Islam

Sunnism

FOUNDED: 632 CE
RELIGION AS A PERCENTAGE OF WORLD POPULATION: 21 percent

OVERVIEW
Sunnism is the largest branch of Islam, representing more than 85 percent of all Muslims. Adherents claim that they represent the traditional, common understanding of Islam proclaimed by the Prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah (c. 570–632 CE), Islam’s founder. Sunnism focuses on the social cohesion of the group (the ummah, or Islamic community), emphasizing consensus on religious, social, political, legal, and doctrinal issues. Sunnis are differentiated from the other major branch of Muslims known as Shiites.

By the early 21st century the global population of Sunnis was approximately 1.5 billion, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Although Sunni believers are found in almost every country in the world, the majority of the population is centered in the Asian/Pacific region, and almost three-quarters of the Sunni population lives in the Middle East. Sunni perspectives have remained dominant in most governments and state institutions throughout the Islamic world; only Iran and Yemen remain singularly Shiite.

HISTORY
The Arabic Koran (also spelled Quran), the sacred text of Islam, is rooted deeply in Semitic and Western religious conceptions and reflects its origins in the religiously diverse tribal cultures of the Hejaz, a region in what is now Saudi Arabia. The Koran does not recognize the Sunnis as a distinctive group. Instead Sunnism teaches that, because Muhammad left no written will at his death, he had no designated successor—though just before he died, he ordered a longtime associate, Abu Bakr (573–634 CE), to lead the community in prayer, which was seen by many as a sign that the Prophet was conferring leadership to him. After Muhammad’s funeral members of the Islamic community chose Abu Bakr as his successor without much apparent contention, due to his lofty position in the community and his selection as prayer leader by the Prophet. This led most Muslims to believe that the majority view should decide crucial issues such as who should be leader. Followers of this belief became known as abl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah (people of established practice and of the community), or Sunnis.
A minority of Muslims opposed the Sunni position, claiming that during Muhammad’s last pilgrimage he had named ’Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 CE), his cousin and son-in-law, as his successor. They came to be known as the Shia (partisans) of ’Ali, later shortened to Shia or Shiiites. The disagreement over succession spawned a series of four internal battles called fitnahs (seditions) between 632 and 819 CE. The Sunnis argued that the Muslim community should be understood as a collective of believers who are responsible for deciding what should be done about any controversial issue, including succession. They eventually argued that God guides the collective will of his believers.

Five years after ’Ali was selected as the fourth caliph, or successor of Muhammad, in 656 CE, he was assassinated. By this time the two groups were sufficiently differentiated such that every Muslim could identify the faction to which he or she belonged. Eventually Sunnis embraced their name as a way to affirm their loyalty to accepted traditions associated with the Prophet, which, they held, formed the basis of a growing Islamic consensus.

Classical Islamic civilization developed under the control and direction of the caliph, or Khalifah Rasul Allah, who was variously understood as a representative or successor of the Prophet Muhammad and who served as head of the developing Islamic state. As Sunnism expanded throughout the Fertile Crescent and west to Egypt and North Africa, the caliph became the principal power that drove Sunni ideology within the Islamic court and was responsible for legal, artistic, medical, scientific, and economic advancement.

As Sunnis came to rule various Muslim empires, they were forced to develop a common religious viewpoint, or consensus, among the various ethnicities and peoples under their control. Many problems required going beyond the simple statements passed down from the Prophet. Hence Sunnis supported a wide range of intellectuals (physicians, Koranic interpreters, historians, scientists, and educators). A class of scholars known as the ulama arose, providing the basis for an international Sunnism. Scholars organized Islamic sources into legal texts, which were accepted as authoritative, and ordinary Sunnis gradually deferred to these scholars (or legists) on most matters of faith and law. These believers increasingly espoused Sharia (the system of Muslim law) not just as a means to solve their legal problems but also as a way to understand and follow God’s will.

