

UNDERSTANDING

Islam

By Daniel C. Peterson

Professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic, Brigham Young University

Note: Because it is important to understand those of other faiths, Church leaders felt that it would be helpful to provide an overview of the history and teachings of Islam, the world's second-largest religion.

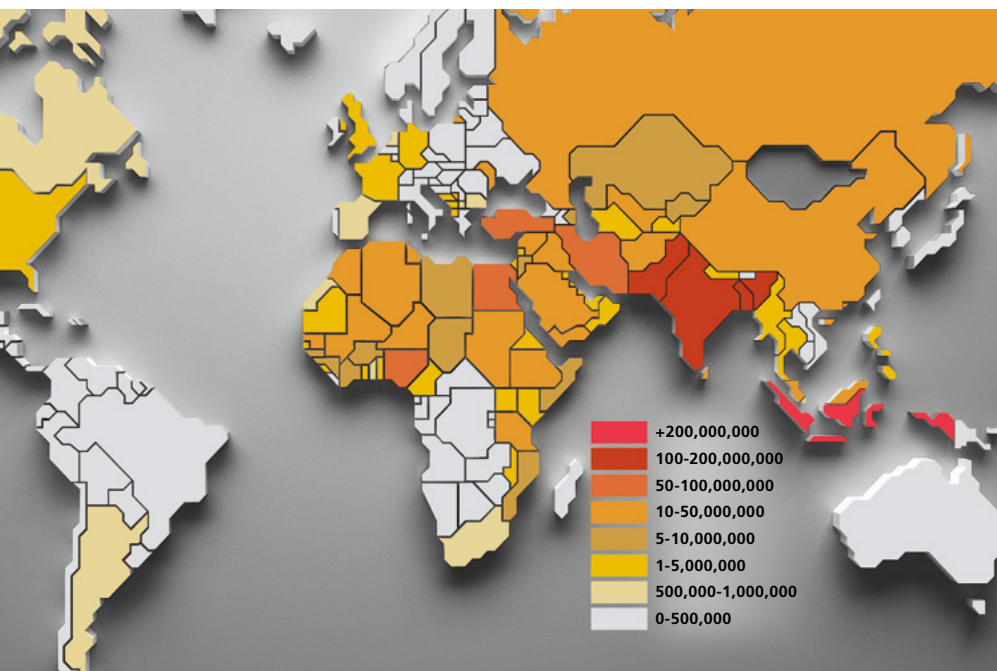
For good or ill, virtually no day passes when Islam and Muslims aren't in the news headlines. Understandably, many non-Muslims—including Latter-day Saints—are curious, even concerned. Do we share anything in common with our Muslim neighbors? Can we live and work together?

First, some historical background may be helpful:

In AD 610, a middle-aged Arabian merchant named Muhammad climbed the hills above his native town of Mecca to reflect and pray about the religious confusion surrounding him. Afterward, he reported that he had received a vision calling him as a prophet to his people. This event marks the beginning of the religion known as Islam (iss-LAAM), a word that means “submission” (to God). A believer in Islam is called a Muslim (MUSS-lim), meaning “submitter.”

Thereafter, Muhammad said he received many revelations until his death nearly 25 years later. He shared them first with the residents of his hometown, warning

A 19th-century mosaic illustrating the Kaaba in Mecca, the city where Muhammad was born and the holiest city in the Islamic world.



Global distribution of Muslims by country, in millions (Pew Research Center, 2009).

remains among its most striking and consequential characteristics.

Two principal factions emerged among Muhammad's followers after his death in AD 632, dividing initially over the question of who should succeed him as the leader of the Islamic community.² The largest of these has come to be called Sunni (it claims to follow the *sunna*, or customary practice of Muhammad, and is relatively flexible on the matter of succession). The other, which grew up around Muhammad's son-in-law, 'Ali, was called the *shi'at 'Ali* (the faction of 'Ali) and is now widely known simply as the Shi'a. Unlike Sunnis, the Shi'a (known as Shi'ite or Shi'i Muslims) believe that the right to succeed Muhammad as leaders of the community properly belongs to the Prophet Muhammad's nearest male relative, 'Ali, and his heirs.

