

## The Essentials of Islam

### Beginnings:

In the 7th century CE,

**Muhammad** believed himself to have received a series of divine revelations from the archangel Gabriel over a period of 23 years, beginning when he was 40 and continuing until his death in 632. These were initially memorized by his companions and then written down by Zayd ibn Thabit and other scribes during the



caliphate of Abu Bakr Siddiq, creating the **Qur'an** ("recitation"), the most sacred scripture. Next in importance are accounts of the life and behavior of Muhammad, known as **hadiths**.

Year 1 of the Islamic calendar is 622 CE, the date of Muhammad's **hejira**, when he journeyed from Mecca to Medina to consolidate the Muslim community. In general, depictions of Allah are not permitted in Islam, and gradually the practice in depicting Muhammad became to leave his face blank or have it covered (as here), to make clear that he is a prophet, not a god to whom one would pray. **Calligraphy** (primarily of Qur'anic passages) is therefore the highest art form, as a celebration of and encounter with the words of Allah - the divine itself.

### Central teachings and practices:

- The Five Pillars of Islam (Sunnī):
  - **Shahada** - the profession of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." Recited five times a day. Allah (the Arabic word for god) is the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians, but their understanding of God's revelation is held to have been faulty, while Muhammad's is the correct one.
  - **Salah** - prayer: five times a day, at set times, facing Mecca - preceded by formal ablutions of face, hands, and feet - includes reciting the opening sura [chapter] of the Qur'an

- **Zakat** - almsgiving: the word means “purification,” so that giving a portion of one’s income (usually about 2.5%) to the good of the community purifies the rest of one’s wealth
  - **Sawm** - fasting: during the daylight hours for the entire month of Ramadan (ninth month of the year - the month in which the first revelation from Gabriel was given to Muhammad), abstain from all food and drink as a devotional discipline - Eid-al-Fitr (breaking of the fast) is a three-day holiday at the end of Ramadan
  - **Hajj** - pilgrimage: at least once during one’s life, travel to Mecca during the 12th month to circle the Ka’ba, a black cubical structure, seven times - wear only a simple white garment to remove any sign of class distinctions - the Ka’ba is believed to be the house Abraham built for Allah, and contains a sacred stone (meteorite) placed there by him
- Shi’ite Muslims see these practices as essential, but denote them differently: Ismailis have seven, adding walayah, love and devotion to Allah and the community, and jihad, the struggle or striving for Allah; Twelvers focus on five beliefs and ten practices, adding some ethical and theological foci.

The main branches of Islam:

- Islam claims 25% of the world’s population as adherents - 1.9 billion people - with 3.5 million living in the United States.
- **Sunni** (85-90%) - those who believed Abu Bakr Siddiq to be the rightful successor (caliph) to Muhammad - many internal divisions, including Wahhabism, a fundamentalist movement behind the leadership of Saudi Arabia
- **Shi’a** (10-15%) - those who believed Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, to have been chosen by Muhammad as his successor - two main branches, the Twelvers (the vast majority) and the Ismailis - again a dispute over leadership
- **Sufism** - the mystical, personal devotion side of Islam - Sufis are primarily gathered in orders and most are Sunni, but there are orders within Shi’ite Islam as well

Image: *Ascent of Muhammad to Heaven* (ca. 1539–1543), from the *Khamseh* of Nizami - Persian, probably by court painter Sultan Muhammed