

ISLAM AND ISLAMIC SECTS

Islam is a major world religion that originated in the Middle East after Judaism and Christianity. While the distribution of Islam throughout the world generally covers Africa, the Middle East, and sections of Asia and Europe, it is becoming a growing religious factor in the United States.

Muhammad - (Peace be upon him):

The founder and prophet of Islam, Muhammad was born in Arabia in 570 CE. He belonged to the Quraysh tribe, whose members served as custodians of the sacred places in Mecca (Makkah).

As an adult he became a respected and successful trader. On a trading journey to Syria he was put in charge of the merchandise of a rich middle-aged woman. She was so taken with him that she offered herself in marriage. She eventually bore him six children, two sons and four daughters. The best known of these children was Fatima who became the wife of Muhammad's divinely ordained successor.

Muhammad was known for his charm, courage, impartiality, and resoluteness. He was considered a man of virtuous character who epitomized what would later become the Islamic ideal. His personal revelation came when he was meditating in a cave outside the city of Mecca when he was forty years old. He had a vision of the angel Gabriel who said to him, "Recite."

Muhammad refused three times until the angel said, "Recite in the name of thy Lord who created." The words that were given to Muhammad declared the oneness and power of God, to whom worship should be made.

Following his revelation, Muhammad began preaching. It was a turbulent time of military conquest and political expansion throughout the area, and Muhammad met with opposition. He and his followers fled the persecution and migrated to Medina, where his teachings began to be accepted and the first Islamic community was founded.

The major achievements of Muhammad were the founding of a state and religion. He was politically successful, created a federation of Arab tribes, and made the religion of Islam the basis of Arab unity. He died in 632 CE. in Medina.

What followed was an amazing expansion of the Muslim faith throughout a large part of the world from Spain to Central Asia to India, Turkey, Africa, Indonesia, Malaya, and China - the same areas where the Muslims were very active traders. But, the expansion was also due to suppression of alternate religious faiths. Jews and Christians were given a special status; they had to pay a tax to maintain their religious autonomy. Other religions were given a different choice: Accept Islam or die.

In the early days of the faith, Islam became a part of both the spiritual and temporal aspects of Muslim life. There was not only an Islamic religious institution but also Islamic law, state, and other government institutions. It wasn't until the twentieth century that the religious and secular were formally separated. Even so, Islam actually draws no absolute distinction between the religious and temporal parts of life; the Muslim state is by definition religious.

Central Beliefs

Islam is a monotheistic religion - Allah is the sole God, the creator, sustainer, and restorer of the world. The overall purpose of humanity is to serve Allah, to worship Him alone, and to construct a moral lifestyle.

The Five Pillars of Islam were set down as the anchor for life as a Muslim. A Muslim should express belief in them and uphold them in his or her daily life. They are:

Profession of faith. There is no God, but God; Muhammad is the prophet of God. Sometimes a variation is used: There is no God, but God and Muhammad is his prophet.

Prayer. A Muslim must pray five times a day facing Mecca: before sunrise, just after noon, later in the afternoon, immediately before sunset, and after dark.

The Zakat. Each Muslim must pay a zakat to the state government. (A zakat is an obligatory tax paid once a year).

Fasting. A Muslim must fast for the month of Ramadan (the ninth Muslim month). Fasting begins at daybreak and ends at sunset. During the fasting day eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse are forbidden.

Hajj. Hajj means pilgrimage. A Muslim must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his or her lifetime provided they are physically and financially able.

A person who practices Islam is called a Muslim. The Arabic term Islam means “surrender,” which provides a strong indication of the fundamental underpinning of the faith. A believer, a Muslim, surrenders to the will of Allah (Arabic for God).

Holy Writings

The **Qur’an** (also known as the Koran) is the holy book of Islam. According to one Muslim tradition, it was written by God and revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over the period of his life from his first revelation when he was forty until his death at sixty-two. In another of the many traditions regarding the writing of the Qur’an Muhammad had the revelations written down on pieces of paper, stones, palm leaves, or whatever writing materials were available. It is believed that he indicated to the scribes the context in which the passages should be placed.

