

Islam

19-25 minutes

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Islam is one of the major religions of the world and is estimated to be the fastest-growing religion in Canada and worldwide. Its 1.6 billion adherents are scattered throughout the globe, though concentrated most densely in South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and North and East Africa. The word "Islam" is derived from the Arabic root *s-l-m*, which carries a range of meanings including submission, obedience, surrender and peace. Followers of Islam, called Muslims (Moslems), believe that Islam is the religion of God (Allah) and was revealed to a succession of prophets including Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad for the guidance and benefit of humanity. Followers of earlier prophets are, therefore, considered to be believers in the same divine message as Muslims.

In ideal terms, to accept Islam is to choose to live life according to the revealed will of God, to surrender oneself to His mercy and judgement, and to strive to maintain righteousness in the world. Individual and communal obedience to the tenets of the faith, coupled with Islam's message of equality among people, is thought to facilitate the elimination of social discord. The teachings of Islam are grounded in the Book of Allah, the *Quran* (Koran), the scripture Muslims believe to have been revealed by God through the angel Gabriel, in Arabic, to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 (when he was 40 years old) and 632 AD (the year of his death). These teachings guide Muslims in their practices and beliefs of Islam.

Muslims are expected to live up to the demands of Sharia (Islamic law), which refers to the rights and responsibilities expressed by an intricate legal-ethical system constructed and refined over the centuries. The Sharia is derived primarily from the *Quran* and the example of the prophet Muhammad (known as the *Sunna*) and defines what is *halal* (permissible), and *haram* (prohibited). Although Islam has no clergy and no sacraments, it does require certain ritual practices in obedience to God's commandments. Often referred to as the "Pillars of Islam," there are five acts of worship incumbent on all believers: a testimony of faith, regular prayer, an annual charitable donation, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and a pilgrimage to the holy sites in Mecca (city in Saudi Arabia) once during a Muslim's lifetime. To avoid a spiritually empty formalism and to facilitate the adherent's personal development, each act is to be approached with a conscious purification of intent meant to remind the worshipper of his or her relationship to God.

Acts of Worship

The Shahadah (affirmation of faith) is a succinct and comprehensive testimony of faith; it is to be affirmed by all Muslims and recited often, and its implications to be acted upon. The Arabic formula translates to "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God." It attests commitment to a strict monotheism and specifies that the revelation to Muhammad is the final truth. It is whispered in the ear of the newborn to remind the child of a primordial covenant made by each individual with God and in the ear of the deceased in preparation for the questioning of the grave.

Salat (ritual prayer) is prescribed for all believers five times a day (at dawn, at midday, in the afternoon, at dusk and in the evening). The prayers are performed while facing toward Mecca; they stamp daily life with a steadfast devotion to God. The prayers are to be preceded by a purity of heart, mind and body, and therefore ritual ablutions are required. The prayer involves liturgical recitations while standing, bowing and kneeling.

Zakat (almsgiving) is perceived as an act of purification. Repeated passages in the *Quran* indicate that prayer and almsgiving are irrevocably bound together as central acts of worship. One's commitment to God is incomplete without this fulfillment of responsibility toward the community. The annual payment or charity required by Sharia (Islamic law) is assessed at 2.5 per cent of one's total assets, and is to be given to the poor, orphans and widows, or charitable causes.

During *sawm* (fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan for 29 to 30 days) believers have a small meal before sunrise, then refrain from food, drink and sex from dawn to dusk. The month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The celebration of the feast known as *Eid-al-Fitr* marks the end of Ramadan, and the first day of *Shawwal*, the tenth month of the Islamic calendar. (See [Religious Festivals](#).) Fasting is a time of repentance and discipline; it binds the community together in a shared experience of deprivation as well as gratitude and celebration at the end of the day.

Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), for believers who can afford it, is incumbent on believers at least once during their lifetime. It commemorates the memory of Abraham's unwavering obedience to God as demonstrated by his willingness, upon God's command, to sacrifice his son — widely considered by Muslim tradition to have been Ishmael, and not Isaac. The ceremony begins with the pilgrim's repentance to God, and seeking forgiveness from family and friends before the journey. The male pilgrim then dons two pieces of white cloth symbolizing the universal brotherhood (*umma*) of which he is a part, as well as the spiritual renewal to which he aspires. A female believer's pilgrimage is no different in terms of motives, intentions and significance, but the particular dress code is set aside in view of Islamic requirements of hijab (headscarf). The pilgrimage tracks and re-enacts prominent moments believed to have occurred in the life of Abraham and his family. In addition to abstention from worldly pleasures, the pilgrim participates in a meditation at Mount Arafat, a ritual pelting of the devil (symbolized by a post at the spot in which Satan is believed to have appeared to Abraham to dissuade him from carrying out his duty), the sacrificial offering of an animal (in commemoration of the Abrahamic sacrifice), the trimming or shaving of the hair on his or her head (again, in a spirit of sacrifice), walking between the mountains of Safa and Marwa (reflecting Hagar's desperate journey in the desert in search of water for Ishmael before a well sprung open for her), and circumambulation of the Kaaba, the central building built by Abraham and Ishmael in devotion to their Lord, which now forms the centrepiece of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

The Islamic house of worship, the mosque, is often characterized by a large, open interior and a dome-shaped roof with a minaret or tower from which the muezzin (Muslim official or crier) calls the faithful to worship. Mosques are nondenominational; all Muslims are welcome. Prayer services are conducted daily from the mihrab, a semicircular niche in the wall facing Mecca, but on Fridays, preceding the midday prayers, the imam or *Khateeb* delivers a sermon from a pulpit known as a *minbar* as the congregation sits on carpets in the centre of the building, facing him. The first Canadian mosque was the [Al Rashid Mosque](#), built in [Edmonton](#) in 1938, now relocated to the historic Fort Edmonton Park. (See *also* [Hilwie Hamdon](#).) Other mosques and centres were not organized in major urban areas until the 1950s and 1970s. Mosques are generally managed by the congregation. (See [Religious Building](#).)

The Creed of Islam

The essential credal statement of Islam as it appears in the Quran specifies belief in God, his messengers, his books, the angels and the Last Day. God represents the Lord of the world and is revealed through nature and history. Humanity was provided guidance through prophets and messengers beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. Certain messengers were entrusted with a scripture (e.g., Moses with the Torah, Jesus with the Gospel). To prevent changes to the scripture, Muslims believe the Quran, God's revelation to Muhammad, must be affirmed and preserved — not only recorded on paper, but also memorized in its entirety by believers. The Quran teaches that God created the angels out of light, and that some have specific tasks. For example, the archangel Gabriel brings revelation, while Izrail is the "angel of death," and Israfil sounds the horn announcing the Last Day and the Resurrection. Muslims believe that on the Day of Judgment all humans will give account for every intent, thought and act. The righteous will be rewarded in Paradise (or, the Garden) while the sinful will be consigned to the Fire.

Islam in Canada

The Islamic mosaic within Canada is the consequence of a variety of factors including changes in [Canadian immigration policies](#), as well as economic and political upheavals affecting Muslims in other countries. The 1871 [census](#) recorded only 13 Muslims in Canada. Their number increased to 645 by 1931, mostly due to [immigrants](#) from Lebanon, Albania, Syria, Yugoslavia and Turkey. The influx of immigrants after the [Second World War](#) raised the number to 33,370 by 1971. The majority of this cohort comprised of highly educated, westernized professionals who came to settle in Canada to share in its economic prosperity. They were mostly from Lebanon, Syria, Indonesia, Morocco, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and the Indian-Pakistani-Bangladeshi subcontinent. From 1966 to 1970, thousands of labourers of Indo-Pakistani background immigrated to escape discrimination in East Africa and Britain. More recently, Muslim immigrants have included workers from southern Lebanon, Somalia and the Balkans fleeing their war-torn countries, as well as political [refugees](#) from [Iran](#) and [Afghanistan](#).