Sunnis were not the only Muslims who embraced Sharia as a spiritual guide, but through developments provided by their scholars and judges, Sharia became inextricably connected to the understanding of Sunnism. When scholars speak of the classical period of Islam (c. 900–1200), they are usually referring to a time when consciousness of Sharia combined with other great achievements throughout the Muslim world to form the pinnacle of Islamic, and Sunni, civilization. By the end of the classical period, however, Sunnis faced the important question of how to incorporate new perspectives without seriously modifying the assumptions of the Sunni system. Some ulama argued that the door to new insights should be closed, and the result was a social order that found it difficult to confront changes associated with modernity.

Beginning in the 13th century a unified sense of Sunnism was challenged by the emergence of independent states and emirates that relied less on an international Sunni value system. The caliph declined as a figure of power and was replaced by sultans, emirs, and emperors. The lack of real power behind a unifying figure like the caliph, who was chiefly a symbolic figurehead, led to political fragmentation in the Islamic world and signaled a weakening of Muslim cohesion. By the time of the Renaissance in Europe in the 1500s, when the West challenged Muslim civilization as European Christian forces conquered Granada, Spain, and expelled Jews and Muslims into North Africa, the word Sunni had taken on a meaning close to “doctrinaire,” or one who is overly concerned about policy at the expense of practicality. Thus, Sunnism often appeared to Western Renaissance commentators as a form of orthodox Islam.

In the 18th and 19th centuries political issues increasingly dominated Sunnism. Due to Western colonialism, the Muslim world was severed into small nation-states, each vying for legitimacy, which further weakened Muslim cohesion. By the end of the 20th century, most Muslim countries were dealing with militant fundamentalist groups bent on reform. These anti-Western and antiregime movements were characterized by a commitment to the international triumph of Islam and rigid opposition to all things not of Islamic origin. Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, a form of puritanical Islam, is an example of such a movement. In addition, a small fringe movement of reformers regarded Islam as under severe threat from the West and argued for a violent response to Western domination. Thus, the jihadist
A movement was born. Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda group is most often associated with this perspective.

Although such reformist groups consider themselves Sunni, their views are not shared by the majority. Instead they represent a new Islamic identity that cannot be solely understood in terms of classical Sunnism. Some of these reformist notions emphasize a return to the time of the Prophet, while others promote a return to the simple model of the ummah during the Prophet’s career. Still others stress the distilled wisdom of the Koran.

Contemporary Islam reflects a variety of opinions about the notion of a return to true Islam. Some salafis (predecessors, or ancestors) argued for a return to the “rightly guided” views of the early Muslim leadership. Others opted for a return to the caliph as the legitimate leader of Islam. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the present-day Islamist reform movement have oriented themselves around a conservative model of what the community is and what it holds. The early 21st century has been marked by the triumph of several Islamist (or fundamentalist) governments built upon an Islamic version of democracy. One of the most notable is the revolution in Egypt that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power in 2012.

CENTRAL DOCTRINES  Sunni doctrine affirms that the God of Islam, Allah, is the only God, a concept underlined in the Koran by the word *tawhid* (unity, or the oneness of God). Shiite beliefs differ little on this issue, and the concept of *tawhid* is a cornerstone of both sects.

Sunnis insist that the Prophet was but a man, although the Koran calls for believers to heed what he says and does. Thus, Sunnis forbid the worship of the Prophet and the creation of images of him. Nevertheless, they affirm that he is the seal of the prophets, meaning that he brought the final and complete message of God and that God will not speak again through any other spokesperson. Therefore, they oppose newer claims to apostleship such as those made by the Ahmadiyya reform movement in India and Pakistan.

For Sunnis the Prophet is an ideal model. Memories of what he said and did were written down and eventually collected in books known as the Hadith (usually translated as “traditions”). Sunnis treasure six of these collections, beginning with the ninth-century collections of the scholars Muhammad ibn Isma’il al-Bukhari (810–870 CE) and Muslim ibn al–Hajjaj (821–875 CE).

