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by Professor Malcolm Clark

for  
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# Islam For Dummies®

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# Introduction

---

**W**elcome to *Islam For Dummies*, the book that keeps you from mixing up Muhammad, Mecca, and Medina. These pages divulge what you want to know about the beliefs, practices, and origins of Islam, as well as current developments in the Islamic world.

## About This Book

---

Shocked and grieved by the events of September 11, 2001, people around the world are coming to understand that they have questions, misconceptions, and perhaps even fear about Islam, and this book is here to help. From giving information about the 1,000-year-old wound left on Islam by the Christian Crusades to understanding the Five Pillars of Faith, this book helps you put today's conflicts into perspective.

In addition, if you live or work among Muslims or have seen a new mosque near your church or synagogue, this book can help you understand and relate to the Muslims in your midst. Muslims are poised to become the second largest religious group in the United States. With this book, you can understand the appeal of this faith without ever having to step foot in a mosque or pray toward Mecca.

I'm not Muslim, so this book isn't written to either defend or attack Islam. Without getting hung up on points of tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, I don't pretend that valid reasons for such differences don't exist. This book is also not a textbook. You find some references to other works but no footnotes detailing the support for each point that's made in the text. A number of good, short introductions to Islam exist, but their brevity means that their treatment of issues is highly selective. *Islam For Dummies* is longer than the typical 100- to 150-page introduction and, thus, more comprehensive.

# Conventions Used in This Book

Keep the following conventions in mind as you read this book:

- » *Muslim* refers to the people who practice Islam; *islam* is Arabic for submission to God; *Islam* refers to the name of the Muslim religion and to all the areas of the world that practice that religion; an *Islamist* is someone who supports Islamic political rule.
- » Normal dating of years in the West uses B.C.(before Christ) and A.D. (after the birth of Christ—literally “in the year of our Lord”) dates. A.D. and B.C. are Christian terms because the very abbreviations affirm Jesus as Christ or as Lord. Today many — certainly not all — books aimed at a general audience that includes non-Christians use the designations B.C.E. and C.E., where B.C.E. stands for *before common era* and C.E. for *common era*. In terms of actual year, a B.C.E. date is the same as a B.C. date, and a C.E. date is the same as an A.D. date. That’s why many books, especially those talking about religion and aimed at a general audience, today use the equivalent, more neutral abbreviations of B.C.E. and C.E., as I do in this book. And often, if the context of a sentence makes clear that I’m talking about the common era, I list only the year and not C.E.
- » I refer to the Qur’an in this manner: Sura 93:6–10. The Qur’an isn’t a collection of books like the Bible, so Sura doesn’t refer to different books of the Qur’an. Instead, sura is similar to the chapter designation of many books. Scholars have hypotheses but don’t even agree on the origin and original meaning of the word sura.



TIP

The most helpful comparison I have seen is to the Biblical book of Psalms: You don’t refer to Chapter 1 of the book of Psalms but to Psalm 1. Similarly, you refer not to Chapter 1 of the Qur’an but to Sura 1. The numbers after the colon are the verses in each sura. Just as Genesis 12:1–3 is a way of referring to the first three verses of Chapter 12 of the book of Genesis, Sura 12:1–3 refers to the first three verses of Sura 12 of the Qur’an. (Islam uses the term *aya* [sign] for these verses.) Versions of the Qur’an differ slightly in how they number verses (see Chapter 7), so if you look up a verse mentioned in this book and it doesn’t seem relevant, read the seven preceding and following verses, and you should find the cited verse in your translation.

- » An essential assertion of the Qur’an is that it’s the word of God in the Arabic language. A translation of the Qur’an into another language is regarded as a paraphrase or interpretation of the Qur’an, distinct from the Arabic original. Islam has always required Muslim converts to acquire at least a minimal knowledge of the Qur’an in Arabic. Therefore, in discussing Islam and the Qur’an, one can’t avoid Arabic terms, which I use throughout this book. The words that you encounter in this book, often in parentheses, are transliterations of the essential Arabic terms. A *transliteration* is different from a

translation. A translation gives the meaning of one word in another language, while a transliteration represents the writing or pronunciation of a word in one language (in this case, Arabic) in another language (in this case, English).

