

Understanding Islam



Don Nardo



UNDERSTANDING
WORLD RELIGIONS

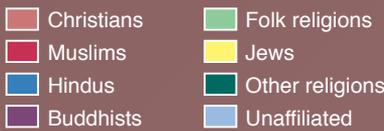
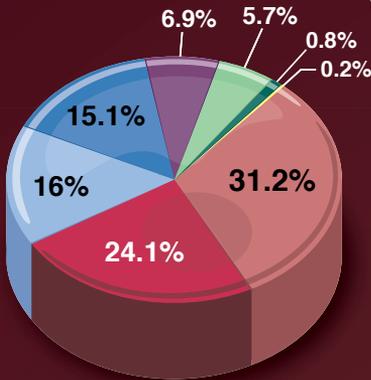
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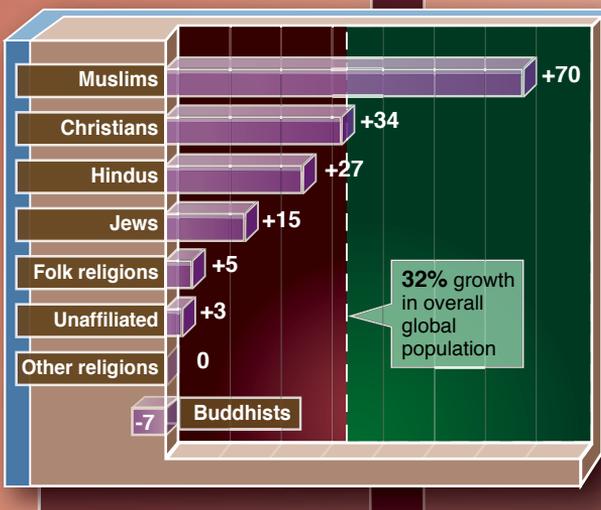
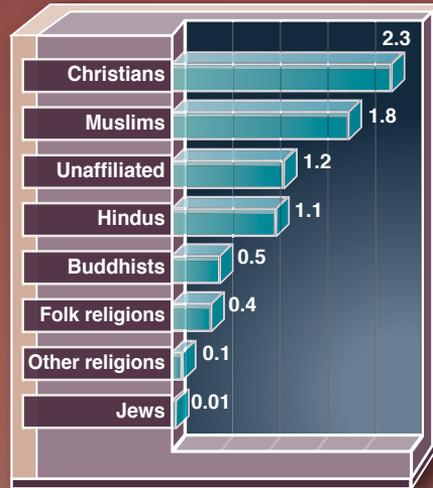
World Religions: By the Numbers

According to a 2017 Pew Research Center demographic analysis, Christians were the largest religious group in the world in 2015. However, that may be changing. The same analysis projects Muslims to be the world's fastest-growing major religious group over the next four decades.

Percent of World Population



Number of People in 2015 (in billions)



Estimated Percent Change in Population Size, 2015-2060

Source: Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, "Christians Remain World's Largest Religious Group, but They Are Declining in Europe," Pew Research Center: The Changing Global Religious Landscape, April 5, 2017. www.pewresearch.org.

