

ISLAM TODAY

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More and more is being said about Islam as the economic and political situation forces us to pay more attention to it. It has thus become very necessary to have information about the history and beliefs of this religion.

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT ISLAM

What our Muslim Friends Believe

Islam means submission to God (Allah); a Muslim is one who submits to God. His creed is; “There is no God but God and Mohammed is the Apostle of God”.

A Muslim accepts the following six articles of belief. (See Koran 2 verse 285).

1. God
2. His angels.
3. His books including the Pentateuch (Moses), the Psalms (David), the Gospel (Jesus) and the Koran (Mohammed).
4. His prophets of whom the most important are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses ‘Isa’ (Jesus) and Mohammed. Mohammed is the last and greatest of the prophets.
5. The last day; which is the Day of Judgement.
6. God’s decrees.

A devout Muslim follows these 5 practices or pillars.

1. Recital of the creed.
2. Prayer. The recital of the ritual prayers five times a day
After ceremonial washing
3. Almsgiving. The giving to the poor of 2 ½% of one’s earnings, in money or goods.

4. Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan from dawn to sunset.
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if possible.

How Islam Arose

Mecca was a very important trading centre in Arabia. In the sixth century after Christ, its famous sacred place (haram) was devoted to the worship of the God's. Pilgrimage worshippers and traders came to Mecca during the special months of truce when travel was safer.

Mohammed was born about 570 AD in Mecca and forty years later felt called by God to preach against idolatry and to proclaim the unity of God. He derived the idea of people basing their lives on a book from the Jews in Mecca and possibly from Christians in other parts of Arabia. He saw himself as the Arab prophet upon whom God had sent down His eternal book- The Koran. His preaching met with opposition (Surah 72 verses 1 and 2) and little success, so he concluded that God intended the divine message and call to be vindicated by political means. The emigration to Medina, in 622 provided him with a political power base. He joined the colony of his followers there. Faith, not kinship, became the basis of the community and Arab unity improved. Medina became subject to Mohammed by force and in 630 the Meccans also gave in. Mohammed returned to Mecca as conqueror and religion and statehood became one. The Muslim era does not date from 610 when Mohammed began to receive parts of the Koran from God, nor from his birth, but from the emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622 (called the Hijra).

How Islam Spread

Within Mohammed's lifetime Islam brought unity to the whole of Arabia. Mohammed died in 632 AD and within ten years of his death Islam had spread to Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Iran. Within one century it had spread to North Africa, Spain, South France, Central Asia, India, and China. Today there are over forty Muslim nations. Over one seventh of the world's population is Muslim.

How Islam Developed

Most Muslims are Sunnis (orthodox). The Shias broke away from the main body of Islam in 611 AD, the year that Ali, the fourth caliph to succeed Mohammed died. The Shias believe that the line of succession should have been directly

through Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed. Therefore they accepted Ali as caliph but not his three predecessors. Shia Islam with its focus on personality has tended to be subdivided as other charismatic leaders have arisen. The Ismailis, followers of the Aga Khan, are a sub-sect of the Shias as are the heretical Ahmadis.

Islam Today

There are some clearly definable forces shaping Islam today.

Political Events

Since the end of the Second World War many Muslim nations have gained their independence. Now a number of these nations are reacting against Western secular influence and decadence and are declaring them Islamic states. From its creation in 1947 Pakistan has been an Islamic state. The need to ensure the survival of Pakistan overshadowed all questions of what form it should adopt. After the 1977 elections in Pakistan the country was divided as to whether it should continue in its previous form or whether it should become a state under the sharia (Islamic Law), ruled by the Muslim traditionalists and fundamentalists. The present martial law is strongly fundamentalist. As fundamentalism sweeps the Muslim world the same issues have become evident in Iran.

Economic Developments Related To Oil Production

Over half of the known resources of the world are owned by Muslim nations. Saudi Arabia has 23%, Kuwait 10%, and Iran 9% of the world's oil. Oil production causes sudden economic development and modernization. The OPEC nations have considerable political power which they use for religious and nationalistic ends.

Nationalism

Since the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the Caliphate in 1924, Arab nationalism has been increasing. Other newly independent Muslim nations have equated religion and patriotism. For example, in Morocco it is assumed that all Moroccans are Muslims. The Muslim nations are, however, not as united as one might expect. Nationalism often runs counter to unity.

Secularization

The influence of European secular culture has been felt particularly in North Africa through the French and the French language. Many young people come from a Muslim culture but have no deep religious convictions. Some are openly Marxists. To counter-balance this some Muslim governments have been putting a greater stress on Arabic and Islam in the school and college curricular and through the media.

Fundamentalism

A strongly conservative country, Saudi Arabia has the Koran as its constitution and the creed of Islam on its national flag. The national anthem of Libya speaks of carrying the Koran in one hand and the sword in the other. Pakistan has recently introduced various punishments based on the Koran, e.g. cutting off the hand in some cases of theft. In both Pakistan and Iran there are now powerful movements striving for a fuller application of Islamic law (Sharia). In rejecting western materialism and communism some leaders try to take the best elements of both and revise and adapt them in accordance with the ideals of Mohammed.