Early Muslim settlements were concentrated in [Ontario](#) and [Alberta](#), with a shift into [Quebec](#) in the 1930s. Most Muslims arriving in Canada since the 1960s settled in urban areas, with more than 70 per cent now concentrated in the [Toronto](#), [Montreal](#), and [Vancouver](#) metropolitan areas; the number approaches 80 per cent if [Edmonton](#) and [Calgary](#) are included. [Statistics Canada's](#) 2011 National Household Survey found that there were over 1.05 million Canadians who identified as Muslim, approximately 3.2 per cent of the Canadian population. They belong to a wide range of ethnic cultures and speak a variety of languages.

The story of Canada's first mosque



Islamic Denominations

A large majority of Muslims, both in Canada and globally, adhere to Sunni Islam, while the remainder follow *Shi'i* (Shia) Islam. The differences between these two denominations reflect early religious-political divisions in Islamic history. While both are guided by the Quran and the teachings of Muhammad, Shi'i Muslims believe that Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was designated as his immediate political and spiritual successor and that this authoritative leadership (known as the *imamate*) was restricted thereafter to the lineage of Ali. Both groups affirm that the revelation through prophets has ceased; however, Shi'is accept imams as divinely ordained leaders capable of providing a continuing source of Muslim doctrine since the death of the Prophet.

There are other divisions within these denominations. Twelver Shi'is, commonly referred to as "Twelvers," believe that the *imamate* culminated in the twelfth Imam, who disappeared in 874 AD, while *Isma'ilis* believe in a succession of Imams continuing through his lineage to the present day under the leadership of the *Aga Khan*. Other important Islamic groups in Canada include Sufis (followers of the mystic traditions of both Sunnism and Shi'ism), as well as sects that are deemed non-Islamic by the majority, such as the Druze, the *Alawis* and the *Qadyanis*.

For Sunni Muslims, Canada offered a special challenge since this group lacked structured leadership. Efforts to organize have historically occurred primarily at the local level; however, there have been important efforts at the national and continental levels. The Federation of Islamic Associations in the US and Canada was formed in the 1950s by second-generation Muslims of [Arab](#) background. In 1962, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) was formed to instill Islamic consciousness in Muslim students in North America. Some MSA alumni in Canada formed the independent Council of Muslim Communities of Canada (CMCC) in 1972; however, the council disbanded within a decade. The council attempted to integrate Muslims of other ethnic and linguistic groups. Its objectives evolved, and the council formed links between Canadian Muslims and other national and international groups to organize youth camps, provide scholarships for Muslims, and publish textbooks and books on Islam. Today, a comparable role is occupied by the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). As the

Muslim community has diversified, so have the functions and types of organizations representing it. In Canada, political advocacy groups have grown and developed within the Muslim community to support its members and safeguard the rights of Muslim citizens. Among such groups are the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN), the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC), the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) and the philanthropic Olive Tree Foundation. The Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) focuses on advancing discussions and interpretations of Islam that differ from mainstream Muslim religious beliefs.

Challenges

Immigrants have often found it difficult to incorporate Islamic practices into their lives because of the pressures of an environment that is traditionally **Christian** and at variance with familiar customs. There are, for example, no public reminders for the daily prayers. Special arrangements often have to be negotiated with employers or schools to accommodate prayer times and religious holidays. Some modern Muslims question the need to pay the zakat since the Canadian government cares for the disadvantaged. The Islamic prohibition of usury also raises concerns regarding transactions involving interest payments, which are a routine component of Canadian economic life. Islamic dietary restrictions concerning the way meat is slaughtered and against pork and alcohol are often seen as impediments to social integration.

A strain between Muslim communities and the larger Canadian society regarding male-female relationships has sometimes been evident since traditional Muslim cultures often expect particular gender roles that are not found in modern Western societies. Religious groups including Muslims argued that the secular legal system did not adequately include the laws and traditions of their faith. In 2003 and 2005, public debates were held in **Ontario** regarding a proposal from a Muslim organization to facilitate Muslim access to private arbitration based on Sharia beliefs. Women's groups, legal organizations and the Muslim Canada Congress were alarmed at the implications this could carry for vulnerable members of the community. Ontario's *Arbitration Act* allowed "faith-based arbitration" when it was agreed to by all parties involved in the arbitration, which allowed people to choose to settle civil disputes such as divorce, custody and inheritance outside the formal **court system**.