Despite such disagreements, the Islamic world has been more unified, religiously speaking, than Christendom. Furthermore, for several centuries after about AD 800, Islamic civilization was arguably the most advanced in the world in terms of science, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy.

Sources of Muslim Doctrine and Practice

The revelations claimed by Muhammad were gathered into a book

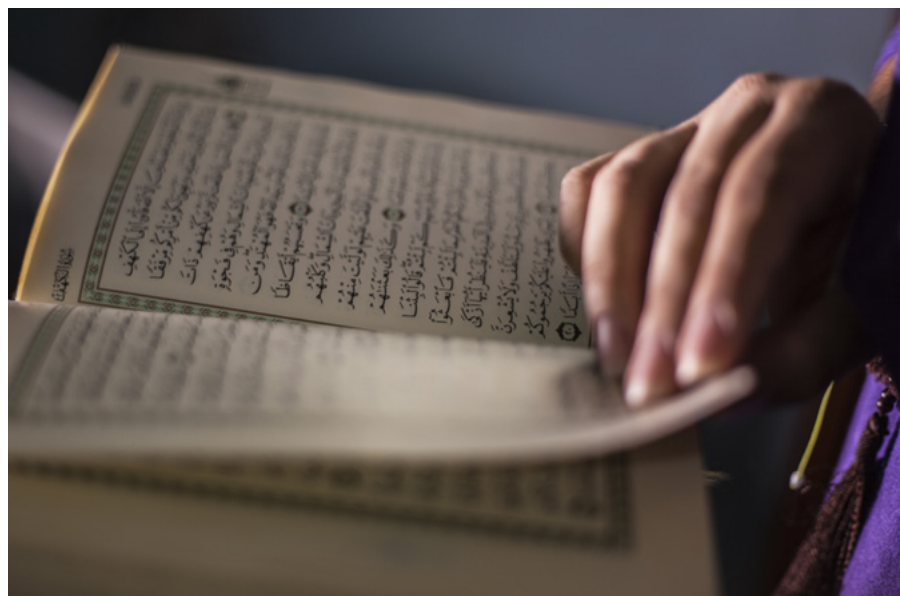
Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the word of Allah given directly to Muhammad.

of divine judgments to come; summoning his audience to repentance and to proper treatment of widows, orphans, and the poor; and preaching the universal resurrection of the dead and the ultimate judgment of God.

However, the ridicule and persecution to which he and his followers were subjected became so intense that they were obliged to flee to the town

of Medina, roughly four days' camel ride to the north.

There, Muhammad's role changed dramatically.¹ From being solely a preacher and a warner, he became the lawgiver, judge, and political leader of an important Arabian town and, over time, of the Arabian Peninsula. This early establishment of a community of believers gave Islam a religious identity rooted in law and justice that



called the Qur'an (from the Arabic verb *qara'a*, "to read" or "to recite") within a decade or two of his death. Composed of 114 chapters, the Qur'an isn't a story about Muhammad. Much like the Doctrine and Covenants, it's not a narrative at all; Muslims regard it as the word (and words) of God given directly to Muhammad.³

Christians reading it will find familiar themes. It speaks, for example, of God's creation of the universe in seven days, His placement of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, their temptation by the devil, their fall, and the call of a line of subsequent prophets (most of whom also appear in the

About two million Muslims undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca each year.

Bible). These prophets are described in the Qur'an as *muslims*, having submitted their wills to God.

Abraham, described as the friend of God, figures prominently in the text.⁴ (Among other things, he is believed to have received revelations that he wrote down but that have since been lost.⁵) Moses, Pharaoh, and the Exodus of the children of Israel also play a role.

Strikingly, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'an, as compared with 19 times in the New Testament. (She is, in fact, the only woman named in the Qur'an.)

