idrisi, 1099-1180: Mathematician, astronomer, geographer of Cordoba. Sponsored mosques, hostelries and schools and gave Europeans their first substantive introduction to Greek philosophy.

Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, 1138-1193: Founder of Ayyubid dynasty of Egypt and Syria; known as Salahadin in the West. Ejected the Crusaders from Jerusalem in 1187 and garnered fame through chivalric battles with Richard the Lion-Hearted.

Muhy; 'l-Din al-Ta'i Ibn 'Arabi, 1165-1240: Mystic, born in Murcia, Spain. Author of some 400 works, including a summary of the teaching of 28 prophets from Adam to Muhammad.

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Readers who want to learn more about Islam will find interesting material in this list. Some of the titles are recent, some are classic, and others did not get the attention they deserved when they were published. Without endorsing the views of individual authors, we encourage wide reading and comparisons of information and viewpoints presented. The books listed here are available in libraries and bookstores. Please do not order books from Saudi Aramco World.


The Hadj: An American’s Pilgrimage to Mecca. Michael Wolfe. 1998, Grove, 0-8021-3586-2, $14 pb. The author, a recent convert, reads the path of earlier writer/explorers, but with less romantic zeal and more quiet wonder, while bringing to life the momentous experience of the contemporary Hajj.


Ideals and Realities of Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. 2000, ABC International Group, 0-930637-11-)(, $17.95 hb. A lucid presentation of important aspects of Islamic religion and culture and their relationship to present-day America.


Islam: A Primer. John Sabini. 6th ed. 2001, AMDEAST*, 0-913957-17-8, $11.50 pb. An easy-to-read, no-frills field guide to Islam’s origins and beliefs, with notes on social customs and rituals such as hospitality, weddings and births.


The Life and Times of Muhammad. Sir John Glubb. 2002, Cooper Square Press, 0-8154-1176-6, $17.95 pb. Glubb Pasha, former commander of the famed Arab Legion, wrote nearly a dozen works on the Middle East, including this sweeping, readable account of the Prophet’s life.


Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources. Martin Lings. 1987, Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 0-89281-170-6, $19.95 pb. A well-narrated biography by a British Muslim scholar, based on traditional sources.

Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years in Western Myth-Making. Minou Reeves. 2000, NYU Press, 0-8147-7533-0, $34.50 hb. A troubling examination of how politics have often distorted the West’s perception of Muhammad.


Towards Understanding Islam. Abu A’ia Maududi. 1994, Islamic Foundation, 0-860370-53-4, $5.95 pb. A concise explanation of the main teachings of Islam by one of the greatest of modern Muslim thinkers.


Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life. John Renard, ed. 1998, University of California Press, 0-520-20976-1, $55 hb; 0-520-21086-7 $22 pb. A collection from more than 30 classical and modern writers and artists to help non-Muslims fathom what it means to be a Muslim.