

ISLAM

Teachers' Version

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Islam: Today there are about one billion "Muslims" or followers of the religion of Islam. Most countries in the central band running across North Africa into Asia and as far as Indonesia have a large or predominantly Muslim population. Only about fifteen percent of Muslims live in the Arabic speaking nations of the Middle East and North Africa, while major Muslim populations are found in the Soviet Union, Pakistan, India, and China. The most populous Muslim country in the world is Indonesia.

Islam entered Iran from its birthplace in Arabia during the first century of its spread (the seventh century C.E.). Over a period of several centuries it gradually replaced Zoroastrianism as the majority religion. For over 800 years, most Iranian Muslims followed the Sunni branch of Islam, which is observed by about 90% of Muslims worldwide. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Iran came to be dominated by the minority Shi'ite branch for a variety of political and social reasons.

Islam appeared in Arabia not far from the birthplace of Judaism and Christianity and in the same cultural climate. The Arab people were divided into a large number of tribes. Most of them were nomads, while a few lived in towns. They knew about the Jewish prophets and Christ, but for the most part they worshipped idols carved from stone. According to Islamic belief, God chose Muhammad to be the last of the prophets before the end of time. God revealed to him an Arabic book known as the Koran (the "Recitation") by means of the angel Gabriel. This book, along with Muhammad's own sayings and explanations about the religion (known as the *Hadith*), has guided the far-flung Islamic community down to modern times. Because of the importance that Muslims give to the actual form of the words revealed by God, Arabic is Islam's sacred language. All Muslims know at least a few words of Arabic so that they can say their required daily prayers in that language. During most of the Muslim era scholars from Muslim countries have considered Arabic the primary language of learning.

When Muhammad--commonly called "the Prophet"--began preaching the new religion to the inhabitants of his home town of Mecca, at first they made fun of him. When some people accepted his message, the others began to persecute him and his followers. Gradually the clarity of his teachings and his own sincerity, kindness, and humility attracted a large number of people to his cause. One of the first to accept the new faith was his young cousin Ali.

In 622 C.E., the Prophet migrated to the nearby town of Medina at the invitation of the inhabitants, who hoped that he would be able to establish peace among their competing factions. He succeeded in this task and most of the people of Medina soon became Muslims. The year of his "migration" to Medina (called *hijra* in Arabic) marks the major turning point for the new religion, so it became the year 1 of the Islamic calendar. From here on Muhammad demonstrated that he was a great general and a master statesman. He soon overcame all opposition to the new religion. By the time of his death in 632, the vast majority of Arabs had accepted Islam and the Arab tribes were united for the first time in recorded history. Those

Arabs who were already "People of a Book," meaning Jews and Christians, were not asked to convert.

A minority of the Muslims felt that the task of ruling the community should go to the Prophet's cousin Ali, who was now also his son-in-law. The majority held that Abu Bakr, one of the oldest and wisest of the Muslims, should be his successor. The minority came to be known as Shi'ites and the majority as Sunnis.

Teachings: Islamic teachings can be divided into three basic categories: practical, doctrinal, and spiritual. These correspond to the three basic dimensions of human life: the body, the mind, and the heart. Practice refers to what people do, doctrine to what they think, and spirituality to how much they love God and other human beings. The word "Islam" means literally "submission" to God's will. "Muslims" are those who bring their bodies, minds, and hearts into conformity with the teachings of the Koran and the *Hadith*. They follow God's guidance instead of their own opinions. Naturally, Muslims, like members of other religions, do not always live up to their own ideals.

On the level of activity, Muslims are guided by the "*Shari'a*," which is a set of practices based on what the Prophet used to do in following the commandments of the Koran. The most important of these practices are called Islam's "five pillars": People are expected to (1) acknowledge the reality of God and the Prophecy of Muhammad; (2) perform a special kind of prayer five times a day; (3) fast by refraining from all food and drink during the daylight hours of Ramadan (one of the months of the Islamic calendar); (4) donate a small proportion of their wealth each year to the poor and needy; (5) make a pilgrimage to the holy sanctuary of Islam (called the Kaaba) in Mecca once in their lifetimes if they have the means to do so. The *Shari'a* also provides guidelines for activities such as preparing food, buying and selling, marriage, and inheritance.