After the prophet’s death, it was decided to find people who had learned the words by heart and to locate written excerpts from all parts of Muslim Empire. The resulting information was edited to complete a correct edition of the work.

Thus, an authoritative text of the Qur’an was eventually produced. It is held in very high regard. Its Arabic language is considered to be unsurpassed in beauty and purity. To imitate the style of the Qur’an is a sacrilege.

The Qur’an is the primary source of every Muslim’s faith and practice. It deals with the subjects that concern all human beings: wisdom, beliefs, worship and law. However, it also provides on the relationship between God and his creatures. It also provides guidelines for a just society, proper human relationships, and equal division of power. The Qur’an also posits that life is a test and that everyone will be rewarded or punished for their actions in the life after this one.

Another source of Islamic doctrine is the **Hadith** - report or collection of sayings attributed to the prophet and members of the early Muslim community. The Hadith is second only to the authority of the Qur’an. It has been thought of as the biography of Muhammad made from the long memory of the members of his community. Hadith was a vital element during the first three centuries of Islamic history, and its study gives a broad index into the philosophy of Islam.

Provisions of law are the primary element, dealing with the moral, social, commercial, and personal aspect of the life and the theological aspects of death and final destiny. The Qur’an and Hadith form the basis of Islamic law.

Worship and Practices

The Qur’an forbids the worship of idols, which means that Muslims are not permitted to make images either of Allah or of the prophet. Some Muslims object to any form of representational art because of the inherent danger of idolatry. For this reason, mosques are often decorated with geometric patterns.

A great sin in Islam is something called shirk, or blasphemy. The Qur’an stresses that God does not share his power with any partner. It warns that those who believe their idols will intercede for them will find that they and the idols will become fuel for hellfire on the day of Judgment.

Many of Muhammad’s restrictions in the Qur’an were explicit in establishing distinctions between Arabs and Jews as shown, for example, in his dietary rules, which borrowed heavily from the Mosaic Law. The most radical difference between the Qur’an and Mosaic laws has to do with intoxicating beverages. Jews frown on alcoholic beverages, but they do not forbid them entirely; wine is an important element in many Jewish rituals and feasts. However, Muhammad absolutely forbade the use of such beverages.

Prayer and Mosques

Prayer has been described as the act of communicating by humans with the sacred or holy. The Islamic Qur’an is regarded as a book of prayers as is the book of Psalms in the Bible, which is considered to be a meditation on Biblical history turned into prayer. Prayer obviously takes as many forms as there are religions.

The act of prayer in Islam, as we know, is prescribed: Muslims are expected to pray five times a day at definite times wherever they happen to be. In addition to that practice, on Fridays all Muslim men are also expected to attend the mosque for the after-midday prayer. Friday is not an identifiable holy day in the manner of that Christians and Jews, for instance, consider the Sabbath. In Islam, business many go on as usual either before or after the midday prayers.

A mosque is actually defined in Islam as any house or open area of prayer.

What's the purpose of mosques? The first mosques were modeled on Muhammad's place of worship, which was the courtyard of his house in Medina. The first mosques were just plots of earth marked out as sacred.

Islam teaches that the whole world is a mosque because a person can pray to God anywhere. Islam makes no distinction between what is sacred and the everyday. However, every mosque has an area with a water supply so that the devout may wash their hands, feet, and face before prayer; Muslims may use sand for washing if water isn't available.

There is no prescribed architectural design for mosques. They generally have a minaret in an elevated place, usually a tower, for the crier or muezzin to proclaim the call to worship.

The muezzin's call to worship is followed by the imam, who leads the community prayers, and then the khatib, who often preachers the Friday sermon. Sometimes the imam performs all three functions. The imam is not a priest. Although he can't perform any rites, he usually conducts marriages and funerals. The imam generally acts as a leader of the local Muslim community and gives advice about Islamic law and customs. He's picked for his wisdom.