- The Arabic language uses different letters and words than does English, but I try to simplify as much as possible. For example, the Arabic language has several different “t” letters, and each is a little different from the others because of markings above and below the letters. In this book, I simply write, “t.”
- Similarly, Arabic, like other Semitic languages, has two essential consonants not represented in Western languages. These are referred to as *`aliph* (from which eventually comes English “A”) and *`ayin* (a guttural sound in the back of the throat). While sounding strange and hard to pronounce to Westerners, these are distinctly different letters, which I represent in this book with ‘ and ` . Some other books, for simplicity, may ignore these letters, and while that’s acceptable, it can lead to confusion of two words identical except for whether they are spelled with ‘ or ` .
- Because Arabic belongs to an entirely different language family than English, different possibilities exist for how to represent an Arabic term in English. If, when reading about Islam, you see two similar words spelled slightly differently, they probably both represent the same Arabic word. Don’t be concerned about which spelling is correct. For example, *`id* and *Eid* are two different English translations for the same Arabic word, which designates the two basic sacrifices of Islamic ritual. Where English has accepted normal usage that may not be technically correct, I use the common term with which you are familiar. For example, I refer to Islam’s holy city as Mecca, even though Makka is a more accurate representation of the Arabic name of the most holy city of Islam.
- Complete Arabic names can be very long, so I commonly use a shortened version. For example, I refer to the founder of the Hanifite legal school as Abu Hanifa rather than using his complete name: Abu Hanifa al-Nu`man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta.

## Foolish Assumptions

As I’ve written this book, I’ve had a picture of you in my mind — your background, your experiences, and your needs for this book. The following are the assumptions I’ve made about you:

- » You don’t need to know anything about Islam or any organized religion prior to reading this book. However, when studying one religion, you often want to contrast and compare key concepts and terms with those in another religion.

In this book, I introduce such terms from Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, but feel free to skip over these references to other religions, if you wish. In any book on Islam, you find more comparisons to Christianity and Judaism than to Far Eastern and South Asian religions. This is because Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are related religions of the same Abrahamic “family” (see Part 5). Of course, in today’s global society, the more you know about all religions and cultures, the better prepared you are to understand any one.

- » You don’t have to be Muslim in order to understand Islam. Believers and non-believers have complementary insights into Islam.
- » My experiences haven’t included all parts of the Muslim world. When I explain a particular belief or practice in Islam, don’t assume that what I say is the only way to understand that particular belief or practice.

All Muslims won’t agree with everything in this book.

- » This book isn’t proposing new interpretations of Islam. Instead, it conveys consensus thinking among scholars and theologians.



REMEMBER

## How This Book is Organized

While writing this book, I’ve had to be selective about which information to include about a religion that’s over 1,400 years old, has over a billion members, and spans the globe. In this book, you won’t find answers to every question you may have, but in each of the seven parts of the book, I’ve attempted to deal with topics that are related to one another. If the Table of Contents doesn’t lead you to what most interests you, try consulting the Index at the back of the book.

### Part 1: Understanding the Basics

This chapter helps you understand what Muslims believe, shares a bit of Muslim history, and gives general information about the number of Muslims in the world and which countries are predominantly Muslim.

### Part 2: Muhammad: The Man, the Book, and Rules of Law

This part introduces you to Muhammad, the Qur’an, and legal and ethical teachings of Islam.

## **Part 3: Becoming Familiar with Muslim Daily Life**

In this part, I tell you about Muslim worship and about rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death. I also discuss some Muslims customs.

## **Part 4: Recognizing That All Muslims Aren't the Same**

Islam has different group of believers and here are some — Shi`ites, Sunnis, Sufis, Druze, and others. This part also discusses Muslims in America.

## **Part 5: Considering Islam's Concept of Abrahamic Religions**

In this part, I explore how the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) relate to one another historically and today, and how Islam has adapted to modernization and globalization over the past 100 years including its contact with other, non-Abrahamic religions.

## **Part 6: The Part of Tens**

Muslims have made outstanding contributions to civilization. This part provides summaries of some of these contributions and the Muslims who have made them. Also, I discuss Islam in a number of specific countries today. If, at some point, you find the details of Islamic belief or practice hard going, take a break and turn to one of the quick chapters in the Parts of Ten.

## **Part 7: Appendixes**

This part tells how to convert dates between the Muslim and the Western calendar, provides a glossary to jog your memory, and has suggestions about resources available for finding out more about Islam.

