

A BASIC OVERVIEW OF ISLAM

By

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With the conflict in the Middle East and recent immigration of many from that region to the West, the religion of Islam has received a lot of attention. There are approximately one billion Muslims in the world today with the largest population in Southeast Asia. There are many different sects that hold various views, and it is thus not possible to present an extensive treatment of each area. This article presents a brief overview of the basic beliefs of Islam.

WHAT IS ISLAM?

Islam is the religion of all who believe that there is one God Allah and that Mohammed was his prophet. The term “*Islam*” means submission. It refers to all who live in submission to Allah, the God of Islam.

HISTORY OF ISLAM

The founder of Islam is Muhammad. Muhammad was born in 570 A.D. The earliest biography of his life records that his mother and father died when he was very young. He was first raised by his grandfather and later by his uncle. When he was 25, he married Khadija, his employer who was much older. Khadija’s wealth allowed Muhammad the time to retreat into the caves of the Arabian Desert to meditate.

At age 40 he began to receive revelations which he believed were from the angel Gabriel. Biographers record that upon receiving these revelations, he would fall into fits of rage, rolling and salivating. He questioned whether these revelations were from God or the devil. He returned terribly frightened that a *jinn* or evil spirit possibly possessed him, but his wife assured him that he was a prophet of Allah.¹ His followers later recorded his revelations. The collection of these revelations became the Koran, the holy book of Islam.

Muhammad began preaching his message in Mecca, which was, at that time, the center of idol worship in the Arabian Peninsula. He believed that there was only one God Allah and that all other gods were false gods. This message was detrimental to the Meccan economy, and he was thus persecuted for his message. In 619 A.D. his wife Khadija died. Over the course of his life, Muhammad married fifteen wives. The youngest of his wives was Aisha, who was seven-years-old when they married and nine-years-old when Muhammad consummated the marriage.²

¹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad* (translated by A. Guillame), 106-7.

² Sahih Al-Bukhari, *Hadith*, Volume 7, Book 64, number 63.

After being rejected for his message in Mecca, he fled to Medina 622 A.D. This event, known as the *Hijira*, is one of the most sacred events celebrated in Islam. In Medina he gained status as a leader by uniting various Arab clans and began to gather a following. He began raiding commercial caravans to obtain financial reward and support his growing army, believing that the raids were sanctioned by Allah (Sura 22:39-40, 2:244, 4:95-97). This demonstration of his growing power caught the attention of the Meccans. However, his raids were hurting the economy of Mecca, and the leaders of the city realized they needed to end his growing threat.

Several key battles ensued between Muhammad and the armies of Mecca. The first battle, the Battle of Badr, occurred in 624 A.D. Muhammad, with an army of three hundred men, fought against the Meccan army of nine hundred. This was a great victory for Muhammad and reinforced his calling as a prophet. The Koran records that he felt God fought for him (8:17, 65).

A year later a second battle, the Battle of Uhud, was fought. At this second battle, the Meccans defeated Muhammad's forces. Muhammad retreated to Medina. He sanctioned more attacks on caravans. This move was meant to strengthen his alliance and prevent others from joining Meccan forces.³

In the spring of 627 A.D. the Meccan army sought to crush Muhammad and laid siege to Medina. However, since they were unable to capture Medina, they withdrew. It was then that Muhammad slaughtered nine hundred Jews in the city and sold the women and children into slavery (Sura 33:9-27).⁴

In March 628 the Meccans made peace with Muhammad. One year later the Meccans attacked the Muslims, nullifying the treaty. In 630 A.D. with an army of 10,000, Muhammad marched to the city of Mecca and captured it. Shortly after the capture of Mecca, Muhammad died in 634 A.D.

After Muhammad's death, a division grew among his followers. The majority of these followers became *Sunnis* and believed Muhammad's *Caliph*, or successor, should be the most worthy disciple. A minority, the *Shiites*, believed the successor should be a blood relative. Since Muhammad did not have any sons, the Shiites believed Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, should be the successor. This division in Islam remains even to present times. The Sunnis prevailed, and the first Caliph was appointed to Abu Bakr (632-634). Following Abu Bakr was Umar (634-644), a Sunni who was later assassinated. Following Umar was Uthman, also a Sunni. The fourth Caliph was Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and a Shiite. By military means these four conquered and converted the Middle East by 750 AD.

SIX ARTICLES OF FAITH

There are Six Articles of Faith in Islam. The First Article is the belief in one God, Allah. Allah is one in unity and singularity; he has no partners. To associate anything or

³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 22:4

⁴ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad* (translated by A. Guillame), 464.

anyone with Allah is blasphemy. Therefore, Muslims consider the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to be blasphemous (Sura 4:116).

The Second Article is the belief in the Holy Scriptures. Islam teaches that there are 104 holy books, and the Koran is the final revelation. The Koran is the holiest of books. Muslims believe that the Bible is a holy book but that Christians and Jews have corrupted it.

