**Mullah**

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*For the city in the Maldives, see* [*Mulah*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulah)*.*

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* [Grand Mufti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Mufti)
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* [Ustad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ustad)
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A mullah praying in [Imamzadeh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imamzadeh) Seyyed Hamza, [Tabriz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabriz).

**Mullah** ([Arabic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language): ملا‎) is generally used to refer to a [Muslim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim) man, educated in [Islamic theology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_theology) and [sacred law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia). The title, given to some [Islamic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam) [clergy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clergy), is derived from the [Arabic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language) word مَوْلَى *mawlā*, meaning "vicar", "master" and "guardian". In large parts of the [Muslim world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_world), particularly [Iran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran), [Azerbaijan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azerbaijan), [Bosnia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosnia), [Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan), [Turkey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkey), [Central Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Asia), [Somalia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somalia) and [South Asia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia), it is the name commonly given to local Islamic clerics or [mosque](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque) leaders.

The title has also been used in some [Sephardic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sephardic) [Jewish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish) communities to refer to the community's leadership, especially religious leadership.

It is primarily understood in the Muslim world as a term of respect for an educated man.

**Training and duties**

Ideally, a trained mullah will have studied Islamic traditions ([hadith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadith)), and Islamic law ([fiqh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiqh)). They are often [hafiz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafiz_%28Quran%29), i.e. have memorized the [Qur'an](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qur%27an). However, uneducated villagers often recognize a literate Muslim with a less than complete Islamic training as their "mullah" or religious cleric. Mullahs with varying levels of training lead prayers in mosques, deliver religious sermons, and perform religious ceremonies such as birth rites and funeral services. They also often teach in a type of Islamic school known as a [madrasah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madrasah). These three kinds of knowledge are applied mostly in interpreting Islamic texts (i.e. the [Quran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quran), [Hadiths](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadiths), etc.) for matters of [Shariah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shariah), i.e. Islamic law.

Mullahs have frequently been involved in politics, but only recently have they actually taken power, when [Islamists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamism) [seized power in Iran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Revolution) in 1979, and later, in Afghanistan under the [Taliban](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taliban).

**Usage**

The term is most often applied to Shi'ite clerics, as [Shi'a Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shia_Islam) is the predominant tradition in Iran. However, the term is very common in [Urdu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urdu_language), spoken throughout [Pakistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakistan), and it is used throughout the Indian subcontinent for any Muslim clergy, [Sunni](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Islam) or Shi'a. Muslim clergy in [Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia) and other former [Soviet Republics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republics_of_the_Soviet_Union) are also referred to as mullahs, regardless of whether they are Sunni or Shi'a.

It has been used among [Persian Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persian_Jews), [Bukharan Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bukharan_Jews), Afghani Jews and other [Central Asian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Asian) Jews to refer to the community's religious and/or secular leadership. In [Kaifeng](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaifeng), China, as well, the [historic Chinese Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_China) who managed the synagogue were called "mullahs".

The term is seldom used in Arabic-speaking areas, where its nearest equivalent is [*shaykh*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaykh) (implying formal Islamic training), [*imam*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imam_%28Sunni_Islam%29) (prayer leader; not to be confused with the imams of the Shiite world), or [*ʿālim*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulema) (‘scholar’, plural *ʿulamāʾ*). In the Sunni world, the concept of "cleric" is of limited usefulness, as authority in the religious system is relatively decentralized.

The term is frequently used in English, although English-speaking Muslim clergy rarely call themselves mullahs. It was adopted from Urdu by the British rulers of India and subsequently came into more widespread use.

**Usage as a derogatory term**

**Iran**

Until early 20th century, the term *mullah* was used in Iranian [hawzas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawza) (seminaries) to refer to low-level clergy who specialized in telling stories of [Ashura](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_of_Ashura), rather than teaching or issuing [fatwas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatwa). Today, the term is sometimes used as a derogatory term for any Islamic cleric. It is common in Iran to refer to an [ayatollah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayatollah) or other high level cleric as a mullah, to ridicule his religious authority In recent years, at least among Shia mullahs, the term *ruhani* (spiritual) has been promoted as an alternative to mullah and [*akhoond*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akhoond), free of pejorative connotations.

**See also**

* [Maulvi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maulvi)
* [Maulana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maulana)
* Mullah [Mohammed Omar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Omar)
* [Mullah Nasruddin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mullah_Nasruddin)
* [Ulema](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulema)
* [International Imam Organization](http://www.globalimam.com)

**External links**

"[Mollah](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_New_International_Encyclop%C3%A6dia/Mollah)". [*New International Encyclopedia*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_International_Encyclopedia). 1905.

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