Within Islam, there are two major branches: the Sunni and the Shi'ia; numerically, the Sunni are the majority. All Muslims worship Allah, the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis honour the four ‘rightly guided’ (rashidun) caliphs, who led the early development of Islam following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad: Abu Bakr (632–634), ‘Umar (634–644), ‘Uthman/Usman (644–656), and ‘Ali [ibn Abi Talib] (656–661). After the murder of ‘Uthman, ‘Ali, who was the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and husband of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima, ascended to the caliphate with broadly popular support. However, Aisha (the Prophet Muhammad’s second wife) and Mu’awiyah (the Umayyad governor of Syria) both challenged the leadership of ‘Ali, claiming that ‘Ali had plotted the assassination of ‘Uthman. Neither challenge succeeded, but ‘Ali was assassinated in 661, leaving behind three sons: Muhammad, Hasan and Husayn; Hasan (the elder brother) abdicated from the leadership, and Husayn was subsequently killed in 680 at Karbala by the army of Yazid, son of Mu’awiyah. Muhammad (who was not a son of Fatima) was proclaimed Imam (‘spiritual leader’) and Mahdi (meaning the redeemer and messianic restorer of Islam) by a Shi’ia sect called Kaysaniah or Hanafiyah.

The various sects of Shi’ia (which means ‘party’ [of ‘Ali]) do not venerate the first three caliphs, but nearly all venerate ‘Ali, Hasan, Husayn, and Husayn’s son, Ali Zayn al-Abidin as true Imams. (Those who venerate the Imams are also referred to as ‘Imami’.) However, after Ali Zayn al-Abidin, half a dozen different lineages are accepted by one or another of the various sects of Shi’ia. The largest sect of Shi’ia (the ‘Twelver’ or Ithna ashari) Shi’ia recognises twelve Imams descended from ‘Ali, and believe that the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Muntazar al-Mahdi (d. 939), did not die but is in ‘occulation’ and will return as the Mahdi.

Ismaili Shi’ia begins with Ismail ibn Ja’far, the eldest son of Ja’far al-Sadiq (the sixth Imam) who was an influential Islamic scholar, poisoned in 765. (Twelver Shi’ias, however, recognise Ja’far’s younger son, Musa al-Kazim as the seventh Imam; and a lineage that descends from him.) Ismail died several years before his father, and according to the Ismailis, the imamate passed to Ismail’s son, Muhammad ibn Ismail, the seventh Imam, who was believed to be the expected Mahdi, whose advent was prophesised by Ja’far. Ismailis, also known as ‘Seveners’, only believe in the sanctity of the first seven Imams, ending with Muhammad ibn Ismail. Ismailism really began in the ninth century as a secret, revolutionary movement, which believed in the impending advent and ‘return’ of Muhammad ibn Ismail, the Mahdi, a belief that continued to permeate all branches of Ismailism. The Imams are thought to have divine authority and special, spiritual power; and since the beginning the teachings of Ismailism have been propagated by spiritual missionaries known as da’i (‘summoners’), who transmit the secret knowledge of the Imam to students.

Ismaili Islam’s most influential period was during the period of the Fatimid caliphate (so called because it claimed to descend from Fatima). Centred on Cairo, from 909 to 1171, it was founded by al-Mahdi, who was considered by some to be the Mahdi; others did not accept him, and broke away to establish rival sects. The Ismaili Fatimids eventually assumed control of an empire extending across north Africa, Sicily and Arabia (including Mecca and Medina).

During the Fatimid caliphate, the Ismailis split into three main sects: the Druze, the Mustalis and what is now the largest sect, the Nizaris. In 1021, caliph al-Hakim was killed, and a group, later to be known as Druze, broke away from the other Ismailis, believing al-Hakim to be the Mahdi. The second division amongst the Ismailis arose after the death of caliph al-Mustansir in 1094. A Persian Ismaili faction supported his eldest son, Nizar, who did not ascend to the caliphate,
while another faction supported the (younger) al-Musta’lii. There were further subsequent subdivisions in the latter two sects over the authority of particular Imams in one or another of the lineages. The main lineage of Nizaris has continued to the present time, the Aga Khan being the current (49th) Imam.