The Third Article is the belief in prophets. Islam teaches that Allah has sent 124,000 prophets to mankind, but only 30 are mentioned in Koran. The six primary prophets mentioned in the Koran are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Islam rejects the Christian teaching that Jesus is God incarnate. The Koran teaches that Jesus was a prophet but that He was merely a man. The Koran teaches that the worship of Jesus is blasphemy (Surah 5:72). Islam also rejects the New Testament teaching that He died on a cross and was resurrected. However, the Koran does affirm the following regarding Christ: Christ was born of a virgin (Surah 19:16-21), He performed miracles (Surah 3:37-45), He was a prophet (Surah 19:29-31), and God raised Him up to heaven (Surah 4:158).

Muhammad is not worshipped, but he is greatly revered. Al-Ghazali, who is considered by many as the greatest Muslim theologian, writes, "Know that the key to happiness is to follow the sunna (Muhammad's actions) and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going..."⁵ Muslims believe that Muhammad is the greatest of the prophets, and his life serves as a model for all Muslims.

The Fourth Article is the doctrine of predestination. Islam teaches that Allah predestines everything that happens, including good and evil. Allah is sovereign and controls all events upon the earth.

The Fifth Article is the belief in angels and *jinn*. Islam teaches that there are two angels for every person. One records the good deeds; the other records the bad deeds. On judgment day the books will be opened, and a person will be judged according to their works. *Jinn* are beings made of light. They can do good and bad. They are not as smart as men but are more powerful.

The Sixth Article is the belief in a resurrection and judgment. At the judgment the two books will be opened, and Allah will judge each person according to their works (Sura 23:102-104). Those whose good works outweigh their bad and those to whom Allah extends His mercy will enter paradise. In paradise, the men will recline on couches, enjoy wine, and be served by heavenly maidens, as many of whom they may take for wives (Sura 52:20, 56:22-35, 55:60-80, 44:51-55, 78:30, 37:40-50).

Hell is described in the Koran as a place where souls are tortured for all eternity. For example, one Sura describes hell as a place where bodies of flesh are thrown into boiling liquid until the flesh falls off. Then, the flesh returns, and the process is repeated endlessly (Sura 56:40-55, 56:40-55). No one's eternal destiny is secure, and there is no assurance that one has done enough to attain paradise. One of Islam's greatest apologists, Isma'il R. Faruqi, states:

⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: the Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 31, quoted in Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1993), 82.

Great as it may be in the eyes of Islam for any person to make the decision to enter the faith, the entry constitutes no guarantee of personal justification in the eyes of God... there is nothing the new initiate can do which would assure him or her of salvation. Islam denies that a human can attain religious felicity on the basis of faith alone... the works and deeds constitute justification in God's eyes... Everyone strives and some strive more than others... Religious justification is thus the Muslim's eternal hope never their complacent certainty, not for even a fleeting moment.⁶

FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The Five Pillars of Islam represent the five basic practices of Islam. These include the following:

- The Confession: There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah.
- Prayer: Muslims are to pray five times a day kneeling and bowing towards Mecca.
- Alms for the poor: Muslims are to give 1/40 of their income to the poor.
- Observance of the holy time of Ramadan: During this time Muslims practice fasting during daylight hours in remembrance of the *Hajirah*.
- *Haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca: Every Muslim male who is able is required to travel to Mecca at least once in his lifetime to worship at the *Ka'aba* (Muslim shrine).

A significant practice to mention is *jihad*, or holy war. When a recognized religious ruler declares holy war, all Muslim men are called to fight in the cause of Allah. If one dies in a jihad, his sins are forgiven, and he will go straight to heaven. Dying in a jihad enables a man to attain the highest status in heaven⁷ (Surah 3:193-195, 4:95, 5:36, 9:5, 28, 47:4).

There are those who argue that jihad primarily refers to a struggle or striving for personal righteousness. However, the historical view of jihad has been that of a military war. Several passages in the Koran teach that it is a military battle against unbelievers (Sura 3:195, 4:95, 9:5, 29, 5:33, 47:4, 2:191, 8:60). One must also look at the example of Muhammad and the early leaders of Islam. These men were warriors, and their example leads one to conclude that it is a military war. Bernard Lewis, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, writes: "The more common interpretation, and that of the overwhelming majority of the classical jurists and commentators, presents jihad as armed struggle for Islam against infidels and apostates."⁸ Jihad has expanded its definition to include a spiritual struggle, but both the historical definition and the example of Muhammad frame it within context of military combat.

⁶ Faruqi, Isma'il R., (Niles, Il., Argus Communications, 1984), 5 quoted in Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1993), 126-127.

⁷ Sheikh Abdullah bin Muhammad Bin Humaid, *Jihad in the Quran and the Sunnah*, p. 11.

⁸ Bernard Lewis, "Jihad vs. Crusade," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2001.

CONCLUSION

This article is a brief overview of the basic teachings of Islam. There are numerous sects in Islam which adhere to various doctrinal beliefs. As conflict continues to escalate in the Middle East and as many Muslims emigrate to the West, Islam will continue to grow and be a major force to contend with on a variety of political, social, and religious levels.