The Remarkable Unity of Islam

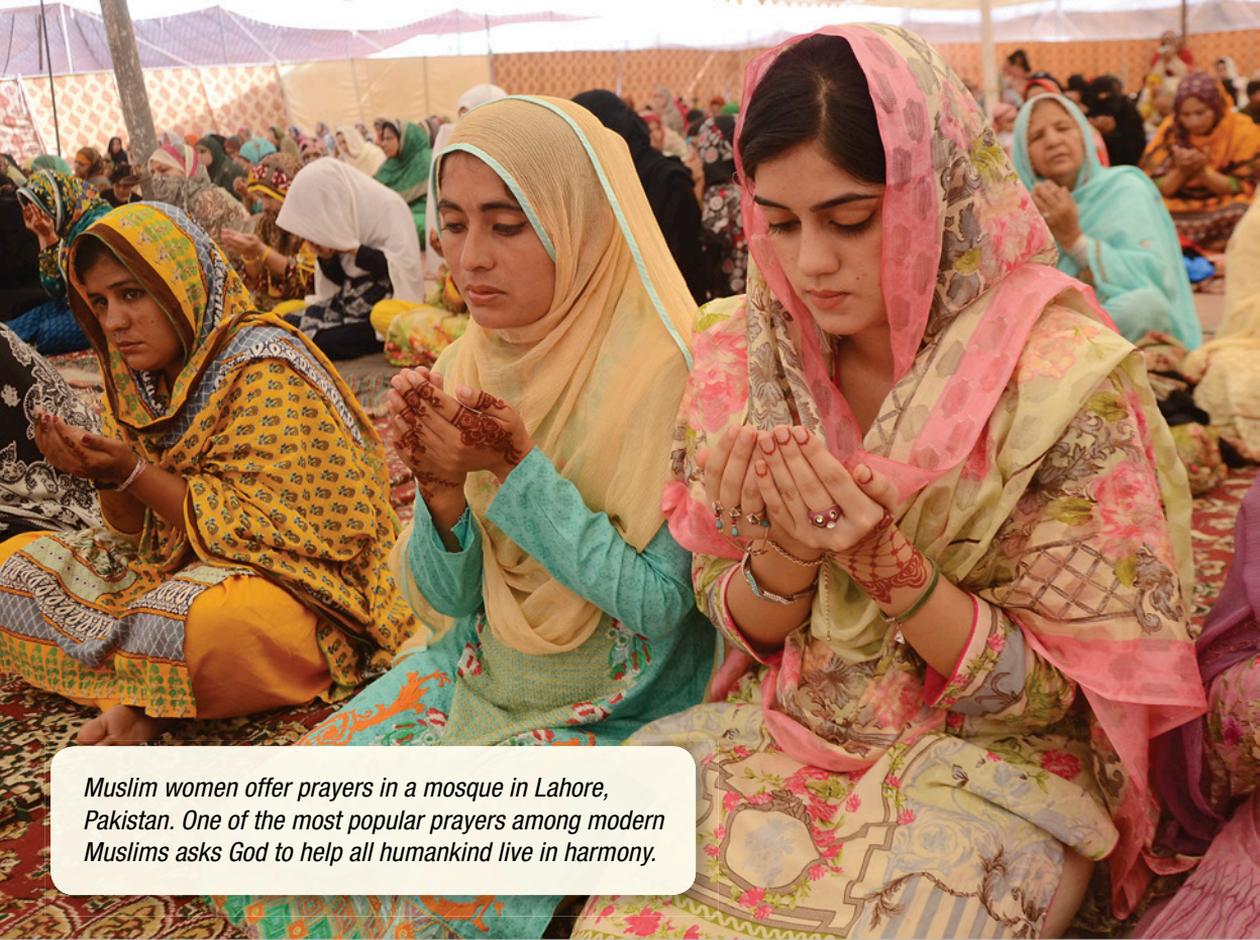
Islam is one of the three main monotheistic faiths, along with Christianity and Judaism. Followers of Islam, called Muslims, worship the same God as Christians and Jews and recognize as holy prophets Judeo-Christian figures such as Moses and Jesus. The primary difference between Islam and these two other faiths is that Muslims recognize a later, and final, prophet—Muhammad. Born in early medieval times, he claimed to receive new revelations from God and started a new faith based on them.

Today, more than fourteen centuries later, Muslims number nearly 2 billion around the globe, accounting for more than 20 percent of the world's population. That makes Islam the second-biggest faith after Christianity. Islam is also a constantly expanding religion. Census records show that Muslims make up the fastest-growing religious minority in both Europe and the United States. In addition, Islam is the youngest of the world's major faiths, having emerged in the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula.

Most Muslims, like members of the other major religions, desire that all peoples live together in peace. One of the more popular modern prayers said by Muslims in many lands says in part: "In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful, look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the controversial teachings of arrogance, divisions, and hatreds which have badly infected our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; reunite us in bonds of love [and] harmony."¹

Those Who Left

The divisions and hatreds mentioned in the prayer are a reference to differences, in some cases deep-seated ones, among various Muslim groups. In particular, most Muslims condemn violent Islamist



Muslim women offer prayers in a mosque in Lahore, Pakistan. One of the most popular prayers among modern Muslims asks God to help all humankind live in harmony.

organizations like al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which spread hatred and employ terror tactics. A number of modern scholars have compared the members of ISIS with the Kharijites (KAR-ee-ites), the very first Muslim group to break away from mainstream Islam, not long after the faith's founding.

The story of the Kharijites illustrates several key aspects of Islam, including the high level of devotion to the faith among all of its members, no matter what their differences might be. The Kharijites' temporary rise to prominence occurred in the years immediately following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. After he passed, a series of his family members assumed control of the Muslim community, or *ummah*, in Arabia. One of them, his son-in-law Uthman, became caliph (leader) in 644 but was assassinated in 656.

At that critical point, another of the Prophet's sons-in-law, Ali, became caliph. However, Muhammad's cousin Muawiya contested Ali's ascendancy, and when the two could not work out their

differences peaceably, they went to war. In the Battle of Siffin in 657, the two sides fought to what appeared to be a draw. Considering this unexpected outcome, Ali and Muawiya agreed to allow a panel of widely respected Muslims to choose which leader should become caliph.

The problem was that a small but vocal group of Ali's supporters were upset that he had agreed to compromise instead of fighting to the bitter end. Claiming that he was not a true Muslim, they left the ummah and established their own version of Islam. This earned them the name Kharijites, meaning "those who left" in Arabic. Seeing them as troublemakers undermining his authority, Ali came out against the Kharijites and engaged them in battle the following year. Although he delivered them a major defeat, some of them survived and continued to resist both Ali and Muawiya. In 661 a Kharijite murdered Ali, which resulted in Muawiya becoming the undisputed caliph—except among the Kharijites.