Early in the classical age of Islam, another view of the religion, known as Mu’tazilism, developed within Sunnism. The scholars who shaped this perspective
were influenced by classical Greek and Greco-Roman intellectual tradition. They attempted to apply a rational and allegorical interpretation to the Koran. Ultimately, Sunnis rejected their approach, insisting that the Koran was not a matter for philosophical speculation but rather a set of codes by which followers should live. Thus, some commentators speak about Muslim orthopraxy, meaning a standard way of living, instead of orthodoxy.

Under the influence of Greek philosophical ideas, Sunnis have debated the issue of free will versus predestination. Most Sunnis hold that a person’s life is intersected by God’s will in many crucial but nonassertive ways. Although the Koran states that each person’s destiny is in the hands of God, it seems to offer a balance between the notion of free will and predestination. As a result Sunnis believe that humans should live in submission to God but should not be passive, disengaged believers. Contemporary Sunnis insist that they play a crucial role in shaping Islamic society even as they acknowledge their life is ultimately in God’s hands.

Sunnis generally practice according to one of four schools of law, which vary on some issues and are distributed regionally: Hanafi (Iraq, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan), Maliki (North and West Africa), Shafi'i (Yemen, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Philippines), and Hanbali (Saudi Arabia). Because of historical factors such as population movement and changes in the ruling dynasties, Muslims in areas such as Syria or the West may find several of these schools of thought in the same location.

Islamic, or Sharia, law does not function as law in the West. Instead, the emphasis is on guiding Muslims toward living the true Islamic life and thus turning society into a normative Muslim community. The adaptation of civil law to include Sharia for Muslim residents has spawned antagonism among certain host cultures in the West. Sharia laws related to family and women often are the focal points of these controversies, and some communities have refused to make any such adaptations.

**MORAL CODE OF CONDUCT** The Sunni moral code is a product of the Koran, which often emphasizes action over belief. In the same vein, the Prophet is said to have voiced the Muslim golden rule: “No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.” However, the Koran commands an ethics of retaliation—that is, turning the other cheek is not acceptable when faced with an evil person.

Everyday activities are normally evaluated according to two concepts, halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden). Halal encompasses all things that the Koran, the Hadith, and Sunni culture have decided are permitted. For example, only animals killed according to proper procedures are to be eaten. Haram applies to all acts that the sources forbid, such as suicide or eating pork.

Sunnis developed more nuanced approaches to moral issues by classifying acts according to three further categories—neutral, recommended, and reprehensible—which, along with halal and haram, provide five possible ahkam, or rulings. There has been debate about how these principles should be applied to an individual’s actions, and Sunni courts require that the context for such designations be established.

**SACRED BOOKS** The Koran is the sacred scripture for both Sunnis and Shiites. The Prophet Muhammad received the holy text in 610 CE when the archangel Gabriel commanded him to recite God’s Word. He continued to receive revelations until his death in 632. According to accepted tradition, immediately after the Prophet’s death, Abu Bakr began collecting these revelations in what would become the Koran. ‘Uthman ibn Affan (579–656) completed the collection about 20 years later. The text was accepted as canonical, and all other versions were destroyed. Sunnis have stood by the veracity of this text despite questions raised about some aspects, including whether some verses have been omitted.

The Koran reflects the religious environment in which it was written, which included pagan, Jewish, and Christian communities. Several of the Koran’s fundamental teachings have much in common with those of the Torah and the Bible. Sunnis regard the Koran as God’s last instruction and the ultimate authority on all matters of doctrine, religious behavior, and faith. All Sunnis maintain that, even though the present-day version was compiled after the time of the Prophet, it reflects an eternal message. They believe that the original book (“the mother of the book”) has always resided with God. Sunnis also hold that the Koran’s message was sent to all prophets but that the other resulting sacred scriptures either were lost or reflect a modification of the pure original message. Thus, the Koran stands above all scriptures as God’s Word alone; other scriptures reflect the hand of human editing and cultural development.

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(d. 768 CE) of historical importance for depicting the setting in which the Koran was received. This work has taken on almost canonical significance for its explanation of how God’s message came to be given through the Prophet Muhammad.

