

What is the Faith of the Muslims?

By Bassam Madany

The faith of Islam began six hundred years after Christ's death. The faithful seek to follow God and obey the teachings of Jesus. But Muslims are not Christians. Who are they?

Christians in North America may no longer ignore the presence of thousands of Muslims in their communities. We need to know who they are and what they believe. Above all, we must share with them the good news of Jesus Christ.

Islam is the name of their religion. It is the Arabic word for total surrender to Allah or God. Muhammad, the founder of this religion was born in Mecca, Arabia in 570 A.D. As a young man meditating near his birthplace, he said that God spoke to him and called him to be his messenger. He preached the unity of God and the vanity of idolatry. Not succeeding in his mission to Mecca, he moved north to Medina and became the religious and political leader of its communities. This happened in 622 A.D. which became the year 1 in the Islamic calendar. Prior to his death in 632, Muhammad spread his power over Mecca and Arabia.

Muhammad made no arrangements for his succession. The leaders of the Muslim community in Medina decided by consensus to designate one of them as the caliph or successor to the prophet. This new office was both religious and political, as there is no separation between "church" and state in Islam.

When Ali, who was the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was chosen as the fourth caliph, the system broke down. The governor of Damascus who was related to the murdered third caliph claimed that Ali had refrained from punishing the assassin. After a few years of struggle, Ali lost his position and the caliphate was taken over by his opponent Mu'awiya in 661. The followers of Ali were called Shi'ites (Arabic for partisans) and their activities to reclaim the caliphate continued to cause turmoil in the expanding Muslim world. The majority of the Muslims accepted the status quo and were resigned to the leadership of Mu'awiya, the new caliph and the founder of the first dynasty in Islam. They came to be known as the Sunni or Orthodox Muslims.

Regardless of their divisions, Muslims hold in common the following beliefs: the unity of God (conceived in a unitarian sense), the prophethood of Muhammad, the existence of angels and devils and a belief in the Day of Judgment. They regard Jesus as a prophet but deny both his deity and sonship. They do not recognize the historicity of his crucifixion nor the necessity of redemption. Man's salvation takes place simply by believing in God's revelations and by doing his will. There is no doctrine of original sin in Islam. Muslims acknowledge that the

sacred books were given to the Jews and the Christians, but they do not acknowledge the Bible as being the authentic Scripture. They claim that the documents were purposely altered prior to the rise of Islam!

Since the beginning of the last century, some Muslim leaders have sought to harmonize the teachings of their faith with Western culture. We refer to them as the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. In the Arab world, the most active radical movement is the Muslim Brotherhood which was founded in Egypt early in this century. The most illustrious leader among them was the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustapha Kemal, known also as Ataturk.

Other Muslim leaders have advocated a complete return to the teachings of Islam in order to meet the challenge of secular worldviews. These Muslim revivalists are found both among the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. In the Arab world, the most active radical movement is the Muslim Brotherhood which was founded in Egypt early in this century.

Islamic radicalism in the Shi'ite Muslim world has always been in the hands of the religious leaders of Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini regards his brand of Islam as the most authentic form of the faith. He advocates a complete return to the early years of Islam and the literal application of Islamic Law (Shari'a). As the undisputed leader of Iran and of the Shi'ite communities of the Middle East, he calls for the overthrow of all opposing regimes in the Muslim world, declaring that their leaders are infidels. Unlike Sunni Islam, where theology tends to be rather scholastic, in Shi'ite Islam there is more room for a dynamic interpretation of the Qu'ran and the Hadith (a collection of the sayings and the acts of Muhammad). Furthermore, Shi'ite Islam is messianic in nature and looks forward to the return of their "hidden" leader or Imam, who will bring peace and justice to the world through the spread of their faith.

There are perhaps from two to three million Muslims in North America. Among them we find Iranians who are Shi'ites. The vast majority of Arab Muslims are Sunnis. The same thing may be said of the Turks, Afghanis and Pakistanis as well as of Black Muslims. North American Christians must become very active presenting the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ to our new neighbors, the Muslims of our cities.