The muezzin who proclaims the call to prayer stands at either the door or side of a small mosque or on the minaret of a large mosque. He faces each of the four directions in turn: east, west, north, and south. To each direction he cries:

***Allah is most great.
I testify that there is no god but Allah.
I testify that Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.
Come to prayer.
Come to salvation.
Allah is most great.
There is no god but Allah.***

Many mosques have installed loudspeaker recordings to be used at the call to prayer. There may also be slight variations in the call.

Islam does not use liturgical vestments in the way many religions do, instead it has universal regulations governing dress. For example, all who enter a mosque must remove their footwear; and all individuals on a pilgrimage must wear the same habit, the *hizam*, and thus appear in holy places as a beggar.

Inside a mosque no representations of Allah, or of any humans, plants, or animals are allowed. Women who attend, particularly in America, should wear a head scarf, and avoid wearing jewelry, particularly any that might depict people or animals or Jewish or Christian religious imagery Modesty should be the guiding factor. Muslim girls and women cover their hair completely.

While women may attend prayers in a mosque, they are seated in a separate area, often upstairs, if there is one, in a gallery, so that neither sex is distracted.

All Muslim prayer is made facing Makkah (Mecca). When prayers are held congregationally people stand in rows shoulder to shoulder with no gaps or reserved spaces. All are considered equal when standing before God. Muslim prayers are memorized; new members of the faith generally have someone to guide them until they commit the prayers to memory.

Birth is not observed in any established routine manner; local traditions vary greatly. Many Muslims wish that the first sounds a baby hears is the call to prayer whispered in each ear. Boys must be circumcised between the ages of seven days and twelve years.

Marriage is a contract between a man and a woman, not a religious rite. Although it does not have to be performed in a mosque with an imam in attendance, it must be conducted according to Islamic law with two male Muslim witnesses. Nevertheless, marriage is seen as a state blessed by God.

Divorce is allowed, but it is certainly discouraged. Islamic law allows a man to have more than one wife; in traditional Islamic societies, this is one way of trying to make sure that women can have the protection of family life. However, the Prophet Muhammad advised that unless a man feels able to treat the wives equally he should marry only one.

Observant Muslims believe that their deaths are predetermined by Allah as part of his design. Therefore, death should not be feared for the deceased will go to Paradise. To overdo mourning would show a mistrust of God's love and mercy.

In Islam, on the Day of Judgment Allah will raise all the dead and judge them. The good will go to Paradise, the others to the fire.

After death, the body is ritually washed and wrapped in a linen shroud. All Muslims regardless of sect are dressed in the standard grave clothes, which number three: an upper shroud, a lower garment, and an overall shroud. Only martyrs are buried in the clothes in which they die, without their bodies or garments being washed. As evidence of their state of glory, the blood and dirt are on view.

Festivals and Celebrations

There are few major Islamic festivals in the year. However, local Muslim communities have their own traditions, which add to the year's festivities.

Do Muslims follow a different calendar from the western world?

Yes, they do. The Islamic calendar is lunar, and unlike most other lunar calendars, is not adjusted to keep in step with the solar year. Thus, Muslim dates tend to change constantly in relation to the western solar calendar. Years are counted from the prophet Muhammad's move to Medina in 622 C.E. The year 2000 C.E. was 1420/21 A.H. (in the year of Hegira).

Muharram is the first month of the year in Islam. New Year's Day is not a major holiday. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim year. Ramadan is a month of fasting. Adult Muslims do not eat, drink, smoke, or have conjugal relations from dawn to sunset. Children under the age of puberty are exempt, although they make a limited fast.

Lailat ul-Qadr, also known as The Night of Determination, is believed to have occurred around the twenty-seventh, but is now considered one of the last ten nights of Ramadan. Many Muslims spend these days and nights in the mosque, so as to be in prayer on The Night of Determination when Allah makes decisions about the destiny of individuals and the world as a whole.

