Islam

Islam is the third of the three major monotheistic religions. It is descended from both Judaism and Christianity. People who practice the religion of Islam are known as Muslims, not Islams. The term Islam literally means “submission” (to Allah), and Muslim means “one who submits”. Like many religions, Islam was not immediately accepted by the local population.

Origins of Islam

• Muslims believe that Abraham is not only the father of the Jews, but also of Arab-Muslims. They trace their descendancy from Abraham’s child Ishmael.

• In 570 CE, Muhammad was born in the city of Mecca, in the Arabian peninsula. He grew up and became a successful businessman, but he still questioned his life and the world around him.
• In 610, at the age of 40, Muhammad went to a cave outside of Mecca to pray and to meditate. There he received the first of his revelations from God.
• Muhammad openly taught his revelations in Mecca, but the people of Mecca did not accept him as a religious prophet. Muhammad fled to the neighboring city of Medina in 622.
• In the city of Medina, people accepted his teachings, and the religion of Islam took root. Muhammad returned to Mecca in 630 with an army, and the Meccans finally submitted to Islam.

Basic Beliefs

• Muslims are monotheistic, and believe there is only one God, Allah. Muhammad is NOT a god, he is the prophet. In fact, Muslims believe Muhammad is the last (and greatest) in a long line of prophets beginning with Abraham, including Moses and Jesus.
• Muslims believe Islam to be the final revelation of Judaism & Christianity. Jews & Christians traditionally have been given special consideration in Muslim communities as “people of the book”.
• Muslims follow the 5 Pillars as the cornerstone of their religion.
  -Pillar 1: Faith (Shahada) Declaration of their faith in Allah.
  -Pillar 2: Prayer (Salat) Pray five times a day toward Mecca.
  -Pillar 3: Almsgiving (Zakat) Giving of alms or charity to the poor and sick.
  -Pillar 4: Fasting (Sawm) Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.
  -Pillar 5: Pilgrimage (Hajj) Making a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

* If you’re faithful to Allah, you will be admitted into eternal Paradise after the final judgment.
Sacred Symbols & Books

- The most widely recognized symbol of Islam is the crescent moon & star. It appears on the flags of some Muslim nations, and can be found atop minaret towers. It is a controversial symbol, since it is not found anywhere in the Qur’an. Many feel it symbolizes the understanding offered by Islam. The waxing crescent increases in light and the star provides direction.
- The Qur’an (Koran) is the holiest book in Islam. It contains the revelations that Muhammad received from Allah. Because the revelations were received in the language of Arabic, Muslims consider only Arabic copies of the Qur’an to be official copies. They believe that something is lost when the language is translated. So while English copies of the Qur’an do exist, they are not considered to be official.
- The Mosque is the Muslim house of worship. A traditional mosque is built with a large open area in which to pray, and is usually topped with a large dome. All mosques have tall slender towers.
- A political/religious leader of a Muslim community or state is called a Caliph.
- A spiritual leader of Muslim services is referred to as an Imam.
- The Ka’aba is located inside of the Great Mosque in Mecca, and is considered the most sacred site in Islam. The Ka’aba itself is a large granite cube (43’ high x 36’ x 42’). The Ka’aba houses the Black Stone—a meteorite that fell from heaven to show Adam & Eve where to build an altar for offerings. Abraham later built a ka’aba to house the black stone, and Muhammad rebuilt it. Pilgrims march around it seven times.

Sects of Islam

- Sunni Muslims—85% of the world’s Muslims are Sunni. These are considered Orthodox Muslims, and follow the example of Muhammad. They also do not believe the caliph (leader of Islam—like a Pope) needs to be a direct blood descendent of Muhammad, but rather should be chosen based on their character and example.
- Shi’ite (Shi’a) Muslims—15% of the world’s Muslims are Shi’a. This group believes that the caliph should be a direct descendent of the prophet. They also believed the Imams (first 12 leaders of the Islamic community) were chosen by God, and were perfect examples for Muslims. The 12th Imam disappeared in the 9th century, and Shi’as believe he will return to judge the faithful at the end of the world.
- Sunnis and Shi’ites have often come to war because of their differences.

Impact on Lives

- The Five Pillars all have a direct impact on Muslims’ lives. Also, most Muslims go to religious school to learn the Qur’an, which means, most Muslims learn to read Arabic.
- Muslims, like Jews, also have dietary laws forbidding the consumption of pork products and alcohol.
- The Qur’an dictates that Muslim women dress and behave in a modest manner. Some Muslim nations take this more seriously than others. In Arab communities of the Middle East, most women are required to remain fully covered in loose fitting garb. In some cases, even the faces of women must be covered. However in Muslim Indonesia, female dress codes are much different.