

The Islamic Soul

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Islam is the religion of approximately one billion people worldwide. The founder was Mohammed, a businessman in Mecca, Arabia, who in 612 A.D. received a revelation from the angel Gabriel, ordering Mohammed to recite the words of Allah. Over the next twenty years recitations poured from Mohammed and these became the Islamic Holy Scripture, the Koran (Qur'an). "Koran" means "recitation" in Arabic. The Koran is the eternal Word of Allah.

The birth of Islam is dated at 622—on the Islamic calendar, A.H. 1. It was in this year that Mohammed traveled to Medina, a caravan town north of Mecca, to gather willing followers. The trip is known as the "*hijira*" ("migration").

"Islam" literally means "submission," but implies "submission to the will of Allah." A "Moslem" ("true believer") is a follower of the Islamic faith. Many Moslems claim that the word "Islam" also finds its root in "*salam*," Arabic for "peace."

Allah is the Supreme Being's name—just as we call the Supreme Being, God. Allah has no Son, nor is there a Holy Spirit. Islam is a strict monotheism.

Moslems claim Abraham as their forefather through Hagar and Ishmael. Moses and Jesus are also great prophets, and Jews and Christians, like Moslems, are considered "People of the Book." Mohammed is the final and greatest prophet.

With the death of Mohammed the leadership of the faith was contested, and soon a split occurred which led to the two major divisions in Islam today—the Sunnis and the Shi'ites.

Islam spread very rapidly. Arab armies conquered the Middle East (much of the Byzantine-Christian Empire and all of the Sassanian-Zoroastrian Empire). Though most Arabs were Muslim, not all conquered nations were Arab, and not all conquered peoples immediately converted to Islam. There were Arabs (Arabia, most of modern Iraq), Persians (Iran), Syrians (roughly modern Syria, Jordan, Israel), Egyptians, Berbers (modern Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco), and Indians (northwestern India). By 750 most of Spain was under the control of Arab governors. By 1600 Islam has spread throughout Southeast Asia.

Islam spread in three ways—by peaceful conversion through the work of missionaries, by Moslem businessmen who set up trading outposts in non-Moslem countries, and by military force.

"*Jihad*" literally means "struggle" (or by implication, "struggle in the cause of Allah), and a Moslem faces three kinds of *jihad*. First, "*jihad* of the heart" means that I must struggle within my self to become a better true believer. Second, "*jihad* of the word" means that I must struggle to spread my faith by preaching to others. Third, "*jihad* of the sword" means I must defend by all means available against anything that may threaten to attack Islam or its spread.

Islam is a religion, a political force, and a way of life. A Moslem is asked to do five things—the “Five Pillars of Islam.” First, one must recite the creed, “There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.” Second, give charity. Third, pray five times a day. Fourth, fast during certain periods of the year. Fifth, make the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to the holy city of Mecca to pray at the Kaaba (the holiest shrine in the Islamic world).

Islamic nations to one degree or another follow legal and moral codes, *sharia*, derived from the Koran, *hadith*, and *sunna* (the sayings and actions of Mohammed). Different Islamic states follow one of four different legal codes: Shafi, Hanabli, Maliki, and Hanafi. There is no formal hierarchy in the religious leadership of Islam, though in some forms of Islam the *iman* or *ayatollah* (literally “faith,” but by extension “religious leader”) has special status. A *fatwa* (a legal judgment) can be issued by any respected religious leader.

Turkey and Iraq have attempted to separate politics from faith while Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Taliban have attempted a strict Islamic government and society. “Ba’ath,” the name of Saddam Hussein’s political party, means “Arab Socialist Resurrection”—nothing Islamic in this. In contrast, in Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini, for all intents and purposes Iran’s political dictator was an *iman* and *ayatollah*.

The contemporary Middle East displays social and political problems that stem from at least two sources. First, there is the decay and final breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 with England and France trying to divide its remains among various tribes, clans, and families. Second, are the effects of Western

culture—liberalism, capitalism, representative democracy, science, and technology, and pop culture—on the world.

Most Moslems are not ethnic or cultural Arabs (Pakistan and Indonesia far and away have the largest populations of Moslems), but Arabic is the language of the Koran and Islamic tradition. Estimates of the number of people of the Islamic faith in the United States vary from two or six million.

Resources

Oxford History of Islam, edited by John Esposito.

Classical Islam, written by G.E. von Grunebaum.

History of the Arabs: From Earliest Times to the Present, written by Phillip Hitti.

A History of the Arab People, written by Albert Hourani.