Western perspectives on the life of the Prophet have often been contentious and have been influenced by conflict over religious truth and social norms. Koran burning and scandalous versions of the Prophet’s life continue to circulate. Sunni theologians have not been successful in separating the validity of the Koran’s statements from the Prophet’s private life despite their insistence on the essential humanness of the Prophet and their long resistance to idealistic and honorific portrayals of his life and achievement. Religious ideology continues to mediate much of this discussion.

SACRED SYMBOLS Because in Islam only God’s creations are to receive the greatest praise, and because turning an object into a totem or fetish is forbidden, Sunnis venerate few man-made symbols. Nevertheless, there are some symbols of Muslim identity. The Kaaba, or cube, is the small, almost square building in the center of the courtyard of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Muslims worldwide pray toward the Kaaba, which serves as the prime symbol for all Muslims, though it has always been in the hands of Sunnis.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS All Sunni Muslims regard the “rightly guided” caliphs—the first four leaders of the Muslim community (Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib)—to be the crucial early leaders. Over the years factionalism has determined which of these leaders Sunnis have honored most.

An important leader at the pinnacle of Islam’s classical period was Harun al-Rashid (786–809 CE), whose caliphate in Baghdad was honored for taking Sunnism to unsurpassed excellence and splendor. Sunnism was also invigorated by Akbar (1556–1605), a Mughal emperor who firmly established Islam in northern India.

Important Sunni world leaders of the modern era include Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), who was responsible for a major rethinking of traditional Islamic statehood. His reforms in Turkey shifted the state’s goals away from embodying religious ideology and toward
adapting Sunnism to modern society. Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) founded the Islamic republic of Pakistan in 1947, attempting to maintain a Sunni identity within a Western political structure. Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970) applied a socialist ideology to the Islamic state when he established a republic in Egypt in 1956.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) founded Wahhabism, a militant reform movement, in what is now Saudi Arabia. A second movement emerged around the Imam Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), whose Sunni Egyptian organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, spread throughout the Arab world, providing institutional growth for Islamism, or Islamic fundamentalism. Its most notable success is gaining a prominent position in the government of Egypt, though the Muslim Brotherhood is also represented in the governmental policies in Turkey and Tunisia. Although the Brotherhood did not participate in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, which saw youths, women, and people across the political spectrum joining together to overthrow the corrupt government of president Hosni Mubarak (1928–), the Brotherhood had been the main opposition to Mubarak’s regime in the past. Thus, it became a focal point for ushering in a new system. Islamists won the 2012 elections handily, and Muhammad Morsi, the Islamists candidate, became president. Only a year later, amidst growing public protest and fears related to the increasing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and threat of religious dictatorship, the Egyptian military took over the government, arresting Morsi and others associated with the Brotherhood.

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS Islamic intellectual tradition is highly nuanced. Scholarship flourished under Sunni caliphs in the early days of Islam, with major developments in science, engineering, medicine, and letters. One religious dimension of this creativity is mysticism. Rabī’ah al-Adawiyya (713–801 CE) of Basra, Iraq, was a devoted Sunni woman of Sufi (mystic) convictions. Her asceticism inspired generations of muridin (devotees) to spend their lives in meditation. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), head of a school in Baghdad, underwent a spiritual revolution and abandoned his career to write books reconciling the mystical tradition with Sunni legal thinking. Sunni civilization was also influenced by writers such as Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (1207–1273), a Sufi poet and savant, and Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240), a theosophist and metaphysical thinker. Even the proto-Islamist founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Hasan al-Banna was strongly influenced by a mystical order. Others pointed to these orders as proof that Islam needed to be reformed.

The leading intellectual al-Biruni (973–1048) was a historian and mathematician who developed a sophisticated reading of Indian culture. A later scholar, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), founded the study of societies (and by extension sociology) with his concept of 'asabiyah (group cohesion). His work is often cited as an example of an early social scientific model arising out of Islamic social analysis. Although some Sunnis would argue that these scholars were secular in their assumptions, they reflect great sensitivity to Islamic social forms.

