Introduction to Islam

Islam is considered the world’s second largest faith and the majority of the world’s one billion Muslims are Asian and African. The largest Muslim communities are in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Central Asia and Nigeria. Muslims admit that biblical prophets such as Moses and Jesus existed, and that they received revelations from G-d. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam had its birth in the Middle East where Moses, Jesus and Mohammad were born. Islam spread throughout the world and it embraces people from many races.

The word Islam means “peace” and “submission” to G-d. Muslims believe in practicing peace and compassion; and from an early age children are reared to understand these virtues. Muslims perform daily prayer, are concerned and assist the poor, and they assign an importance to being with community and family. Islam reflects a way of life and every Muslim is considered a members of a world community of believers called the “ummah” – and are collectively held together by their common faith in G-d and his prophets.

As in Judaism and Christianity Islam has denominations such as the Sunni Muslims who compose 85% of Muslims and the Shii (Shiite) who compose 15% of the Muslim world. Despite their differences, all Muslims share a common faith in Allah (G-d and the teachings of Mohammad). Muslims hold that Mohammad held special messages for the people and he revealed G-ds will to the people. This message is in the form of their scripture called the Koran. Muslims believe in the notion of one creator, G-d who is the sustainer and judge of all. Muslims assert that G-ds will was revealed to many prophets and messengers like Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus—and then to Mohammad who is considered the last prophet.

Mohammad was born in Mecca and lived from 570 – 632 C.E. Mecca was a cultural and commercial center in Arabia at the time. He was an orphan raised by his uncle, and he worked as a caravan manager. Mohammad traveled quite a bit and eventually met and married a woman named Khadjia. He is considered to have been happily married and was respected as a successful business man in the community—known for his honesty. Mohammad was sought by others in the community to settle disputes. At times, he was seen meditating and reflecting on meaningful issues. At the age of 40 he had a powerful experience that would alter his life forever. He was alone one day reflecting and meditating when he heard a voice commanding him to “Recite.” Mohammad was confused, not knowing where the voice was originating from. He responded that he had nothing to recite. The angel Gabriel again insisted he recite.

Finally, the words came—recite in the name of your Lord who created man out of a germ cell; recite for your Lord is the Most Gracious One Who revealed to man what he was blind to. This experience would later affect the lives of millions of people in the world. Mohammad advised everyone to repent their sinful ways, seek out and worship the one true G-d. Mohammad received these messages for 22 years before his death at the age of 62. Mohammad was said to have served as the moral conscience of his community, cautioning everyone that G-d would judge people for practicing social injustices. Islam has no Church and their religious scholars are called Ulama. Man either receives eternal reward in heaven or received punishment in hell; depending on whether one adhered to G- ds laws.

All Muslims share the basic beliefs called the Five Pillars of Islam

The First Pillar

In this pillar one must proclaim their faith: “There is no G-d but G-d and Mohammad is the prophet of G-d” Mohammad was G-ds messenger. Similar to Jews and Christians Muslims believe that G-d communicates to man through prophets. The Koran was revealed to Mohammad and it contains the final, absolute message from G-d.

The Second Pillar

This pillar is worship, which is termed Salat. Muslims worship five times daily—at designated times throughout the day and night they stop to face Mecca and worship G-d. Muslim may pray alone or in a group and prayer consists of reciting prayers from the Koran.

The Third Pillar

Almsgiving, which is called Zakat is a social obligation Muslims practice that reinforces the virtue of community and responsibility. Islam holds that since G-d is the creator of the world—all wealth belongs to him. Human beings are considered caretakers and interested in earning wealth which can be offered as charity. Charity is encouraged and anyone financially able should donate to the less fortunate.

The Fourth Pillar

If physically able, once a year Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. It is a time designated for personal reflection and to exercise discipline. It is also a time to thank G-d for his blessings, to repent and atone for one’s sins—to discipline the body and strengthen moral character. For one month each day. From dawn to dusk Muslims abstain from eating or drinking. At the conclusion of Ramadan, the 27th day there is a Feast of Breaking the Fast where worshippers eat and exchange gifts.

The Fifth Pillar

The last pillar is to make a pilgrimage or “Haji” to Mecca. Every Muslim is obligated to make the pilgrimage once in a lifetime. It is considered to be a dream or mission of one’s life. Muslim arrive in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, and during this time they visit the sacred sites. The pilgrimage ends with a great feast and Muslims visit the mosque and tomb of Mohammad in Medina.

During the first half of the 20th century many Blacks converted to Islam. The most prominent of these was Elijah Mohammad who founded the Nation of Islam. He combined the virtue of hard work and a strict moral code— often times asserting Black separatism which was the mission of the Nation of Islam. This denomination established mosques and temples in many undeveloped and poor communities in urban neighborhoods.

After learning of the Nation of Islam Malcolm X converted and in the 1960’s he began making pilgrimage to Mecca where he firsthand experienced Islam. However, he returned from these experiences rejecting the notion that the White race was evil. Consequently, Malcolm X broke with Elijah Mohammad and in 1965 he was assassinated at a religious rally. Two members of the Nation of Islam were subsequently charged and convicted of his murder. A number of African-American Muslims, under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan retain the Nation of Islam and its separatist outlook.