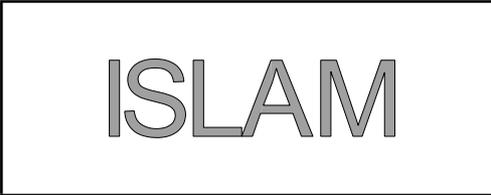


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ISLAM

By Harry Jivenmukta

INTRODUCTION AND MAP

Islam is one of the most popular religions on Earth. It is unclear whether it is the largest, but it does continue to grow much faster than Christianity which has a more stabilised and large following. Before the birth of **Mohammed** there were already some of the basic beliefs present which make up Islam as it is today. Mohammed was born in **Mecca**, (now in Saudi Arabia), and lived from 570 to 632 AD. He believed that he had been chosen by **Allah**, (God), to spread the message of Islam to the people.

At the time of Mohammed there were various other religions present in the Middle East. The oldest one was Judaism, and Christianity of course which was a fairly new religion. Others believed in various minor religions including praying to spirits and objects.

Islam spread throughout the region during and after the life of Mohammed. When he died, Muslims were led by four successors, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, who spread the religion throughout the region. Slowly, Islam, spread to many parts of the world.



QUESTIONS

Can you mark the areas on the map above where Islam is the major religion today? Make a list of Islamic countries.

THE LIFE OF MOHAMMED

Mohammed was born into a tribe which lived at **Mecca**, in 570 AD. He never saw his father, who died before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six. As an orphan, Mohammed was brought up by his grandfather and an uncle.

In his early years he worked on the camel trails which linked trading towns in the area. He became known for his honesty and fairness in a business which was often far from honest. He started working for a woman called Khadija, and in time married her, although she was 15 years older than he. They had six children but the two sons died in infancy.

The first deed for which Mohammed was particularly remembered was when after a storm, a religiously important stone, the **Ka'ba** had been dislodged from its place in the temple in Mecca. Tribes quarrelled amongst themselves about who should have the honourable job of replacing the stone. It was agreed that the first person to attend the temple the next morning should decide. The first person to visit was Mohammed and he listened to all sides in the argument. Then he put a sheet on the floor and placed the stone on it. He suggested that each tribe leader take a corner of the cloth and then they could all have the honour of having placed the stone.

Mohammed began spending increasing amounts of time meditating and it was whilst he was meditating that an angel, **Gabriel**, came to him and announced that he was to be the messenger of God. Mohammed returned to Mecca to start his work and was helped on many occasions by the angel to fulfil his work.

People were quite hostile at first but slowly some began to believe his message and it spread amongst other places to another town, **Medina**. Mohammed moved to Medina after suffering persecution in Mecca. In time Mohammed became the ruler of Medina. Mecca was a holy site and Mohammed knew that if his teachings were to be accepted he had to spread the word there, even by force if necessary. A series of small battles ensued between the Muslims of Medina and the Meccans. The victory came at Badr where Mohammed won against great odds. People believed that Mohammed had won because God was on his side.

Mohammed cleared the Ka'ba of all idols and converted Mecca to Islam. By the time Mohammed died many parts of Arabia had accepted Islam.

QUESTIONS

List the important points in the life of Mohammed.

What was life like at the time of Mohammed?

What other religions were popular at this time?

PLACE OF WORSHIP

The place where Muslims worship is called a **Mosque**. Mosques are a place for communal prayer and in some larger ones there may also be areas for believers to study and classrooms to teach children. Mosques can come in all sorts of sizes, and in Britain they can be found in many types of buildings. In the East, mosques are more distinctive and usually have a tall Minaret which is like a tower from which the **Imam**, (priest), can call believers to prayer.

Cleanliness is very important to Muslims and they will ceremoniously wash their face, hands and feet before praying. All Mosques have washing facilities. Muslims enter the prayer room after taking off their shoes and men will pray together, (women do not usually attend the Mosque but pray at home. Where women do attend the Mosque there is a separate room adjoining the main prayer hall which will be partitioned for privacy). Muslims pray facing towards Mecca which in the case of Britain is East.

Although there is no particular day when Muslims attend the Mosque, Fridays are very popular. The Imam will lead the prayers. In small Mosques the Imam may be a lay preacher, but in larger Mosques the Imam is present at most times and that is his only job. The Imam stands at the front facing the **Mihrab**, (a recess or indicator to the direction of Mecca), and begins the prayer with the congregation following the Imams prayers and repeating them.

Muslims pray five times each day at given times. It is not necessary for people to stop working to pray although some often do. Many people who work will recite the prayers quietly whilst working.

QUESTIONS

What different activities can take place in a Mosque?

Are there any Mosques near where you live?

Why do Muslims pray five times a day?

THE FIVE PILLARS.

There are **Five Pillars** of belief which a Muslim must try to follow.

THERE IS ONE GOD, ALLAH,
AND MOHAMMED IS HIS
PROPHET.