Eid ul-Fitr celebrates the end of the month of fasting and lasts for three days. Prayers are offered, special foods prepared, and gifts are exchanged.

Eid ul-Adha, known as the Feast of Sacrifice, celebrates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac when God asked him to. God commanded a lamb be sacrificed instead of Ishmael. The sacrifice of a lamb is an important part of the festival.

Al-Isra Wal Miraj is the night of the ascension of Muhammad to Heaven to meet with Allah. It is celebrated on the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month. It is said the prophet set out the disciplines of the daily prayers.

Muhammad-Maulid al-Nabi celebrates the birth of the prophet Muhammad. It is held on the twelfth day of the third month and is a highly popular festival that draws thousands of visitors who join in processions and prayers.

The purpose of the Muslim ceremony called the *dhikr* is to glorify Allah and seek spiritual perfection. In the performance part of this ceremony, participants dress in conical hats and black mantles, and they dance in a building where their members sit in a circle and listen to music. Then, slowly standing to greet the master, they take off their black coats to show white shirts and waistcoats. Beginning to revolve rhythmically, they then throw back their heads and raise the palms of their right hands—keeping their left hands down.

The rhythm accelerates, they whirl faster and faster and faster until they are in a trance in which they lose themselves trying to seek union with Allah. These participants are called the whirling dervishes.

Developments of Modern Islam

To be a Muslim, or at least a reasonably devout one, is a way of life. Whereas other religions usually have a division, if not marked then implied, between the secular and the religious, that is not the case with Muslims. Daily life is where Islam resides—the religion is about a way of living. The Qur'an and the Hadith provide the guidance to carry that out.

Islamic law is founded on the *shari'ah* that is based on the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the advice and wisdom of scholars. Allah is seen as the supreme lawgiver. The integration of this philosophy is directly related to the demographics of the country where Islam is being practiced. In countries where Muslims are in the minority the integration of religion and secular activities will be less than where Muslims are in the majority. Money comes under the guidance of the Qur'an, which forbids usury and the charging of interest, but it approves making a fair profit. Naturally, this can be difficult to implement in a world market. In the Qur'an, business dealings and their outcome are described as "seeking the bounty of God." Wealth made should be used first for the support of family, then given to those in need. The Qur'an also forbids gambling.

Because of Western influence in the Middle East generally and the operation and economics of interest-based banks, many Muslims have abandoned the ban on usury. But many countries have Islamic, non-interest-bearing banks in Muslim communities.

Jihad in Arabic means fighting or striving. In Islam, it is a doctrine that calls upon believers to devote themselves to combating the enemies of their religion. The term has been used to describe a "holy war," even though this is not its literal meaning. Historically, the term was applied in wars both between various Muslim sects and non-Muslim ones.

Family life is an essential part of the Muslim way of living. All family members should care for one another. The Prophet Muhammad made particular reference about a man taking care of his mother. Animals, too, are to be respected and treated in ways that do not violate their lives in the family or community. Animals that are being used for food must be slaughtered in the correct way. Pig meat is strictly forbidden. The Qur'an outlaws alcohol.

Sunnis and Shiites

Of the two main groups within Islam, the Sunni compose about 90 percent of all adherents and the Shiites about 10 percent. Sunni Muslims look at themselves as the traditional, mainstream, pragmatic branch of Islam; in fact, they became known as the orthodox element in Islam. This claim, however, is in dispute as it is considered that all orientations in Islam are a result of the common Islamic origin.

Religious and Political Differences

In early Islamic history the Shiites were the more political of the two groups. When problems arose over the rightful successors to Muhammad, the Sunni said the first four caliphs were Muhammad's rightful successors, whereas the opposing minority, the Shiites, believed that Muslim leadership belonged to Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, and then to his descendants. This disagreement led to continuous internal wars that proved to be, from Ali's point of view, largely unsuccessful. However, Ali's status was eventually recognized, and he was made a major hero of Sunni Islam.