Modern religious reformists include Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897), a political revolutionary who resisted British imperialism in Islamic territories; Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a Muslim modernist and advocate of Westernizing reform in India; Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), an advocate of Islamic modernism in Egypt; Sayyid Abdul Ala Mawdudi (1904–1979), a neoconservative reformer and fundamentalist ideologue in Pakistan; and Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), the principal theorist of the contemporary radical Islamist movement. A more recent example is the moderate Sunni voice of Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988), who originally was hired to assist in developing Pakistan’s legal system and later became one of the leading Muslim intellectuals in the United States. Muhammad Fethullah Gulen (1941–), born in Turkey and living in exile in the United States, is one of Sunnism’s most influential contemporary voices. He is known for his advocacy of reformed Islam, including multireligious dialogue, scientific study, and multiparty democracy.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE Because Sunnism has no priesthood and no explicit religious hierarchy, there is no one spokesperson for the tradition. Over the course of history, the ulama (scholarly class) have come to be the official authorities of Islamic learning and have often represented Sunnism. They have exercised more control over the Sunni point of view than any other group, except perhaps until the rise of Islamism, or fundamentalism, in the contemporary period. Under the influence of Islamism, a small number of individuals using media and technology have succeeded in acquiring and holding disproportionate power over public opinion.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES There are no essential differences between Sunnis and Shiites concerning places of worship. Although the mosque is the common house of worship, a Muslim does not need a
Muslim Leadership

Traditionally Sunnism holds that, in a true Islamic state, religion and politics are united. Historically, though, Islamic religious values express themselves through different prisms—sometimes as doctrine, common tradition, or politics. Sorting out which values apply and when makes being the ideal leader a complicated chore. What constitutes the true Islamic state is a matter of debate within Sunnism, as are the ideal qualities of a leader. Some Sunnis believe that the Islamic community should be led by a religious person whose piety indicates that he or she is God’s choice as a political leader. For instance, Abu Bakr, the first caliph (reigned 632–34 CE), has long been seen as a pious man who had little skill in governance but whose closeness to the Prophet justified his position. Other Sunnis maintain that Muslims should be led by a person with political acumen but no special piety.

Many outside forces, such as Western imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism, have influenced the understanding of the Muslim state and the proper stance of a leader toward the people. An example is Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970), who in 1956 established Egypt as a republic compatible with Islamic principles. Although Nasser possessed considerable political savvy, he was not a particularly religious man. He experimented with an Arab socialist model that was rooted in intellectual Marxism. The result was the short-lived United Arab Republic, which united Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961, and several long-lasting reforms that empowered Egyptian peasant farmers as a social group.

Sunní radical leaders have continued to express a wide variety of perspectives. Most are familiar with jihadist leadership. Osama bin Laden (1957–2011) encouraged the use of terror and indiscriminate violence to overthrow Western culture and political structures. Of perhaps equal relevance, though representing a different outlook, is Wallace Warith Deen Muhammad (1933–), head of an Islamic movement in the United States—first called the Nation of Islam and then the American Muslim Society—begun by his father, Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975). Warith has dramatically changed this American sectarian movement into one of the most respected Sunni organizations in the Western world.

Muslim leadership is almost always spoken of in the press in male terms, although Islamic feminism has had a considerable impact on Muslim societies. Adherents to Western feminism and the conservative Islamic womanist position alike have fueled movements such as the Arab Spring—a wave of protests, riots, and civil wars that began in 2010. In the United States the writings of Egyptian-born Leila Ahmed (1940–) have expressed the Muslim feminist perspective. For some Sunnis, however, this emphasis on women in Islam is but a return to the kind of society that developed around the Prophet and his wives Khadija and Aisha, who were examples of powerful, independent women in their own right.