# Icons Used in This Book

To call attention to useful information, I've put the following graphic images (icons) beside some paragraphs in this book:



ISLAMIC  
TEXT

This icon indicates passages from the Qur'an and other Islamic texts.



TIP

This icon spotlights important or useful information about Islam.



REMEMBER

I put this icon beside information that will come in handy in understanding other things about Islam.



HEADS UP

This icon clues you into an area of controversy or misunderstanding.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

This icon is beside information that goes into far more detail than you probably want, but is still important for understanding Islam. If you just want the basics, skip these sections.

# Where to Go From Here

This book is planned so that you can go directly to whatever interests you most about Islam. It's not a novel that requires you to begin with Chapter 1 and end with the last chapter. You may want to begin with Chapter 1, which provides a quick overview of Islamic origins and beliefs. After that, check out the following common areas of interest:

- » If you're interested in Islamic beliefs, go to Chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 11.
- » For Muslim rituals and worship, go to Part 3.
- » If you're more interested in Islamic history, turn to Chapters 2, 5, and 15.
- » If you're primarily interested in the modern world, read Chapters 17, 18, and 21.
- » To read about Islam in America and the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, skip to Chapters 15, 16, and 17.

Or plan your own itinerary!



# 1

## **Understanding the Basics**

## IN THIS PART . . .

Although you can begin reading this book anywhere, this part begins by providing an overview of Islamic origins and beliefs. You find out about the main branches of Islam, the number of Muslims in the world, and the countries that have the largest Muslim populations. You may also want to read Chapter 2 to get an overview of Islamic history: Some of the references you come across in other chapters of this book are easier to understand if you have this historical background.

The real meat of this part deals with Islamic beliefs, including how God is understood in Islam. This part examines the key attribute of God in Islam — his oneness — as well as his other attributes, his names, and the signs that testify to God. In addition, this part considers key theological issues in early Islam, such as the relationships between faith and works and between theology and philosophy. I conclude this part by looking at Islamic beliefs concerning the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the ultimate destination of heaven or hell.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting an overview of Islamic origins, beliefs, and practices
- » Counting the numbers and pinpointing Muslims on the world map

## Chapter **1**

# Approaching Islam

In this chapter, you get a quick glance at Islam that the rest of this book expands on: how the faith began, what Muslims believe, how those beliefs diverge into various branches of the faith, and where and how many Muslims practice their faith around the world today.



REMEMBER

Keep in mind that this chapter is only a teaser for more detailed treatment in subsequent chapters of individual topics.

## Getting an Overview of Islamic Origins

In about 610 A.D., the angel Gabriel appeared to a man named Muhammad in the city of Mecca in present day Saudi Arabia. Gabriel told Muhammad that God had commissioned Muhammad as His last prophet. The revelations Muhammad received until his death in 632 constitute the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. Muhammad believed that he was restoring and completing the original religion of humanity, that he stood in the line of the Biblical prophets who had also been sent by God to call people to submit to God.

Muhammad's contemporaries in Mecca worshipped many gods and rejected Muhammad's call to worship only one God. In 622, Muhammad and his small band of believers emigrated from Mecca north to the town of Yathrib, which the

Muslims renamed Medina. That year would eventually be set as the first year of the Muslim calendar (see Appendix A). At Medina, Muhammad established the first Muslim community.

In 630, Muhammad led the army of the growing Muslim community against Mecca, which submitted peacefully. By the time of Muhammad's death, two years later, most of Arabia had accepted Islam and become part of the Islamic community. Muhammad was succeeded by a series of rulers (*caliphs*) under whom Islam burst forth as a new power on the world scene. In less than 100 years, Muslim armies had incorporated most of the lands from the western border regions of northwest India in the East to Spain in the West into a single, great empire usually called a caliphate.

Gradually, the original unity of Islam was lost, never to be regained. The caliphate fell before the Mongol onslaught in 1258. Islam continued to spread in the following centuries, but new Muslim kingdoms rose and fell. By the end of the 17th century, the military power of Islam ebbed away and by the end of the 19th and on into the first part of the 20th century, most Muslim countries came under direct or indirect control of European nations. In the second half of the 20th century, Muslim nations gained their independence. Despite political and economic decline, the number of Muslims in the world increased rapidly in the 20th century, and Islam became for the first time a truly global religion.