MUSLIMS MUST PRAY
FIVE TIMES EACH DAY.



MUSLIMS SHOULD GIVE
UP TO 2.5% OF THEIR
INCOME TO CHARITY.



MUSLIMS SHOULD
FAST, ESPECIALLY
DURING RAMADAN.



MUSLIMS SHOULD MAKE
A PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA
AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR
LIFE.

QUESTIONS

Why is it important to recognise that there is only one God?

Why should believers give money to charities?

Why do people fast?

BELIEFS

The Five Pillars described on page 4 are explained in more detail here.

THE FIRST PILLAR. Muslims believe that there is only one God, but also that **God is One**. This means that God is the ruler, the administrator, the giver of life and death; in other words God is responsible for everything on Earth and there is no other God. Muslims should not pray to any other God or prophets, or holy people. The implication is also that a person must give himself or herself totally to God. Muslims believe that God passed his message to people through prophets and that Mohammed was the last prophet. Muslims respect Jesus and other prophets before Mohammed and believe that they were also sent by God.

THE SECOND PILLAR. **Prayer** is very important to Muslims. Muslims must pray five times each day;

In The Morning,
At Noon,
In Mid-Afternoon,
At Sunset,
Before Going To Bed.

It is considered important to praise God through prayer and prayer reminds Muslims to live good lives and keep them on the right path. There are two types of prayer; **Du'ah** and **Salat**. The first is prayer which can be conducted in private and sometimes Muslims use beads, (99 threaded), which they count each time they praise God. Salat is a ritual prayer which is conducted five times each day.

Muslims will pray with their heads covered and their shoes removed. It is not necessary to pray the Salat prayer in a Mosque but where possible men especially will attend these prayers in a Mosque.

QUESTIONS

What is meant by '**there is only one God**' and '**God is one**'?

What are the differences between Du'ah and Salat methods of prayer?

BELIEFS

THE THIRD PILLAR. Muslims believe that all they have belongs to God and that it is their duty to help other people. Muslims should give 2.5% of their wealth each year to charity, (this is called **Zakat**). In some countries, like Pakistan, these are collected as taxes by the government. Many people believe, however, that giving to charity should be a matter for their own conscience and that treating them as taxes is wrong.

THE FOURTH PILLAR. Fasting is an important part of a Muslims life because it teaches discipline and proves how fortunate they are in life. Muslims especially fast during **Ramadan**. This means that they cannot eat during the day for one month, (Muslim calendar), and can only eat after sunset and before sunrise. Some people are excused fasting. These include;

The Ill,
The Old,
Children Under Ten,
Pregnant Women.

THE FIFTH PILLAR. All Muslims except the ill or the very poor are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life. Millions of people visit Mecca each year and many people make the journey in the month of Dhu-al-Hijjah, (twelfth month, Muslim calendar). People make this **Hajj**, (pilgrimage), in order to share their belief and enrich their experience. People are expected to wear simple white clothes and not display wealth or rank in society. The Pilgrimage lasts about two weeks and the person who has completed it is called a **Hajji**, (one who has completed the pilgrimage). The pilgrimage involves visits to several places including; The Ka'ba, Abraham's Shrine, Mount Arafat, and Mina. Finally returning to Mecca the pilgrim prays and drinks from the Zam Zam well.

QUESTIONS

How can fasting help someone to understand more about God?

Why do Muslims go on a pilgrimage? Do people from other faiths go on pilgrimages?

THE QUR'AN

The Muslim holy book is called the **Qur'an**, and sometimes spelled as **Koran**. The readings in the Qur'an are believed to be the words of God. The angel Gabriel spoke to Mohammed many times and Mohammed, because he could not read or write, recited them over and over again until he knew them by heart. He would then tell his followers these words in his sermons. During his lifetime, many parts of the Qur'an were written down, but it was not until after Mohammed's death that the first complete Qur'an was produced.

The Qur'an was written in Arabic but today is available in many languages. You must bear in mind, however, that much is lost in translation. There are 114 **Suras**, (chapters), in the Qur'an. Unlike many religions, Islam gives great detail to its followers about how they should live in their day to day lives. Topics covered include;

Duties Of Employers,
Sharing Of Possessions,
Marriage Laws,
How To Treat Criminals.

Like many other religions, Islam does not allow drinking alcohol, or gambling. Muslims are also told not to charge interest when lending money.

The Qur'an says that a man can have as many as four wives, as long as he treats each one properly and can maintain all four. This often goes contrary to the laws in many countries today.

The Muslims also have another book which they read regularly. This is called the **Hadith** and comprises many sayings and also gives advice. It does not have the same authority as the Qur'an but since it comprises words of Mohammed, people still respect it.

QUESTIONS

How does the Qur'an differ from other holy books?

How does the Qur'an affect the everyday lives of Muslims?

Should people live according to civil law or religious law?

