The word Islam means 'submission to the will of God'.

Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers. The 2001 census recorded 1,591,000 Muslims in the UK, around 2.7% of the population.

* Muslims believe that Islam was [**revealed**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad_1.shtml) over 1400 years ago in Mecca, Arabia.
* Followers of Islam are called Muslims.
* Muslims [**believe**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/) that there is only One God.
* The Arabic word for God is Allah.
* According to Muslims, God sent a number of prophets to mankind to teach them [**how to live**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/islamethics/) according to His law.
* Jesus, Moses and Abraham are respected as prophets of God.
* They believe that the final Prophet was Muhammad.
* Muslims believe that Islam has always existed, but for practical purposes, date their religion from the time of the migration of Muhammad.
* Muslims base their laws on their holy book the [**Qur'an**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/texts/quran_1.shtml), and the Sunnah.
* Muslims believe the Sunnah is the practical example of Prophet Muhammad and that there are five basic [**Pillars of Islam**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/fivepillars.shtml).
* These pillars are the [**declaration of faith**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/shahadah.shtml), [**praying**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/salat.shtml) five times a day, giving money to [**charity**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/zakat.shtml), [**fasting**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/sawm.shtml) and a [**pilgrimage**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/practices/hajj_1.shtml) to Mecca (atleast once).

**Basic articles of faith**

Muslims have six main beliefs.

* Belief in Allah as the one and only God
* Belief in [**angels**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9gf)
* Belief in the [**holy books**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/texts/quran_1.shtml)
* Belief in the Prophets...
  + e.g. Adam, [**Ibrahim**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/ibrahim.shtml) (Abraham), [**Musa**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/musa.shtml) (Moses), Dawud (David), [**Isa**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/isa.shtml) (Jesus).
  + [**Muhammad**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad_1.shtml) (peace be upon him) is the final prophet.
* Belief in the Day of Judgement...
  + The day when the life of every human being will be assessed to decide whether they go to heaven or hell.
* Belief in Predestination...
  + That Allah has the knowlege of all that will happen.
  + Muslims believe that this doesn't stop human beings making free choices.

**Allah**

Allah is [**the name**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004njln) Muslims use for the supreme and unique God, who created and rules everything.

The heart of faith for all Muslims is obedience to Allah's will.

* Allah is *eternal*, *omniscient*, and *omnipotent*...
  + Allah has always existed and will always exist.
  + Allah knows everything that can be known.
  + Allah can do anything that can be done.
* Allah has no shape or form...
  + Allah can't be seen.
  + Allah can't be heard.
  + Allah is neither male nor female.
* Allah is just...
  + Allah rewards and punishes fairly.
  + But Allah is also merciful.
* A believer can approach Allah by [**praying**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p005465m), and by [**reciting the Qur'an**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0092pw0).
* Muslims worship only Allah...
  + because only Allah is worthy of worship.

**The one and only God**

All Muslims believe that God is one alone:

* There is only one God.
* God has no children, no parents, and no partners.
* God was not created by a being.
* There are no equal, superior, or lesser Gods.

Muslims believe that Islam is a faith that has always existed and that it was gradually revealed to humanity by a number of prophets, but the final and complete revelation of the faith was made through the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE. Muhammad was born in Mecca in Saudi Arabia in 570. He was a deeply spiritual man, and often spent time in meditation on Mount Hira. The traditional story of the [**Qur'an**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/texts/quran_1.shtml) tells how one night in 610 he was meditating in a cave on the mountain when he was visited by the angel Jibreel who ordered him to [**recite**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0092pw0). Once Jibreel mentioned the name of Allah, Muhammad began to recite [**words**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0030sqm) which he came to believe were the words of God.

**The Qur'an**

During the rest of his life Muhammad continued to receive these revelations. The words were remembered and recorded, and form the text of the Holy Qu'ran, the Muslim scripture.

**Preaching**

Believing that God had chosen him as his messenger Muhammad began to preach what God had revealed to him. The simple and clear-cut message of Islam, that there is no [**God**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/beliefs.shtml) but Allah, and that life should be lived in complete submission to the will of Allah, was attractive to many people, and they flocked to hear it.