In contrast to the Shiites, who believed that the leadership of Islam was determined by divine order or inspiration, the Sunni regarded leadership as the result of the prevailing Muslim political realities. Historically, the leadership was in the hands of the foremost families of Mecca. For the Sunni, balance between spiritual and political authority afforded both the correct exercise of religious order and practical maintenance of the Muslim world.

Sunni orthodoxy placed strong emphasis on the majority view of the community. Over the years this perspective provided them the opportunity to include matters that were outside the root teaching of the Qur'an. Thus, the Sunni have earned the reputation of being religiously and culturally diverse.

The religious and political differences between the Sunni and the Shiite have been fraught with enmity and dissension throughout history. Today, Iran is the bastion of Shiite Islam—its state religion—and the majority of Iranians are Shiites. Even so, people in Iran do practice other religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and even Zoroastrianism, an ancient faith that predates Judaism. Shiite adherents also live in Syria, East Africa, India, and Pakistan. Overall, Shiites comprise somewhere in the region of eighty million people, or a tenth of all Moslems. For instance, the Kurdish, who live in northern Iran, Iraq, and eastern Turkey, are Sunni Muslims.

The Shiites maintain that only those in the bloodline of Muhammad are the legitimate heirs of Islam. **Shiitism** is often called "**twelver**" because Iranians generally recognized only twelve imams, or supreme religious leaders, following the death of Muhammad. The twelfth of these is Mardi, the so-called hidden imam, who is believed to still be alive in some celestial state. The ayatollahs, highly respected scholars and teachers of Islam, are thought to be standing in for Mardi as they interpret the words of Muhammad.

Religious Practices

The religious practices of the Shiites are different from those of the Sunni. For devout Shiites, a pilgrimage to Mecca is the most important religious practice, but they also visit the tombs of the eleven earthly imams, and Iranians frequently cross the border into Iraq to visit the tomb of Ali.

In the twentieth century, Shiites became a major political force in Iran, where they deposed a secularist monarchy, and in Lebanon, where they led resistance to Israeli occupation in the south during the 1980s and 1990s.

The Shiites, from a western point of view, would probably be considered the most conservative of the two main factions in Islam. Their doctrine has always firmly revolved around the Qur'an, and in modern times, they have become the chief voice of militant Islamic fundamentalism.

Sufism—a mystical sect—arose in Islam around 661 C.E. as an apparent reaction against the worldliness of the Muslim community of the time. Sufism sought the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience with Allah.

The meaning of the word **jihad** in most Muslim sects is "**fighting or striving**" to fulfill a duty in one of four ways—the heart, the tongue, the hand, and the sword. The Sufis chose the first of the four, "the greater jihad," which is by the heart.

Sufism has influenced parts of Muslim society. The orthodox Muslims, of course, disagreed with Sufi beliefs and actions—saint worship, musical performance, visiting tombs, and miracle mongering, to name a few. They thought that the Sufi leaders could gain dangerous authority and political influence over illiterate villagers in backward areas.

However, by educating the masses and deepening the spiritual side of their lives, Sufism made an important contribution to those members of Muslim society. For all the criticism they created for themselves, the Sufis scrupulously observed the commands of the divine law.

Probably the greatest contribution they made to the Islamic community flowed from their love of Persian poetry. The mystics also contributed to national and regional literature where they provided artistic works in not only their own language but also the languages of the local adherents, for instance, Punjabi and Urdu-speaking areas of South Asia and in Turkey. The literature produced during this highly creative time of the Sufis is considered to be the golden age among Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages.

The Sufis were responsible for tremendous missionary activity throughout the world, which continues today.

Over the years Sufism has declined in many countries. But, in the West, Sufism has been popularized recently. Whether or not this is a fad or is a devout attempt can't be said. What is known is that Sufism requires strict discipline before its goal of divine love is achieved.

Robert Pollock, "***The Everything World's Religions Book.***" Copyright 2002 by Adams Media Corporation, Avon, Massachusetts, USA.