FESTIVALS

There are many festivals that Muslims celebrate depending on the branch of Islam they support and depending on which country they live in. Here are some of the common festivals.

Id-Ul-Fitr is the festival which marks the end of Ramadan. After a month of fasting, people dress up and visit relatives and friends and feast for three days. People visit the Mosque to pray and thank Allah for giving them the strength to observe Ramadan. In the West people often send cards which say '**Eid Mubarak**', which means Happy Eid!

Id-Ul-Adha takes place on the tenth day of the pilgrimage to Mecca, but people who are not on the pilgrimage also celebrate it. Abraham sacrificed his son, Ishmeal, as God commanded and this festival shows willingness to sacrifice part of one's property to God. Muslims often sacrifice a goat or sheep on this occasion. The animal is sacrificed according to the rules of **Halal** in which prayers are read and then the animal's throat is cut to enable all the blood to run out of the animal. Muslims can only eat meat which is killed in this way. The meat is shared out in the community.

Hijra celebrates Mohammed's move from Mecca to Medina. Islam was first established in Medina before Mohammed returned to Mecca.

Mohammed's Birthday is celebrated for a whole month according to the Muslim calendar in the month of Rabi'ul-Awwal. Muslims see this day as the most important day ever, when their prophet was born to bring them salvation.

There are many other festivals and celebrations which are not always universally celebrated, and depend on the branch of Islam which a person follows.

NB **Id** is also sometimes spelled as **Eid**.

QUESTIONS

Find out about other festivals which Muslims celebrate.

Why do people celebrate festivals?

How do Muslim festivals compare to the festivals of other religions?

BIRTH

Muslims celebrate birth similarly to other religious groups. When a baby is born there is great joy. Shortly after the birth there is an **Adhan**, (call to prayer read out to the baby). This can be done by the father, a male relative or an Imam.

One week after the baby's birth, it is given a name. Passages from the Qur'an are read and then the baby is named. On this occasion the male babies are circumcised and their hair is shaved off. The hair shaving symbolises getting rid of any misfortune which the baby may have. In some cases the baby's hair is weighed and a gift made of precious metals of that weight to charity.

When a child is four years and four days old a ceremony called **Bismillah** happens where a child begins its religious training. After this ceremony the child will be expected to attend the Mosque for religious training and also learn at home from its parents. Children are taught simple prayers at first, and in time may learn Arabic in order to be able to read the Qur'an. This is not vital today because the Qur'an is available in several languages.

Islam is a way of life and it is important that a child begins to live in a particular way from a very early age since it is hard to break bad habits later. Since Islam dictates lifestyle in detail it takes quite a long time to learn the fundamentals. Starting to learn early is therefore essential.

QUESTIONS

Why do Muslims speak out the call to prayer when a child is born?

Why is it important for a child to learn the Qur'an?

Is Islam a hard religion to follow for children?

DEATH

Muslims bury their dead rather than cremating them. After a death the family gathers and relevant prayers are read from the Qur'an. The funeral of the person takes place as soon as possible after death. The body is washed and wrapped in a white sheet, (or the white clothes worn by the person on his or her pilgrimage to Mecca), and placed in a coffin. The coffin is taken to the Mosque and prayers are said. The body is then buried with the head of the person facing towards Mecca. In some areas of Britain Muslims have their own cemeteries.

Muslims believe in the **Day Of Judgement**. After death they will be judged by Allah who will send those who have done good in their life to heaven and those who have done evil to hell. In this way Islam is similar to Christianity.

QUESTIONS

In what ways is the funeral ceremony of Muslims similar to other faiths?

Do you believe in the Day of Judgement? What does it mean to you?

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a very important institution in Islam. Marriages are arranged by parents in those countries where arranged marriages are predominant. Marriage is a civil event in Islam but it is bound by religion because the man and woman declare their intentions before God.

The ceremony itself can be very elaborate although some people prefer a very simple event. The marriage can take place anywhere and does not have to happen in a Mosque. It is important, however, for an official to be present and often this will be the Imam.

The Imam recites from the Qur'an and talks about the meaning and importance of marriage. He will then talk about the duties expected both of the husband and of the wife. Both people then have to state before God of their intentions to marry. A civil record is kept of the marriage.

The Qur'an states that women have an equal right to property but the civil laws of many Muslim countries do not allow this to happen in practice. The Qur'an also allows for a man to have four wives but this rarely happens. In order to have more than one wife the husband has to provide separate living areas for each wife and respect each of his wives equally.

Divorce is allowed in Islam and a procedure is described in the Qur'an. Some Muslim countries have their own civil laws which differ from that written in the Qur'an. But the overriding attitude is that an attempt should be made to save a relationship and divorce is a last resort.

QUESTIONS

How important is marriage in Islam?

Find out about the condition which allows a Muslim to have four wives.

Should the law of the Qur'an or civil law prevail in marriages?

Topics In World Religions