## Summarizing Islamic Beliefs

Muslims share many of the same basic beliefs as Christians and Jews, while differing fundamentally from Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism:

- » God created the world and all that is in it.
- » God established in His revealed word the principles by which to live, including concern for the poor.
- » One shouldn't worship other gods, or money, or power, or oneself.
- » At the end of time, God will judge all people.
- » If a person had fulfilled the divine command, he or she will go to heaven.

God calls upon all people to submit to His will, as embodied in His revealed law. In fact, the word *islam* means submission; Islam comes from the same root as the word for peace. Islam is often thought of as the religion of submission to God. Basic Islamic beliefs are summarized in the Five Pillars of Faith (see Chapter 4).



HEADS UP

*Islam* is the name of the religion. A *Muslim* is the name of a member of the Islamic religion. The word “Muslim” means “one who submits to God.” A Muslim isn’t a Mohammedan, and Muslims don’t belong to a Mohammedan religion, because Muhammad is only a man. Muslims worship God and not Muhammad.

Basic Islamic practice is summed up in the Five Pillars of Worship (see Chapter 9). Muslims must confess that only God is God and that Muhammad is His messenger. They stop whatever they’re doing five times a day to pray to God. Once a year, in the month of Ramadan, they fast from dawn to dusk. Each year, they give a defined portion of their wealth to serve God’s purposes. And once in a lifetime, each Muslim who is able must make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

## Dividing into Branches



REMEMBER

Islam has two main branches: the Sunnis and the Shi`ites.

- » Sunnis constitute from 84 to 90 percent of the world’s Muslims. The term “Sunni” refers to the traditions followed by Muhammad and the early Muslims.
- » After Muhammad’s death, some Muslims believed that his cousin and son-in-law, `Ali, should have succeeded him (as opposed to the first three caliphs who came after Muhammad). The term *Shi`a* refers to the party of `Ali, those who believed that religious and political leadership of the Muslim community should always remain in the line of `Ali and his wife Fatima. Because of disputes that arose about the line of succession, Shi`ites divided into a number of different groups, such as Ithna`-Ashari (or Twelvers), Isma`ilis, and Zaydis (see Chapter 12 for details).



TECHNICAL STUFF

Sufis are another large group of Muslims. Sufism is Islamic mysticism, rather than a sect, like Sunnis or Shi`ites. So, a Sufi is normally also a Sunni (or more rarely, a Shi`ite) Muslim. Many Sufi orders (see Chapter 13) exist just like many monastic orders exist in Roman Catholicism.

## Counting the Numbers

Determining the membership of any religion is tricky, but the surveys and studies are good at giving general ranges, as provided in Table 1-1. The *demographers* (those who study populations) don’t judge whether people are active members or whether they almost never attend a temple, synagogue, mosque, or church. When

one of these studies lists 360 million Buddhists in the world, this means that 360 million people consider themselves to be Buddhists.

**TABLE 1-1**

### Size of Selected World Religions (2000)

Religion	Size	Percentage
Christianity	1.9 billion	31–33 percent
Islam	1.2 billion	19–22 percent
Hinduism	881 million	14 percent
Buddhism	360 million	6 percent
Judaism	14 million	under .5 percent

Christianity and Islam are still both growing, most rapidly in Africa over the past century. Muslim countries have some of the world’s highest fertility figures, which accounts for much of the Islamic growth.



TIP

The figures for 1900 provide an interesting comparison to those for 2000. In 1900, the 555 million Christians represented 32 percent of the world’s population, about the same as today. In contrast, the 200 million Muslims constituted only 12.3 percent of the world population, in contrast to Islam’s 19 percent plus today. This percentage growth is why Islam is called the world’s fastest growing major religion.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

For more information on the demographics of world religions, go to [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com).

## Locating Islam on the World Map

All Arabs aren’t Muslims, and all Muslims aren’t Arabs (the original inhabitants of the Middle East who became the dominant population of many Middle Eastern and North African countries, from Iraq to Morocco). In fact, Arabs are only 20 percent of the world’s Muslims. In contrast, South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India) has 300 million Muslims. The Middle East has 200 million Muslims, but the two largest Muslim countries in the Middle East — Turkey and Iran — aren’t Arab countries. Of course, Arabic is the language of Islam, and Arabic culture has left an indelible impression upon Islam, although most Muslims don’t speak Arabic.