One constant Qur'anic refrain is the doctrine of *tawhid* (taw-HEED), a word that might be translated as "monotheism" or, more literally, as

"making one." It represents one of the central principles of Islam: that there is only one entirely unique divine being. "He does not beget, nor is he begotten," declares the Qur'an, "and there is none like him."⁶ What follows from this is surely the most important distinction between Islam and Christianity: Muslims don't believe in the deity of Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost. It also indicates that, while all people are equally creations of God, according to Islamic doctrine we are not His children.

Yet Muslims believe Jesus to have been a sinless prophet of God, born of a virgin and destined to play a central role in the events of the last days. He is mentioned frequently and reverently in the Qur'an.



Muslims kneel in prayer five times a day.

Basic Muslim Teachings and Practices

The so-called “Five Pillars of Islam”—most concisely summarized not in the Qur’an but in a statement traditionally ascribed to Muhammad—set forth some basic Islamic doctrine:

1. Testimony

If Islam has a universal creed, it’s the *shahada* (sha-HAD-ah), “profession of faith,” or “testimony.” The term refers to an Arabic formula that, translated, runs as follows: “I testify that there is no god but God [Allah] and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” The *shahada* is the entryway into Islam. To recite it with sincere belief is to become a Muslim.

The Arabic equivalent of the word *God* is *Allah*. A contraction of the words *al-* (“the”) and *ilah* (“god”), it’s not a proper name but a title, and it’s closely related to the Hebrew word *Elohim*.

Since there is no Islamic priesthood, there are no priesthood ordinances. Nor is there a single Islamic



“church.” Thus, professing the *shahada* is, in a sense, the Islamic equivalent of baptism. The current lack of a formal, unified, worldwide leadership structure has other implications. For example, there is no overall leader of the world’s Muslims, nobody who speaks for the entire community. (Muhammad is almost universally regarded as the final prophet.) This also means that there is no church from which terrorists or “heretics” can be excommunicated.

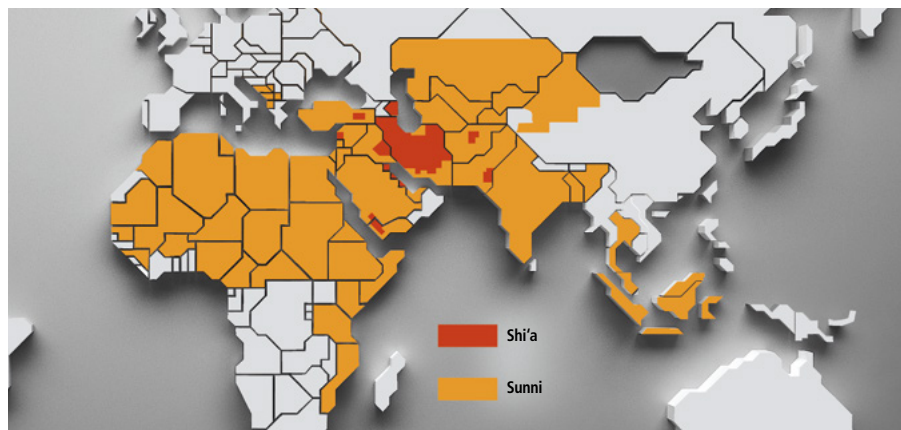
2. Prayer

Many non-Muslims are aware of the Muslim ritual prayer called *salat* (sa-LAAT), which involves a specific

number of physical prostrations, five times daily. Reciting prescribed verses from the Qur’an and touching the forehead to the ground demonstrates humble submission to God. More spontaneous prayer, called *du’a*, can be offered at any time and does not require prostration.

For midday prayers on Friday, Muslim men are required and Muslim women encouraged to pray in a mosque (from Arabic *masjid*, or “place of prostration”). There, in gender-separated groups, they form lines, praying as led by the mosque’s imam (ee-MAAM, from Arabic *amama*, meaning “in front of”), and listen to a short sermon. Fridays, however, aren’t quite equivalent to the Sabbath; although the “weekend” in most Muslim countries centers on *yawm al-jum’a* (“the day of gathering”) or Friday, working on that day isn’t considered sinful.