Folk or Popular Islam

This includes the occult, safeguards against evil eye, many superstitious practices, the excessive regard for religious leaders whether alive or dead etc. Folk Islam is very different from ideal Islam as described in the Koran and has its origins in animism.

Mohammed Veneration

There is a revival of Mohammed veneration. He is described as the Lord of the worlds and the uncut jewel of beauty etc.

Similarities and Differences in Interpretation of the Same Words by Muslims and Christians.

Muslims and Christians use terms like God, man, sin, repentance, salvation, prayer, judgement, and Hell, but their definitions are different. This similarity can be a help but also a hindrance to communication. Here are a few examples:

1. God

The Koran puts a great stress on the unity of God. However, the Muslim considers the Koran itself as God's eternal word and message. The one God revealed His will in a book not a person. The Christian accepts the Biblical teaching of the oneness of God and His revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, the eternal and living word of God.

(John 17 verse 3).

2. Jesus

The Koran honours Jesus Christ calling him "Isa" (Jesus), the son of Mary, the Messiah, ascribing miracles to Him and acknowledging Him as a major prophet. Muslims, however, deny that He is God manifest in the flesh that He died for sinners on the cross and rose from the dead. Christians worship Jesus, confessing Him to be Lord and Saviour. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the eternal Word of God revealed in human flesh at the crucial point in history. He identified Himself with sinful man and offered Himself as a holy and perfect sacrifice on man's behalf. In dying on the cross He atoned for human sinfulness and sins. This sacrifice of Himself had God's seal upon it in that God raised Him from the dead and He was taken up alive into heaven.

3. Man

The Koran teaches that man was created weak (Surah 4 verse 32) but is God's vice-regent (Surah 2 verse 30) or representative on earth- a high calling. The Bible teaches that man was created in the image of God but that man through deliberate disobedience, not weakness, has defaced God's image in himself so that the effects of sin have reached every part of his being. Man can be spiritually born again by the Holy Spirit when he accepts God's way for his deliverance from sin and its consequences. God's way is Jesus who died for man's sin and rose from the dead.

4. Salvation

A Muslim generally asks “what guidance and rules has God given that I should follow”? A Christian asks “how can I be saved from my sin and be accepted by a holy God”?

The noun “salvation” appears once in the Koran (Surah 40 verse 44) but the verb “save” occurs a number of times. Salvation to the Muslim means possible deliverance from death, Hell and punishment after judgement. To be sure that one will be saved is presumption on man’s part. In Islam the state of man is not regarded as so serious and thus by his good deeds he may improve himself and be accepted by God. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches that man is saved by grace and not in any way by good deeds. Through Jesus’ sacrifice man is cleansed from Hell and punishment (Colossians 2 verse 13, John 10 verse 10, and John 3 verse 18).

Worksheet

Divide into groups, each group starting with a different subject for discussion. Choose a group leader.

Make notes on your discussions so that you can make a report of it.

If you finish one subject, choose another.

1. Have we become aware of the fact that Islam is the second religion of Europe? Many Muslims do live next door to us. What does that mean for us?
2. What do we think about Islam’s reaction to the affluence and degradation of western society? What is our reaction towards the situation that is developing in Iran?
3. At the level of faith, what are the relationships that Muslims and Christians can have with each other?
4. In the actual situation of conflict between Israel and the Arab world, do we have the same love for both?
5. “We aspire to build new bridges of knowledge and co-operation between the Muslim world and the predominately Christian west”. How should Christians respond?

Ideas to take home

1. Make friends with a Muslim
2. Pray daily for your friend.
3. Get others to pray with you for your friend and for their own Muslim friends.
4. Find out from which country your friend belongs to.
5. Listen to what your friend has to say about his beliefs and learn from him.
6. Buy a copy of the Koran, a copy of the life of Mohammed and a book to help you in witnessing to Muslims.
7. Collect stories, illustrations and proverbs which will help you in illustrating the main truths of the Bible.
8. Send for more prayer information for your prayer group.

Further References

1. The Koran. A copy in your own language, e.g. the meaning of the Glorious Koran by Mohammed Pickthall.
2. The life of Mohammed. A copy in your own language, e.g. Mohammed by Maxime Rodinson.
3. Christian Witness among Muslims. Africa Christian Press (Pelican paperback in UK, translated from French).
4. Share your Faith with a Muslim Charles R. Marsh. Moody Press, Chicago, USA, 1975.
5. God's Plan for Man. Also The Glory of Christ. Selections of Bible verses on these themes especially compiled for giving to Muslims and available in several languages from the Scripture Gift Mission, Radstock House, 3 Eccleston Street, London SW1W 9LZ, UK. Free.
6. Gospels, New Testaments and Bibles for giving to Muslims in their own languages available from the Bible Societies.
7. Books by Muslims about Islam e.g. works by Kausar Niazi or Maulana Maududi. You can obtain catalogues of books and sometimes free literature and other information from Islamic Cultural Centres in different parts of Europe. They are sponsored by the Islamic Council of Europe.
8. Au seuil de Islam edited by CLE, Yaounde.