What is Sacred

All Muslims treat the Koran with special care. It is regarded by some as so powerful that it has curative powers (a folk belief often found among Sunnis). Early followers thought the lives of saintly figures such as Muhammad contained a powerful spiritual element called baraka. Founders and leaders of Sufi orders are often considered to have baraka, and seeking their help with a problem is recognized as a way of appropriating the power of a saint to one’s life. According to some Moroccan Sunnis, tombs of the saints can contain baraka, and consequently the countryside is dotted with sacred places for visitation.
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HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS Sunnis observe all major Muslim holidays, including Eid al-Fitr (the end of the Ramadan fast) and Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice). Most Sunni countries also celebrate the birthday of the Prophet. Unlike Shiite communities, Sunnis do not pay special attention to 'Ali or other Shiite figures.

MODE OF DRESS Sunnism does not have a distinctive dress code. Diversity is the norm within Muslim communities, and ethnicity and culture often have greater influence on clothing than religion. Nevertheless, at times throughout history some distinctive styles have been supported by Sunni culture. The hijab (Islamic headscarf) almost always identifies a woman as a conservative Muslim. Some Sunni women go so far as to wear the burqa, a loose garment that covers the body, head, and face, with only a slit for the eyes. Huda Sharawi (1879–1947), an Egyptian woman, made a significant challenge to the Sunni use of the hijab in the early 20th century by encouraging like-minded feminists to discard it. Supporters of the hijab point out that it was worn by Muhammad’s wives, while detractors argue that it arose in classical society as a way for upper-class women to distinguish themselves from the working class and therefore was not meant as a requirement for all women.

DIETARY PRACTICES Sunnis observe all the dietary laws of Islam. There are minor differences between the various schools of Sunni thought. For example, depending on the school (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, or Hanbali), eating shellfish is classified as forbidden, reprehensible, or permissible.

RITUALS Sunnis embrace all the central rites of Islam. The most fundamental are daily prayer, fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving, and hajj (pilgrimage). There are only minor differences between Sunnis and Shiites in these areas. For example, Shiites hold that one should not cover one’s head in the presence of the holy places; therefore, they prefer to travel in open-top buses. Some Shiites also use a small tablet of clay from Medina to touch their head to when they pray.

RITES OF PASSAGE Sunnis practice four major rites of passage: birth, circumcision, marriage, and death. They celebrate the birth of a child with the ‘aqiqa, the sacrifice of an animal on the seventh day after birth. Circumcision of boys is a marker of Muslim, and Sunni, identity. For example, in Egypt it occurs when a boy has completed the recitation of the Koran, usually at about age 12. For many Middle Eastern Muslims, memorizing the Koran is a sign that the adolescent is ready to move into the realm of adult responsibility.

Kashmiri Sunni Muslim men pray at the Jamia Mosque on the last Friday of the holy Islamic month of Ramadan in 2010 in Srinagar, India. © YAWAR NAZIR/GETTY IMAGES.
A small number of Sunni cultures perform female circumcision, depending upon ethnic custom and interpretation of a particular statement of the Prophet (in which he advises a woman who is performing the operation not to cut too deep). Some see this statement as a justification of the practice, as the Prophet did not outright condemn it. In societies that practice this rite, female circumcision is performed at the onset of puberty. Girls are then deemed capable of being married, so the rite is associated with passage to adulthood. However, most Sunni cultures oppose female circumcision, which is also known as female genital mutilation (FGM) and is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) and others to be a human rights violation. Providing no health benefits, the procedure can result in shock; severe, sometimes recurring pain; significant risk of infection; sepsis; tetanus; infertility; later childbirth complications; and even death.

Sunnism regards marriage as a blessing from God and views sexuality within marriage to be healthy and beneficial, so weddings are occasions for great community festivity. After marrying the spouses take their places as members of the adult community. A major difference between Sunnism and Shiism is the practice of *mut'a* (temporary) marriage, in which a couple marries for a specific duration, such as a day, a month, or three years. Sunni law rejects this practice, while Shiite law accepts it (although such marriages are rarely performed).