More than 85 percent of the world’s Muslims are Sunni (see Pew Research Center). Shiites are a minority virtually everywhere except in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq.



3. Almsgiving

Zakat (za-KAAT, meaning “that which purifies”) denotes making charitable donations to support the poor, as well as to mosques and other Islamic undertakings. It is generally reckoned at 2.5 percent of a Muslim’s total wealth above a certain minimum amount. In some Muslim countries, it’s gathered by government institutions. In others, it’s voluntary.

4. Fasting

Every year devout Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise until sunset during the entire lunar month of Ramadan. They also commonly devote themselves to special charity toward the poor and to reading the Qur’an during the month.⁷

5. Pilgrimage

Muslims possessing the health and resources to do so should undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetimes. (A visit to Medina, the second holiest city in Islam, is typically included but isn’t required.) For faithful Muslims, doing so is a deeply spiritual and moving event, something like attending general conference in person or entering the temple for the first time.

Some Current Issues

Three focal points of contemporary non-Muslim concern about Islam are religious violence; Islamic, or *shari’a*, law; and Islam’s treatment of women.

Some extremists have used the term *jihad* to refer exclusively to “holy

war,” but the word actually means “practical work,” as opposed to “mere” prayer and scripture study.

Muslim jurists and thinkers have varied in their understanding of jihad. Standard legal sources argue, for instance, that acceptable military jihad must be defensive and that opponents must be forewarned and allowed opportunity to cease provocative actions. Some jurists and other Muslim thinkers today argue that jihad can designate any practical action intended to benefit the Islamic community or to improve the world more

A group of Muslim women join together for iftar, the evening meal when Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset.



LATTER-DAY SAINT AUTHORS ON ISLAM

- Arnold H. Green, “Mormonism and Islam: From Polemics to Mutual Respect and Cooperation,” *BYU Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2001), 199–220.
- James A. Toronto, “A Latter-day Saint Perspective on Muhammad,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2000, 50–58.
- Daniel C. Peterson, *Abraham Divided* (1995).
- James B. Mayfield, “Ishmael, Our Brother,” *Ensign*, June 1979, 24–32.
- Hugh Nibley, “Islam and Mormonism—A Comparison,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1972, 55–64.

Some Muslim women wear the hijab head covering as a sign of modesty or devotion to Allah or to visibly express their Muslim identity.

generally. Muhammad is said to have distinguished between the “greater jihad” and the “lesser jihad.” The latter, he said, is warfare. But the greater jihad is to combat injustice as well as one’s personal resistance to living righteously.

Today’s Islamist terrorism claims religious roots, but it arguably reflects social, political, and economic grievances that have little or no connection to religion as such.⁸ Moreover, it’s important to note that the vast majority of the world’s Muslims have not joined the terrorists in their violence.⁹

Shari’a is another point of concern for some non-Muslims. Drawn from the Qur’an and the *hadith*—brief reports of what Muhammad and his closest associates said and did that provide models of Muslim behavior as well as supplement and explain Qur’anic passages—it is a code of Muslim conduct.¹⁰ Rules governing both male and female dress (such as the *hijab*, or veil) are found in *shari’a*; while they’re enforced by some Muslim countries, they’re left to individual choice in others. *Shari’a* also covers such matters as personal hygiene; the time and content of prayer; and rules governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Thus, when Muslims indicate in surveys that they wish to be governed by *shari’a*, they may or may not be making a political statement. They may simply be saying that they aspire to live genuinely Muslim lives.



Many non-Muslims, when they think of Islam’s treatment of women, immediately think of polygamy and veils. But the cultural reality is far more complex. Many passages in the Qur’an declare women to be equal to men, while others seem to assign them subordinate roles. Certainly there are practices in many Islamic countries—often with roots in pre-Islamic tribal culture or other pre-existing customs—that render women subservient. However, the way Muslims see women’s roles varies considerably from country to country and even within countries.

Latter-day Saint Views of Islam

Despite our different beliefs, how can Latter-day Saints approach building relationships with Muslims?