Concerns were raised that faith-based arbitration would not adequately or fairly support women, may not fully comply with international human rights standards and did not include different interpretations of religious law. Some questioned whether the rulings could be applied under Canadian law. The controversy motivated Premier **Dalton McGuinty** to appoint Marion Boyd (former Attorney-General and former Minister Responsible for Women's Issues) to study the risks and suggest recommendations. Boyd recommended that private arbitration under religious law be continued, however, she also recommended safeguards to protect vulnerable parties. A public backlash against the recommendations prompted the premier to ban all religious arbitration.

In **Quebec** in 2007, debates over accommodating immigrants and what constituted "reasonable accommodation" were sparked when the small town of Hérouxville passed a code of conduct for immigrants or "new arrivals" that included a rule that prohibited stoning women. The town's exaggerated code of conduct for immigrants and the description of "dominant norms" for people living in the rural community were revised after Muslim women from the Canadian Islamic Congress met with representatives from the town council. Conflicts between religious requirements and Quebec's secular society prompted Premier **Jean Charest** to appoint prominent academics **Gérard Bouchard** and **Charles Taylor** to study the concept and limits of "reasonable accommodation" in Canadian society. Bouchard and Taylor focused on religion and the role of **interculturalism**

in Quebec (as opposed to the [multiculturalism](#) identified within English Canada), and the increasingly diverse identity of Quebec society. (See [Bouchard-Taylor Commission](#); [Secularism in Quebec](#).)

The debate on Quebec secularism and religious accommodations persisted over the years. In 2013, the [Parti Québécois](#) government proposed a [Quebec Values Charter](#). The proposal called for banning all civil servants from wearing religious items, including the hijab, to enforce state secularism. The initiative was strongly criticized by advocates for infringing on minorities' religious rights. The bill was never adopted. In 2019, [François Legault's Coalition Avenir Québec](#) government passed [Bill 21](#). It banned civil servants in positions of authority (such as teachers, police and judges) from wearing religious symbols. The law notably employs the [notwithstanding clause](#) to bypass the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#). Many Muslim activists criticized the law for restricting hijab-wearing women from many jobs. Some argued that it was encouraging [islamophobia](#). A January 2022 Léger poll found that 55 per cent of people in Quebec supported Bill 21.

Islam in Canada Today

Debates on Islam, Canadian [multiculturalism](#) (or [interculturalism](#)) and diversity were complicated by global politics and events, in particular the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 (see [9/11 and Canada](#)), and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan (see [Canada and the War in Afghanistan](#)) and Iraq. The global situation has fomented distrust between Muslim communities and government agencies. Related to this climate, [Statistics Canada](#) reported that in 2006, among the 220 hate crimes motivated by religion, 21 per cent of offences were against Muslims or Islam. (See [Islamophobia in Canada](#).) In 2017, a shooter attacked a mosque in Ste-Foy, killing 6 people and wounding 5 others. (See [Quebec City Mosque Shooting](#).)

Islamic community organizations have made efforts to reach out to other religious and community groups. During the 1980s, Islam West Associates promoted mutual understanding between Muslims in Canada and all other Canadians. More recently, efforts have been made to acquaint Canadian society with the Islamic contribution to culture, science and art through exhibits at some of the nation's largest museums. In 2014, a permanent collection of art and artifacts from the Muslim world housed at The Aga Khan Museum opened in [Toronto](#). In 2007, the [CBC](#) premiered *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a sitcom depicting the travails of a small Muslim community in rural [Saskatchewan](#). An earlier documentary (*Me and the Mosque*) directed by *Little Mosque* creator Zarqa Nawaz illustrated the role of women in Canadian mosques. (See also [Hilwie Hamdon](#).) It also described the emerging awareness among second-generation Muslim Canadians of the need to blend their religious heritage and Canadian sensibilities.

Al Rashid Mosque — the first mosque in Canada — opened in Edmonton in the late 1930s, but getting it built was no small feat. It happened thanks to the determination of a group of Lebanese Muslim women, led by Hilwie Hamdon, who brought Albertans of all faiths together to help make history.

Note: *The Secret Life of Canada* is hosted and written by Falen Johnson and Leah Simone Bowen and is a CBC original podcast independent of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.