**MEMBERSHIP** Because the Koran explicitly recognizes the legitimacy of Judaism and Christianity as faiths of a common tradition, there is no attempt within Islam to launch a widespread program to convert members of other faiths. Generally speaking, Muslims, including Sunnis, are content to present information about Islam if asked, but they do not actively proselytize. Conservative Muslims can be energetic in presenting Islam’s message to inquirers. One group, Tablighu Jamaat, a Sunni reformist organization based in the Indian subcontinent, has sent missionaries throughout the world to argue that Muslim society must return to its common tradition, there is no attempt within Islam to convert members of other religions. Generally speaking, Muslims, including Sunnis, are content to present information about Islam if asked, but they do not actively proselytize. Conservative Muslims can be energetic in presenting Islam’s message to inquirers. One group, Tablighu Jamaat, a Sunni reformist organization based in the Indian subcontinent, has sent missionaries throughout the world to argue that Muslim society must return to its spiritual roots and properly extol the virtues of true Islam. However, the group focuses on reaching only Muslims.

Islamic law states that Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. In the West and in places where Muslims are a minority, however, male conversion through marriage is one means of community growth. (Women are not required to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim man because the Koran allows Muslim men to marry women of the Abrahamic tradition, such as Christians and Jews.) In the United States the Nation of Islam has been particularly effective in organizing prison missions to convert young African American men to Islam while incarcerated.

Sunnis have adapted well to new media. Sunni mosques across the world have created Web sites and established a presence on social media to attract visitors as the Internet has become the communications vehicle of choice for young Sunnis, many of whom use sites such as Facebook to interact. At the same time social media has been used to connect dissidents around the Muslim world and unite disparate factions to reform Islam.

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** Because Sunnism expanded through military conquest in the early days, Sunnis’ commitment to tolerance is often questioned. For example, members of the Ahmadiyya sect, who mainly live in Pakistan, claim that they face widespread intolerance from the majority of the Sunni population. However, most observers note that there is little evidence of systemic intolerance in Sunnism. For centuries Sunnis have lived in close proximity to members of all major religions without any concerted attempt to undermine them, and in most cases Sunnis have constructed good working relationships with people of other religions.

Most Sunnis regard attacks against adherents of other religions as forbidden, and they strongly criticize ultraconservative and reactionary factions that participate in violence in the name of Islam. Almost all Sunnis condemn the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and insist that intolerance is a characteristic of radical Islamist groups, not of Sunnism as a whole. Regarded as the third-most influential Muslim in the Islamic world, King Mohammad VI of Morocco (1963– ), whose roots go back to Andalusian times and to the Prophet Muhammad, has actively connected with diverse elements within Sunnism, such as the Sufis, and has reached out to the long-standing Jewish community in his country. His tolerant Sunni philosophy emphasizes addressing social inequities and the religious position of minorities.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** Sunnism stresses egalitarian principles. The integration of religion and politics in Sunni community life means that politics cannot override what religion guarantees. Even a person of the lowest status can claim that God has provided him or her with certain
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rights. Thus, in dispensing justice within the community, a Sunni ruler or official is charged with upholding citizens’ rights above all else.

Most Sunnis believe that an individual’s rights include freedom of religion, the right to existence, and the right to own property. In Pakistan groups such as the All Pakistan Women’s Association and the Women’s Action Forum, while not overtly Sunni in their approach, argue for women’s rights as a value consistent with Sunni teachings on equality. Progressive Muslims have used Sunni notions of equality to advocate for a gender jihad, arguing for a vigorous rethinking of the traditional relationship between the sexes in Muslim societies.

SOCIAL LIFE Sunnis typically live in a close-knit environment that emphasizes personal piety, private family festivities, public prayer in the mosque, and community celebration. A key to this environment is marriage. Embracing the notion that the normative Muslim life is married life, Muslim families spend a great deal of time and effort securing a good marriage for their children. Sunnis traditionally insisted upon contracting marriages for children that preserved and strengthened the family line. This often resulted in families canvassing nearby relatives for partners for their children and an emphasis on first-cousin marriages. This also resulted in a close connection between the concepts of ummah (community) and family.

