Islam: An Overview

Islam is the youngest and fastest-growing major world religion. It was founded by Arabian visionary Muhammad (570-632 AD), who was born in the city of Mecca in Arabia. Muhammad claimed he received supernatural revelations from God through the angel Gabriel. These revelations were written down by others and compiled into a book called the Koran (or *Qur'an*). Islam today is comprised of two main schools: the majority Sunni school and the minority Shi'ite school. In addition, there are millions of Muslim mystics called Sufis. Islam is the second-largest religion in the world (behind Christianity) with about 1.5 billion followers. Interestingly, the four nations with the largest number of Muslims today are all outside the Middle East – Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

Purpose

The ultimate goal of Islam is to subjugate the world and then rule it according to Islamic law. Islam claims to be the restoration of true monotheism and thus supersedes both Judaism and Christianity. Islamic law teaches that conversion may be achieved through persuasion or subjugation, but some hold that if these fail, unbelievers (or "infidels") may be eliminated if necessary. As such, hostility toward non-Muslims is accepted and even encouraged in some Islamic cultures, based on passages from the Koran such as, "O, true believers, take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends. They cannot be trusted. They are defiled – filth."

Islam's Beginnings

Islam began with the supernatural visions and revelations that Muhammad claimed he received from God through the angel Gabriel. Because Muhammad could neither read nor write, he claimed to have memorized these revelations and ordered his followers to write them down. These writings became Islam's holy book, the Koran. Muhammad at first feared his revelations came from a *jinn*, or evil spirit, but later he accepted their source as divine and taught that he alone was the true recipient of Allah's truth.

Muhammad was born in the Arabian city of Mecca in 570 A.D. Mecca was an important economic center, serving as a resting place for trading caravans. But is also was an important religious city because the *Ka'bah* was located there. The *Ka'bah* is a cubic structure that in the days of Muhammad housed 360 deities. Each Arabian tribe selected its own deity and came to Mecca each year to pay homage to its god. Muhammad's monotheistic preaching threatened the economic and religious livelihood of Mecca and set him against his own tribe. He and about 100 Muslim families were forced to flee to Medina, a city 200 miles north of Mecca. Muslims look to the year of Muhammad's flight, 622 A.D., as the beginning of the Muslim calendar. In 630, Muhammad and his army returned and took control of Mecca. He personally destroyed the idols in the *Ka'bah* and within a year succeeded in unifying the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula under Islam. Muhammad died in 632 A.D. without appointing a successor.

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The Sects of Islam

The two major sects of Islam, Sunni and Shi'ite, originally were established after Muhammad's death in a dispute over who should serve as his successor, or *caliph*. The Sunni Muslims insisted that Muhammad's successor be elected, while the Shi'ite Muslims felt he should be of Muhammad's blood line, which would have meant that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, would have become *caliph*. The Sunnis prevailed and today account for about 80 percent of the Muslim population. Sunnis and Shi'ites differ in other ways as well:

- **Authority.** Sunnis emphasize the authority of the written traditions, which include the Koran and the *Sunna* ("custom"), from which they derive their name. They also receive guidance from a consensus of elders (*ulama*), who base their decisions on Islam's writings. Shi'ites look more toward human authority. Initially, they believed Allah spoke through the *Imam*, roughly the equivalent of the Catholic Pope. In the ninth century, however, the twelfth *Imam*, known as the *Mahdi*, became hidden; Shi'ites today await his return, much as Christians await the return of Christ.
- **Civil and religious power.** Sunnis believe there should be a separation between civil and religious authorities, while Shi'ites believe the religious authorities should exercise both political and religious power. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, was a Shi'ite leader.

There is another significant sect of Islam known as Sufism, which is mystical in nature. Minor sects include the Wahhabis (primarily in Saudi Arabia), the Druze (mostly in Lebanon, Syria and northern Israel), the Alawites (mainly in Syria), and the Ahmadiyas (primarily in Pakistan). Beyond this, Islam has been influential in the founding of two other religions: Sikhism and Baha'i.

Source of Authority

Muslims believe Allah has revealed many written works, including the Old and New Testaments. But these revelations ended with the Koran (*Qur'an*, "recitations"), which supersedes all others. For all practical purposes, Muslims accept only the Koran as the Word of God. They believe Allah's earlier revelations in the Bible have been corrupted by Christians and therefore are not trustworthy, except as interpreted by the Koran. Sunni Muslims, as mentioned above, also place strong emphasis on the *Sunna*, which includes the *Hadith*, in which the sayings and conduct of Muhammad and his companions are recorded.