First of all, we should recognize Muslims’ right to “worship how, where, or what they may” (Articles of Faith 1:11). In 1841, Latter-day Saints on the city council of Nauvoo passed an ordinance on religious freedom guaranteeing “free toleration, and equal privileges” to “the Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists,

Baptists, Latter-day Saints, Quakers, Episcopalians, Universalists, Unitarians, Mohammedans [Muslims], and all other religious sects and denominations whatever.”¹¹

We should also recall that our Church leaders have generally been strikingly positive in their appreciation of the founder of Islam. In 1855, for example, in a time when many Christians condemned Muhammad as an antichrist, Elders George A. Smith (1817–75) and Parley P. Pratt (1807–57) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles delivered lengthy sermons not only manifesting an impressively informed and fair understanding of Islamic history but also praising Muhammad himself. Elder Smith remarked that Muhammad “was no doubt raised up by God on purpose” to preach against idolatry, and he expressed sympathy for Muslims, who, like the Latter-day Saints, find it hard “to get an honest history” written about them. Speaking immediately afterward, Elder Pratt expressed admiration for Muhammad’s teachings and for the morality and institutions of Muslim society.¹²

A more recent official statement came in 1978 from the First Presidency. It specifically mentions Muhammad among “the great religious leaders of the world,” saying that, like them, he “received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to [these leaders] by God,” wrote Presidents Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, “to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.”¹³

Building on Common Ground

While Latter-day Saints and Muslims obviously differ on important matters—notably the divinity of Jesus Christ, His role as Savior, and the calling of modern prophets—we have many things in common. We both believe, for example, that we are morally accountable before God, that we should pursue both personal

righteousness and a good and just society, and that we will be resurrected and brought before God for judgment.

Both Muslims and Latter-day Saints believe in the vital importance of strong families and in the divine command to help the poor and needy and that we demonstrate our faith through acts of discipleship. There seems no reason why Latter-day Saints and Muslims cannot do so alongside one another and even, when opportunities present themselves, by cooperating together in communities where, more and more, we find ourselves neighbors in an increasingly secular world. Together, we can demonstrate that religious faith can be a powerful force for good and not merely a source of strife and even violence, as some critics argue.

The Qur’an itself suggests a way of living peacefully together despite

our differences: “If God had willed, he could have made you a single community. But he desired to test you in what he has given you. So, compete with one another in good deeds. You will all return to God, and he will inform you regarding the things wherein you used to disagree.”¹⁴ ■

NOTES

1. In fact, AD 622—the year of Muhammad’s *Hijra*, or immigration, to Medina—is the base year of the Muslim (*Hijri*) calendar, and the revelations gathered in the Qur’an are classified as either Meccan or Medinan.
2. Over the centuries, the two factions have grown apart over other secondary issues as well.
3. Significantly, though, while translation of the Qur’an into other languages is allowed, only the original Arabic is regarded as truly the Qur’an and truly scriptural.
4. See Qur’an 4:125.
5. See Qur’an 53:36-62; 87:9-19; see also Daniel C. Peterson, “News from Antiquity,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1994, 16–21.
6. Qur’an 112:3-4. Translations from the Qur’an are from Daniel C. Peterson.
7. Standard editions of the Qur’an are divided into 30 equal portions for precisely that purpose.
8. See, for example, Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (2005); Graham E. Fuller, *A World without Islam* (2010); Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (2010).
9. See Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (2011); see also John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (2008); James Zogby, *Arab Voices: What They Are Saying to Us, and Why It Matters* (2010).
10. It’s rather similar, in fact, to rabbinic law in Judaism.
11. Ordinance in Relation to Religious Societies, City of Nauvoo, [Illinois] headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, March 1, 1841.
12. See *Journal of Discourses*, 3:28–42.
13. First Presidency statement, Feb. 15, 1978. In his revision of *Introduction to the Qur’an* (1970) by Richard Bell, W. Montgomery Watt, an eminent scholar of Islam and an Anglican priest, offered one possible way in which a believing Christian might view the Qur’an as inspired.
14. Qur’an 5:48; compare 2:48.