Although the Koran emphasizes the role of husbands and wives as mutually supportive, the community evolved separate zones of influence for each gender. Women were assumed to dominate the private environment, and caring for the household and children was considered their most important duty. Men were expected to be in charge of the public face of the family and community. This political role segregation generated fairly rigid social systems that sometimes disadvantaged women, most evidently in education, public life, and health care. This phenomenon has been roundly criticized by Western observers, and debate has often focused on the visual aspects of gender differences, particularly the wearing of the hijab or burqa in public spaces.

In Islamic societies debate has surfaced over female representation in governing councils and legislative bodies. Since few women command sufficient public support to win an election, few have succeeded in attaining office. Therefore, if women are to have any public representation, Sunni councils must appoint them to office. Thus, debate has centered on how many women should be appointed and whether the goal of Koranic equality should be upheld by legislative bodies.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES Sunni Islam has given birth to a number of reform trends, some of which have created sociopolitical movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. At its extreme, Sunni conservatism has led to the emergence of anti-Western, antimodern religio-political governments such as the Taliban of Afghanistan and militant reactionary groups such as al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. Indeed, al-Qaeda was responsible for the most dramatic attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor—the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The subsequent War on Terror challenged the nominally peaceful role of religion in international affairs as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and military operations in Libya were premised on Islamic complicity in the conflict.

Although only a small minority of Sunnis engage in the kind of jihadist ideology that has led to acts of terrorism, the moderate Sunni majority has struggled to articulate an alternative viewpoint. Moderate Sunnis are trying to extricate Islam from the shroud of violence that many associate with it. Groups such as the Islamic Progressives in the United States and the advocates of female Koran reciters in Indonesia have made attempts to modify the image of Sunni Islam. Others are trying to return the word jihad from its militant context to the original Koranic meaning of internal discipline. Despite these efforts, the Sunni Muslims who have immigrated to Europe and North America often have received a negative reception and have faced antagonism from host countries. The resulting “Islamophobia” in Europe and other Westernized lands has caused some believers to further isolate themselves.

Another controversial aspect of Sunnism is the relationship between the religion’s traditional beliefs and the views of various fundamentalist or radical movements. Reflecting the Islamic revival that has been underway since the 19th century, some citizens of Muslim countries are reluctant to support secular governments on the grounds that Islam will be removed from the center of the state value system and that religious minorities will be granted the same political power as Muslims. Some Sunni believers have called for a radical revision of state institutions, have rejected the separation of religion from state politics, and have advocated for a readoption of...
CULTURAL IMPACT  The Koran, as the primary element of Muslim life, has influenced most Sunni artistic expressions. The holy text has been glorified with elaborately developed scripts, or designs, which are used to decorate mosques and public buildings. Because Sunnis insist on consensus, what is appropriate as a subject of art is a matter of public debate. The broad cultural synthesis that was characteristic of Sunnism in its golden age has been shattered in the modern era by influences that have largely arisen from the West and modern technology. Mosque architectural style, for example, may reflect local tastes, but often the decor remains traditional, employing arabesque (ornate patterns), calligraphy, and domes.

Islamic music, much of it by Sunnis, continues to expand beyond traditional borders. Sufi chants and traditional music have increasingly found a place on the world music charts. At the same time new styles of Sunni music have become increasingly globalized. Popular Sunni musicians in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East have wedded religious speech with rap, hip-hop, and rock music to appeal to a new generation of Muslim youth. In the United States the Nation of Islam has fostered many rap groups, including Lakim Shabazz, Paris, KAM, Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, Prince Akeem, Big Daddy Kane, and Poor Righteous Teachers. Seen as a voice for the underclass, these musicians have dramatically influenced youth, so much so that some governments have tried to legally restrict their influence and lyrics. Such governments are concerned about the violence described in music by some rap and hip-hop artists. For example, Deso Dog, a German rapper who converted to Islam, was condemned by the German government for allegedly influencing a youth to set fire to a busload of servicemen and women in Frankfurt.

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See Also Vol. 1: Islam, Shiism

Bibliography

Books


**Periodicals**


**Web Sites**