Basic Beliefs

Every Muslim must hold to six articles of faith:

- Faith in Allah. The central doctrine of Islam is that God is one and that no one may be associated with his deity. To associate someone, like Jesus, with Allah by calling Him God's Son is to commit the unpardonable sin of *shirk* (see Surah 4:48).
- Belief in angels like Gabriel, whom they claim transmitted the Koran to Muhammad. Each person has two angels assigned to him or her – one to record the person's good deeds and the other to record the person's evil deeds. Muslims also believe in evil spirits called *jinn*, from which we get the word "genie."

- Acceptance of the Koran. Four high-ranking prophets were given books by divine revelation. Moses was given the *Tawrat* (Torah); David, the *Zabur* (his Psalms); Jesus, the *Injil* (Gospel); and Muhammad, the Koran. Muslims teach that only the Koran has been preserved in perfection; Jews and Christians have corrupted the rest.
- Acceptance of Islam's prophets, with Muhammad as the greatest. The Koran says Allah has sent prophets to every nation, proclaiming the truth of the one true God. In all, 124,000 prophets have been sent. Most are unknown, but many include biblical characters such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. Muhammad is the only prophet who is for all time; he is called "Seal of the Prophets."
- Belief in predestination – that is, everything that happens, good and evil, is predestined by Allah's will.
- Preparation for the Day of Judgment, in which each person's good and evil works will be measured, resulting in heaven or hell. Only Allah knows – and has predetermined – who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. Hell is not an eternal place of torment, but a place where evil is purged from its inhabitants.

Religious Duties

Every Muslim must practice at least five fundamental religious duties. These are known as the Pillars of Religion, and they are:

- The confession of faith or *Shahada:* "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." Sincerity in voicing the confession is essential. If a Muslim repudiates the *Shahada* it nullifies his or her hope of salvation.
- Prayer (*Salat).* Muslims must recite 17 cycles of prayer each day. These cycles usually are spread over five times while the supplicant faces Mecca – dawn, noon, midafternoon, dusk, and two hours after sunset. The noon service on Friday is the only time Muslims are expected to gather together at the mosque. Muslims wash themselves ceremonially before praying; this is called ablution or *wudu*.
- Observing *Ramadan,* a month of fasting throughout the daylight hours to commemorate the first revelation of the Koran to Muhammad. During the day, Muslims must refrain from food, drink, smoke, and sexual relations. After sundown, all of these pleasures may be enjoyed until sunrise the next day.
- Almsgiving or *Zakat.* Muslims are required to give 2.5 percent of their currency, plus other forms of wealth, as determined by a complicated system that purifies their remaining wealth.
- Pilgrimage, or *Hajj,* to Mecca, Muhammad's place of birth. Every Muslim who is physically and financially able must make this trek at least once is his or her lifetime. Pilgrims must wear white garments to eliminate all class distinctions. The process of visiting several sacred sites usually takes more than a week.

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- A sixth religious duty is sometimes associated with these: *Jihad*, or Muslim holy war. When the situation warrants it, this duty requires Muslims to go to war to defend Islam against "infidels." Anyone who dies in a holy war is guaranteed everlasting life in heaven and is considered a martyr for Islam.

Are God and Allah the same?

While many people assume that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, differing only in the name upon which they call, this simply is not true. The God of the Koran and the God of the Bible do share some similarities, but the differences are profound. Following are some similarities and differences highlighted by *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions*:

Similarities

- Both are One.
- Both are transcendent Creators of the universe.
- Both are sovereign.
- Both are omnipotent.
- Both have spoken to humanity through messengers or prophets, through angels, and through the written word.
- Both know in intimate detail the thoughts and deeds of men.
- Both will judge the wicked.

Differences

- Allah is a singular unity, while God is a compound unity who is one in essence and three in persons (Matt. 28:19; John 10:30; Acts 5:3-4).
- Allah is not a father and has begotten no sons (Surahs 19:88-92; 112:3), but God exists in an eternal relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Through the Koran, Allah broke into history through a word that is written, but the God of the Bible broke into history through the Word who is a person (John 1:1, 14; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:2-3; 1 John 1:1-3; 4:9-10).
- "Allah loves not those that do wrong" (Surah 3:140), and neither does he love "him who is treacherous, sinful" (Surah 4:107), but the God of the Bible "proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).
- The standard of judgment for Allah is the Koranic teaching that our good deeds must outweigh our bad deeds (Surahs 7:8-9; 21:47), but the standard of the God of the Bible is complete perfection as measured by the holy character of God Himself (Matt. 5:48; Rom. 3:23).
- Allah provided a messenger, Muhammad, who warned of Allah's impending judgment (Surahs 2:119; 5:19; 7:184, 188; 15:89-90) and who declared that "No bearer of a burden can bear the burden of another" (Surahs 17:15; 35:18). But God provided a sinless Savior who took our sins upon Himself and bore God's wrath in our place (Matt. 20:28; 26:28; Luke 22:37; John 3:16; 10:9-11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; 1 Thess. 5:9-10).

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