“Take away the controversial teachings of arrogance, divisions, and hatreds which have badly infected our hearts.”¹

—From a popular Muslim prayer

Seeking Order and Meaning In Life

In the centuries that followed, the Kharijites remained an ever-present minority within Islam, opposing virtually all the caliphs and accusing them of not being conservative or devout enough. The descendants of these protesters within the ummah still exist today. Dwelling mainly in North Africa and Oman in southeastern Arabia, they reject the name Kharijite and call themselves the Ibadi.

The fact that many moderate Muslims have described members of the terrorist group ISIS as modern-day Kharijites stems from some striking similarities between the two groups. Among them are condemning other Muslims and killing anyone, including children and women, to further their cause. In 2014 prominent Muslim scholar Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh called ISIS an outgrowth of the Kharijites who “believed that killing Muslims was not a crime, and we do not consider either of them Muslims.”² Even leaders of the equally infamous Islamist terror group al Qaeda have compared ISIS to the Kharijites.

Why Muslims Abstain from Pork



The Islamic prohibition against eating pork comes partly from the following verse in the Quran: “Forbidden to you for food are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine.” The word *swine* generally refers to pigs. Muslims are not the only people who have a traditional objection to eating pork. Another is Jews, whose prohibition on eating pork is based on several biblical passages. One, from the book of Leviticus, reads: “And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be cloven footed, yet he chews not the cud; he is unclean to you.” Both Muslims and Jews cite essentially the same reasons for abstaining from eating pork. First, they argue that pigs have historically been known as scavengers that tend to live in very unclean conditions and are regularly covered in dirt and animal feces. In this view, the chances of humans consuming particles of such filth are high. Also, those who support the pork prohibition say medical research indicates that pork flesh sometimes contains various parasites. Among them are small but dangerous worms, including pinworm, roundworm, and hookworm. Particularly troublesome is the pork tapeworm, which, once ingested, takes up residence in the intestines. A tapeworm can grow to be extremely long, and its eggs can enter the bloodstream and from there travel to other parts of the body. If any of these eggs reach the brain, they can cause memory loss; if they make it into the heart, the result can be a heart attack.

Quran 5:3.

Leviticus 11:7.

Other Major Islamic Holidays

Ramadan itself is viewed by most Muslims as the most sacred of the Islamic holidays. It takes place during the ninth lunar month—called Ramadan in the festival’s honor. The historical-spiritual basis of the holiday is that it was the month in which the angel Gabriel began helping Muhammad recite the verses of the Quran. To celebrate that momentous event, Muslims devote the month’s entire twenty-nine days to alternately refraining from and then hugely enjoying the foods they see as part of God’s bounty to humans. The belief is that this repeated daily fasting pleases

God because it continually brings his faithful followers together. As Carole Hillenbrand puts it, “The alternation of fasting in the day and shared meals taken with family and friends after nightfall strongly enhances Muslims’ sense of community and social solidarity.”⁴⁴

Another Islamic holiday that commemorates an event directly related to Muhammad is Mawlid al-Nabi, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday. The feasting in his honor takes place on the twelfth day of the third lunar month—Rabi al-Awwal. In addition to the traditional banquet, people either recite or listen to someone else recite a religious sermon. There is also gift giving among relatives and friends.

Although a majority of Muslim sects observe Mawlid al-Nabi, a few do not. “The celebration is opposed by purists,” Paul Grieve explains, “as magnifying the cult of Muhammad.” Grieve says they feel this is “contrary to the true basis of Islam in which there are no intermediaries between man and God, with Muhammad regarded as nothing more than human. The feast is more popular in sentimental Pakistan, for example, than in the austere atmosphere of Saudi Arabia, where Mawlid is actively opposed.”⁴⁵

Still another popular Islamic holy day—Ashura—is observed differently by Sunnis and Shias. For Sunnis, the feast, held on the tenth day of the lunar month Muharram, recalls with respect and joy the time when God rescued a fellow People of the Book, the Jews, from their bondage in Egypt. Muhammad himself made this a compulsory Muslim holiday.

In contrast, although Shias also celebrate Ashura, they view its origins differently. The Shias’ observance is a commemoration of the death of Muhammad’s grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, in about 680 CE (or AH 58). The site of this event—Karbala, in central Iraq—thereafter became a place that Shia Muslims visit on a pilgrimage similar in some ways to the hajj. At the height of the Karbala

“[The] shared meals taken with family and friends after nightfall [during Ramadan] strongly enhances Muslims’ sense of community.”⁴⁴

—Scholar Carole Hillenbrand

SOURCE NOTES

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