

World History

What Is ISLAM?

How did one of the world's major religions start, and then spread?

Muslims from all over the world circle the Kaaba (the black cube) during the annual *hajj* to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

Words to Know

- **Koran:** the holy book of Islam." It is often written as Qur'an.
- **monotheistic** (MAH-nuh-thee-ISS-tik): believing in only one God.
- **prophet:** a religious leader thought to be inspired or instructed by God to speak in His name, or announce future events.
- **sunna:** Islamic customs based on Muhammad's words and deeds.

Islam is a word that Americans see and hear almost daily. More than 1.3 billion people worldwide are followers of Islam. (Only Christianity has more followers—about 2 billion.) But how much do Americans know about Islam? Here are some key questions and answers.

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Q. What is the difference between *Islam* and *Muslim*?

A. Islam is one of the world's three great **monotheistic** religions. (The others are Judaism and Christianity.) The word *Islam* means "submission to God." A Muslim is a person who practices Islam. *Muslim* means "one who surrenders" to God.

Q. Who is Allah?

A. Allah (AH-luh) is the Arab name for God—the same God worshipped by Jews and Christians. Most words of Islam are Arabic because the religion arose in Arabia (now Saudi Arabia).

Q. Who was Muhammad?

A. He was an Arab merchant born in Mecca about 570 A.D. Muslims believe that God chose Muhammad to pass on His teachings, since many people weren't heeding the words of earlier **prophets**, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Like the earlier prophets, Muhammad emphasized monotheism.

Q. How did Islam begin?

A. It is said that Muhammad received his first message from God in 610 A.D. Muhammad had gone to a mountain-top to meditate and pray. Suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared, commanding,



Left: a Muslim schoolgirl in Sydney, Australia. **Right:** People take part in Friday prayers outside a mosque in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates.

"Recite!" Muhammad began to speak, saying, "Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who . . . taught man what he did not know." It was the first of many times Muhammad recited messages believed to be from God.

Q. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?

A. Muslims are expected to perform these Five Pillars, or acts of worship:

- **shahadah:** recitation of faith, which is, "There is no one worthy of worship but God, and Muhammad is His messenger."
- **salat:** ritual prayer, done five times a day, facing Mecca.
- **zakat:** helping people in need by giving a portion of one's salary to charity.
- **sawm:** fasting during Ramadan, the month in which Muhammad met the angel on the mountaintop.
- **hajj (HAJJ):** pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim who can afford the trip is expected to do so at least once during his or her lifetime. Pilgrims take part in soul-cleansing rites during specific days in the last month of the year.

Q. What is sharia (shuh-REE-uh)?

A. Islamic law based on the **Koran** and **sunna**. Like other legal codes, it defines what is and is not permissible,

and how violations are to be punished. Interpretations of *sharia* vary.

Q. Why do Muslims face Mecca when they pray?

A. Mecca is Islam's holiest city. When Muhammad lived and worked there, it was a major trading center. When he became a religious leader, the city's powerful traders and tribal chiefs resented his growing influence. In 622 A.D., Muhammad migrated from Mecca to escape their murder plot. He later returned with an army and conquered the city for Allah, without any bloodshed.

Mecca is also the site of the ancient Kaaba (*KAH-buh*), a large, cube-shaped stone. Muslims believe that Abraham built it to be the House of God. Pilgrims circle the Kaaba in one of the key rites of the *hajj*.

Q. Who are Sunni and Shia?

A. When Muhammad died in 632 A.D., his followers disagreed about who should be their next caliph (*KAY-luf*), or spiritual leader. Some followed Abu Bakr, Muhammad's longtime friend and adviser. Others believed that Muhammad had wanted that title to go to Ali, his trusted son-in-law.

These passionate, deeply held beliefs split Muslims into two branches. Abu Bakr's supporters became the Sunni (*SCO-nee*), while Ali's became the Shia (*SHEE-ah*). Smaller branches also exist.

Q. Why is Islam in the news?

A. In recent years, Muslim extremists have committed violent acts, including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. But people committing such acts represent a minority of Muslims. Muslim-related conflicts in the news are often a clash of economic, political, or cultural differences rather than of faiths.

Q. Who are today's Muslims?

A. They are of many nationalities, races, and ethnic groups. Fewer than one fifth of Muslims are Arab. Islam is a dominant or major religion in parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. In the U.S., the Muslim population is more than 2.3 million. **JS**

Think About It

Which practices of Islam are similar to those of other religions you know about?