

BASIC FACTS OF THE RELIGION OF ISLAM

I. Overview

Islam is the religious faith of over one billion people on the planet, with one in six claiming it as their faith heritage. This makes Islam the second most practiced faith on earth. The word **Islam** means "committing oneself (to the will of God)" and shares the same root consonants as the Arabic word for "peace". The adherents of Islam refer to themselves as **Muslims** (or Moslems, those who submit). Often described as the third of the great monotheistic religions (the others being Judaism and Christianity), Islam is noted for its stark and often uncompromising assertion that **Allah** (Arabic for The God) alone is the sole creator and sustainer of the universe. While the religion historically appears later than the other monotheistic faiths, Muslims believe Islam (as it was practiced by **Muhammad** or Mohammed, the final Prophet of God) was a return to the true faith that was once embodied in Judaism and Christianity, but had been later obscured or corrupted by the passage of time. The central repository of divine revelation is the **Qur'an** (also spelled Koran), which Muslims believe came to Muhammad from God via the Arch Angel Gabriel. Within this Holy Book and the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (known as Hadith), Muslims were able to construct a culture and society that was unrivaled in power, wealth, and learning for over a thousand years.

II. Basic Principles

While similar in many ways to the other monotheistic religions, Islam does place an extreme emphasis on both personal intention, and on public observance. The religion denotes five major tenants (or **pillars**) of belief. These are: **the Declaration of Faith, Prayer, Almsgiving, Ritual Fasting, and Pilgrimage.**

a. The Declaration of Faith (in Arabic the Shahada) lies at the core of Islam and clearly defines the religion. It states: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet or Messenger."

b. Following the tradition of the Prophet, many Muslims **pray five times a day.** Devotions begin at dawn (Fajir), continue at noon (Zuhr), at mid-afternoon (Asr), at sunset (Maghrib), and conclude at night (Isha). Additionally, Muslims are entreated to pray their Zuhr prayers communally on Fridays, which is known as Juma (derived from the Arabic verb "to gather"). During this service, the bonds of the community are reinforced with a sermon (Khutba) and congregational prayer. All prayers are directed towards the Ka'ba, a cube shaped sanctuary located in Mecca. The Ka'ba was a pre-Islamic holy site that Muslims believe was first built by the Prophet Adam, and later renovated by the Prophet Abraham.

c. Almsgiving or Zakat is incumbent upon all of those Muslims who have reached a certain level of prosperity. Classically defined as 2.5% of one's individual wealth, this money would go to the poorer elements in Muslim society.

d. Fasting (or in the Arabic Saum) generally occurs during the Muslim lunar month of Ramadan. During this month, Muslims who participate in the fast may not eat or drink anything, nor may they engage in marital relations during the period from dawn to dusk. The fasting month ends by the sighting of the moon, which is cause for a great celebration..

e. The final pillar of Islam is the yearly **pilgrimage** (or Haij) to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, located in what is now Saudi Arabia, during the lunar month of the Hajj. Of all the pillars of the faith, this is the only one that is not universally binding upon Muslims. It is only incumbent upon those who are physically and financially able to undertake the difficult journey. The goal of all pilgrims is the Ka'ba, the cube shaped sanctuary that is central to the religious observation of the pilgrimage.

It is also important to note that some include **Jihad** (often translated as Holy War) among the pillars of the faith. The notion of Holy War is a component of Jihad, but this activity is referred to as the Lesser Jihad. The Greater Jihad is the struggle within oneself for betterment; including the defeat of one's baser attributes, the perfection of one's religious duties, and the attainment of knowledge. The Lesser Jihad occurs as a method to protect the religion, and most scholars conclude that it is solely for defensive purposes.

III. Major Groupings

Within Islam, there exists a series of sects or groups that define themselves as Muslim, but follow slightly different interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith. These differences have been the essence of much internal strife within the Islamic world. The basic division of Muslims is that between the **Sunni** and the **Shi'i** (also spelled as Shiites). Additionally, other groups that look to the Islamic tradition, and see themselves as Muslims have come into being. These include the Ahmadiyyah Movement and the American Muslim Mission (which includes the Nation of Islam).

a. The term **Sunni** denotes those that describe themselves as the followers of the "custom" (or Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad. This segment is by far the largest of the Muslim population, with roughly 85-90% of all followers falling into this group. Among the Sunni, there are four major "schools of thought" that are based on slight differences of interpretation of Islamic law and can also reflect regional differences. These are: The Hanafi School, The Maliki, The Shafi'i, The Hanbali.

b. The term **Shi'i** denotes those that describe themselves as the followers of the "party" of Ali, who was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, the first convert to the religion, and a Caliph (or successor to Community leadership in the Islamic World). This segment is by far the minority of the worldwide Muslim population, with roughly 10-15% of all followers claiming adherence to this group. However, this group does form a huge majority of the country of Iran, and sizable minorities in Iraq and the countries of the Levant. One of the earliest divisions in the Islamic community, the split between the Sunnis and Shi'is centered around the question of succession to community leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. While the Sunnis recognize three community leaders prior to the accession of Ali, the Shi'i believe that Ali is the only legitimate ruler in Islam after the Prophet, and diverged from the larger community due to the belief that religious and political authority alone resided in the family of Ali. Among the Shi'i, there are three major groups that are based on different interpretations on the issue of the succession.