Ismaili philosophy distinguishes between exoteric (zahir) and esoteric (batin) meaning in religion and religious texts: the zahir aspect of religious texts, such as revealed by prophets, is different in each text; the ‘hidden’ batin meaning, however, is of eternal, unchanging truths, revealed by esoteric interpretation (ta’wil), which is a science of exegesis. As in the Jewish mysticism of the Qabbala (with which Ismailism has many affinities) letters and numbers (particularly the numbers five and seven) have mystical and symbolic correspondences (jafr). Although the ordinary believer may have some understanding of batin meaning, only an Imam can understand the batin aspect of the Koran and other texts completely. The sacred texts of the Nizari Ismailis are called Ginans, which are mostly written in Urdu and Gujarati (languages of South Asia), while the Ismaili texts of Persian and Arabic origin are called Qasidas, which were written by da’is.

According to Ismailis, God is the Absolute One, who is beyond cognisance. Most Ismailis believe that God is both transcendent and immanent, and so subscribe to a form of pantheism (though this is not accepted by Mustali Ismailis), and maintain that the souls of the prophets are derived from the first light (aql) of the universe. In ‘creation’, many ranks of beings were produced, including seven cherubs, and three spiritual forces, which are often identified with archangels. Also created were seven messenger prophets and their scriptures, each of whom is a speaker (natiq) who appears successively in one of the seven aeons, bringing a new divine message. The first six were succeeded by an envoy (wasi) or silent one (samit) who revealed the esoteric meaning concealed in their message. The last speaker prophet will be (the ‘returned’) Muhammad ibn Ismail. In Ismaili tradition, the esoteric truths must be kept secret; they begin to be revealed to the neophyte at an initiation ritual. To avoid persecution, Ismailis have always kept their religious beliefs hidden (taqiyya). Most Ismailis, including the Nizaris and Druze, believe in reincarnation (the Druze believe that only they will be reincarnated as humans). Pentads have figured prominently in Ismaili cosmogony since the time of the earliest known (eighth century) ‘proto-Ismaili’ text, the Umm al Kitab, wherein are described, amongst other pentads, five kinds of light, five colours, and five ‘persons of the mantle’ (Muhammad, ‘Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn). The Druze believe in five cosmic principles: intelligence/reason (green); soul (red); word (yellow); precedent (blue); immanence (white). These ‘virtues’ were, until recently, continuously embodied in prophets and philosophers, such as Adam and Pythagoras. Ismailis generally believe in an original religion of Adam and the angels that existed in paradise, before the ‘fall’. While mainstream Islam maintains the sanctity of the ‘five pillars’ (the creed, shahada; prayer, salah; almsgiving, zakah; fasting, sawm; and pilgrimage, hajj), Ismailis maintain the sanctity of two additional pillars (guardianship, walayah; and struggle, jihad).

According to Ismailis, Allah manifests in the prophets, Imams and da’is, who act as messengers and guardians (walayah). Jihad is variously interpreted by Ismailis: some, such as the Nizaris (who are pacifist), believe that jihad refers only to personal struggle, while the Druze believe that jihad means ‘holy warfare’. Many Ismailis monthly perform chantas, for the forgiveness of sins in the previous month. However, a significant current in Ismailism is the belief in the symbolic interpretation of religious injunctions: fasting can be interpreted as the avoidance of evil actions; hajj does not need to be performed bodily; and prayer may be performed three times a day, or symbolically.
It is estimated that the Ismaili population numbers between fifteen and thirty million people. Originally inhabiting the countries of north and north-east Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and parts of China, in diaspora many are now residents of Europe and north America, and of Canada in particular. Owing to their historical persecution and their general practice of ‘hiding’ their religion, although Ismailis have been and continue to be influential in many spheres of professional and economic life, they often pass relatively unnoticed within the societies in which they live.