On the level of doctrine, Islam tries to instill a proper understanding of the nature of reality. Here it sets down "three principles": (1) God is one, (2) God sent prophets or messengers to mankind, and (3) human beings, having heard the words of God's messengers, are responsible for their own actions. In brief, the three principles teach that a single reality, called "God" in everyday language, underlies all things. He created the universe out of love and compassion for others. He appointed human beings as his representatives and as rulers of the universe, but only on condition that they "submit" their wills to his will, or in other words, that they be good "Muslims." He sent many thousands of prophets, including Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, and Jesus, to remind people of their responsibilities toward him and toward other human beings. If people fail to observe their duties as God's servants and representatives, the entire world, which has been entrusted to their care, will be corrupted and destroyed. After death, people will be asked to account for their own action. They will be given an everlasting home according to the degree to which they have lived up to their responsibilities.

On the "spiritual" level, Islam provides guidelines for stirring up the fire of love in the heart. The goal is that people should desire only what their loved one desires, their loved one being God himself. Love of God in the heart is seen as the basis for all human goodness, compassion, and justice.

Islam in Iran: Though Islam was born as a religion of simple townspeople, it had the resources to adapt itself to social and cultural complexity. Of all the countries to which Islam spread during the first centuries of its existence, Iran had the oldest and richest civilization. Once they adopted the new religion and took part in its vitality, the Iranians became the primary means whereby Islam was transformed into a world religion. It might be expected that a religion born among Arabs would be propagated mainly by Arabs. But in fact, most of the great authorities in the three basic dimensions of Islam discussed above -- practice, doctrine, and spirituality -- were Iranians. Even though their mother tongue was Persian, they became masters of the Arabic language and wrote most of the classics through which Islam has been understood until modern times.

Since Islam addresses the three dimensions of human existence, it has been deeply influential on all levels of Iranian society, from individual and family life to government. This influence is perhaps most obvious in art and literature. Iranian artists have produced great masterpieces in every field, such as architecture, calligraphy, painting, ceramics, music, and poetry. In the West "Persian carpets" have been famous for centuries.

Nowadays Iran is well-known as the major center of Shi'ite Islam. In practice the basic difference between Sunni and Shi'ite Islam goes back to the differing importance given to the descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and her husband, the Prophet's cousin Ali. The Shi'ites have always considered Ali the Prophet's rightful successor as the leader or "Imam" of the Islamic community. Ali, in turn, appointed his son Hasan to succeed him as Imam, and Hasan appointed his brother Husayn. Then the Imamate goes through a specific line of Husayn's descendants down to the twelfth and last Imam, who disappeared in the year 939 C.E. Ever since, Shi'ites have awaited the return of the last Imam so that justice may be established on earth.

Veneration for the Imams plays an important role in Shi'ite piety. Traditionally, the birth dates and death dates of all the Imams, along with those of the Prophet and his daughter Fatima, have been observed as holidays. Three of the Imams play an especially important role in the everyday observances of Iranian Muslims. The first of these, Ali is loved especially for his bravery, kindness, and generosity. The book of his sayings and sermons, *Nahj al-balagha*, is ranked just below the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet. At Ghadir-e Khom (or Khom's pond), the place at which the Prophet appointed Ali to be his successor, an annual festival commemorates this event. The three days during the fasting month of Ramadan that mark an assassin's attack on Ali and his death are one of the saddest periods of the year.

However, the day of deepest mourning for Shi'ites is called "*Ashura*" and commemorates the tragic killing of Ali's son Husayn along with many of his male relatives. During the ten-day period leading up to and including Ashura, Shi'ites walk in long processions, chanting poetry in memory of Husayn's tragedy, and even beating themselves on the chest in order to share in his pain.

Finally, the eighth Imam, Reza, has a special place in Iranian hearts especially because he is the only Imam buried in Iran. His tomb in Mashhad is a great place of pilgrimage. Many Iranians feel that even if they are not able to make the pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, God will forgive their sins if they visit Imam Reza in Mashhad.

Bibliography

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