**The Hijrah**

Muhammad's popularity was seen as threatening by the people in power in Mecca, and Muhammad took his followers on a journey from Mecca to Medina in 622. This journey is called the [**Hijrah**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/holydays/alhijra.shtml) (migration) and the event was seen as so important for Islam that 622 is the year in which the [**Islamic calendar**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tools/calendar/faith.shtml?muslim) begins.

**The return to Mecca**

Within ten years Muhammad had gained so many followers that he was able to return and conquer Mecca. From this time on he was generally accepted by the faithful as the true final Prophet of God.

Muhammad continued to lead his community both spiritually and in earthly matters until his death in 632. Islam is now the second most popular religion on the planet with more than a billion followers.

**Jerusalem**

Jerusalem is the third holiest site in Islam: the first Muslims didn't pray towards Mecca, but to Jerusalem. This episode explores the theory that Islam may have grown out of a cult of [**Judaism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/index.shtml).

**The Alhambra Palace** is perhaps the finest surviving Muslim palace in the world and its symbolic of an episode that many Muslims believe has been all but written out of the history books by Europe's Christians: the flowering of Islam culture, philosophy and science, which meant that once the intellectual heart of Europe beat not in Paris, Rome or Athens, but in the great Muslim cities of [**Granada**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/spain_1.shtml) and [**Cordoba**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548l1).

[**Indonesia**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/80faiths/locations/australasia1.shtml) is the world's largest Muslim nation and since it proclaimed its independence in 1945 it has often been plagued by religiously motivated violence.

But Islamic reformers in the country are advocating a radical reinterpretation of the life of Muhammad as a way of leading the country to democracy.

History:

The period immediately following Muhammad's death until the death of his cousin and son-in-law Ali in 661 is remembered as a kind of golden age by some Muslims. It was the Age of the Rashidun, or "rightly-guided ones," when Muhammad's close companions led the community of Muslims.

Muhammad died unexpectedly of illness in 632, depriving the Muslim community of its founder and leader. With little preparation for this loss, the community was divided over the question of succession. Some believed that Muhammad had named his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants to succeed him. Others thought that Muhammad had died without naming a successor, and that the community elders were therefore responsible for naming a successor. This dispute over time divided the community into two major [groups](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Historical-Development/Schisms-Sects.html), the partisans (singular, Shi'a) of Ali, and the Sunni.

The majority of Muhammad's followers chose to follow Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet's who was chosen by the elders of the community. Abu Bakr thus became the first religious and political leader, called caliph (Arabic, *khalifah* or successor). Islamic tradition remembers Abu Bakr as a humble and moral man who ruled with great fidelity to the teachings of the [Quran](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Origins/Scriptures.html). During the two years that he ruled as caliph before his death in 634, Abu Bakr consolidated Muslim rule in Arabia and sent armies into Syria and Iraq on short and successful raids.

Tradition holds that Abu Bakr designated one of his military advisors, Umar ibn al-Khattab as his successor. A brilliant general, Umar continued the campaign of military conquest with astonishing success. In the ten years of Umar's reign as Islam's second caliph, Arab armies conquered Egypt, Syria, and Iraq.

Umar was also responsible for establishing a variety of important social and legal institutions. Throughout the newly-conquered provinces, Umar appointed provincial judges (Arabic, *qadi*), to settle disputes. He established regulations to govern public observance of important Quranic teaching, such as the pilgrimage to [Mecca](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html), the observance of the holy month of [Ramadan](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html), and the punishment of adultery and drunkenness. During Umar's reign, Jews and Christians in the newly-conquered territory were assigned the status of *dhimmi*, or "People of the Book." The dhimmi were not forced to convert. They were exempted from the [*zakat*](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html), or alms tax obligatory on all Muslims, although they were required to pay the *jizyah*, or poll tax, which was higher. Whether due to the higher tax burden on the dhimmi, or due to Islam's message of egalitarianism, Islam ultimately won many converts in the newly-conquered territories. On his deathbed, Umar established a council (Arabic, *shura*) to select his successor. The shura chose Uthman ibn Affan, a man with a strong reputation for loyalty to Muhammad, as the third caliph. Uthman continued the policies established by Umar, and spearheaded the production of an official written version of the Quran.

**Divisions:**

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](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html). 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 religions 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*](http://www.patheos.com/Library/Islam/Ethics-Morality-Community/Principles-of-Moral-Thought-and-Action.html), which means "the trodden path."

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.