

Script of Narration

The Arabic word Islam means surrender. It is derived from the Arabic root word for peace, and, as it is used in the Koran, the holy book of the religion of Islam, it means surrender to Allah, or God.

Thus the Muslim, or follower of Islam, is one who surrenders to God.

Islam is said to be the world's fastest growing religion. And is, perhaps, the religion most misunderstood by Westerners.

One-fifth of the people on Earth, more than one billion individuals who call themselves Muslims, have come to believe in the vision of God, of Allah, as set down by the prophet Mohammed.

The West often sees Islam as a religion of extremes and extremists. Primarily as a result of the frequent conflicts that have arisen in the Middle East.

In Iran, where Islam is the state religion, followers of other faiths have been persecuted in the past.

In India, there have been frequent clashes between Hindus, with their belief in many deities, and Muslims, whose religion states, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohamed is his prophet."

In Israel, there have been frequent outbursts of violence between Arab Muslims and Jews.

While the extremists may represent the dark side of the faith, they are far from being its only side, and they involve only a very small percentage of Muslims

Islam is generally tolerant of other religions, particularly those that share a belief in one god. In fact, since Islam originated in the Middle East, at a later time than both Judaism and Christianity, there are many similarities between the three religions.

Pristine Islam, the faith when it has not been corrupted by mis-interpretation, or by the desire for power or gain, is a religion based on the principle of peace and equality, and of tolerance and understanding. It is a religion that provides spiritual and practical guidance for some of the richest, and some of the poorest people, on Earth.

"If one is a conscious practicing Muslim, the whole of one's daily life is affected by one's practices, and perhaps more importantly by one's awareness. Because a conscious Muslim will live with a constant awareness of responsibility to God and of the fact that this life is not a permanent place to be. We're going on from this life to another life and that's what we're aspiring for. We're hoping to do something during the course of our life, day by day, hour by hour that will please our Lord and bring us closer to him and will guarantee us some sort of a satisfactory position in the next life."

Many of the laws and customs of Islam seem strange to the westerner. To some, the law of prayer five times a day and the month of fasting at Ramadan may seem extreme.

"We have five daily prayers and we build our life around those five daily prayers, no matter whether we are traveling or playing or doing something else when the time for prayer comes, so we take that time off and connect ourselves with the creator and remind ourselves so that we are never forgetful of the creator."

To others the custom of purdah, the veiling of women, practiced in some communities, may offend the western sense of freedom and equality.

"A lot of misconceptions, a lot of misunderstandings about women's place in Islam and one of the problems is, especially in some of the Middle Eastern countries the status of women has been influenced by culture. So what we in America see as women's status is more of women's status in that culture rather than in the religion. The hijab, which is the covering for women in Islam, is, I believe, both a practical and spiritual consideration. There is a verse in the Koran where God instructs the Prophet to tell his wives that that they should cover so that they could be known but not abused."

While westerners follow secular-based laws, for the Muslim, obedience to the religious-based law of Islam gives a sense of oneness with a more powerful and sacred force and provides an important balance for the increasingly materialistic culture of the modern world.

"In America, where it is so easy to do what's best for you I have to remember that every year I have to give charity out of my savings. Every year I fast and I know what it is like to be thirsty and hungry and not be able to eat. It teaches you compassion and helps you to understand that you need to reach out to people that its not all about you, it's about everyone. And I do think that Islam provides that balance.

Today, Islamic nations have far reaching military, economic and political power. Some Islamic countries and their leaders have challenged the greatest powers on earth, and turmoil and wars in the Middle East have created feelings of insecurity and anger throughout the world.

But who bears responsibility for these problems? The answers are not simple ones, and they have their roots in hundreds of years of history.

Islam is the youngest of the world's great religions, and has drawn followers from all over the world, as illustrated by this mosque in Washington, DC.

Muslims, the followers of Islam, believe in a single all-powerful god, whom they call Allah, literally "the strong," "the mighty," or "the powerful." They believe that Mohammed, the founder of Islam, was not a savior or messiah. Rather, Mohammed was simply a man; a man through whom God spoke and delivered the text of the holiest book in Islam, the Koran.

Mohammedanism, as Islam is sometimes called, is an inaccurate term, and offends the spirit of the religion, since Muslims do not worship Mohammed. They believe that Mohammed was the last in a line of prophets, which includes Jesus and Abraham, the father of Judaism. They do not believe in the

divinity of any of these prophets. The central belief of Islam is that "there is no God but Allah, and Mohamed is his prophet."

The word Islam means "submission to God's will." A Muslim is one who submits to that will, keeping God in mind at all times. The devout Muslim spends much time in contact with God through prayer repeating, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet," before each prayer.

The belief that God is all-powerful and all knowing creates a sense of community for Muslims that reaches beyond political and racial barriers uniting Muslims throughout the world.

Islam is a humane faith, as much concerned with a person's life on Earth as in the hereafter. The Koran is similar to the Bible of the Christians and Jews in that it provides a code by which to live life on Earth in order to assure a place in heaven.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam teaches of a final judgment day when Allah will assign the souls of the dead to either heaven or hell depending on their deeds in their earthly lives.

It dictates that followers shall care for those less fortunate than themselves by giving alms to the poor. It forbids the lending of money for profit. It sets out rules governing family and business, the Koran provides guidance for every phase of a Muslims life.

THE MESSENGER OF GOD

Mohammed was born in 570 C.E., in Mecca, a city in Saudi Arabia, which today is the center of Islam. At that time, Mecca was a prosperous trading and religious center for tribes of Arabic-speaking people.

Mohammed was orphaned at a young age and was raised by an uncle who had many children and was an impoverished trader.

As Mohammed grew up he accompanied his uncle on his travels. At this time he developed a dislike for traditional idol worship of the tribes people. At the same time, he encountered and grew to respect Jews and Christians who worshipped one god.

According to Islamic tradition, one night when Mohammed was forty years old he was meditating on Mount Hira, near Mecca. He had a vision of the archangel Gabriel who commanded: "Mohammed recite. You are the messenger of God."

As a result of these instructions, Mohammed, revealed the beginnings of the Koran. Since he could not write, he communicated the teachings orally to all who would listen.

Mohammed's revelations continued for the next 23 years, starting a religion that would change the course of history.

Mohammed would often stand in the streets reciting line after line of God's message to him. The people of Mecca worshipped idols and did not like the fact that he denounced their long-held traditions and threatened to take his life.

In 622 C.E., he fled to a more tolerant city to the north, now called Medina-the city of the prophet.

During his ten years at Medina, Mohammed laid the foundations of Islam, a religion that today is followed by one out of every five people on earth.

Several years later, in 630 C.E. he led 10,000 of his followers back to Mecca, which was captured, with very little resistance. Mecca became the religious center for Muslims worldwide.

Two years after this, in the last year of his life, 632 C.E., Mohammed led a great pilgrimage to Mecca. In his final speech to the Muslim community he urged kindness and respect toward others, especially women.

"There is a saying of the prophet where someone came to him and said, 'I want to give charity but I don't have any money.' And the Prophet said, 'Then do something for them.' And he said, 'What if I can't?' He said, 'Then smile, even a smile is a form of worship, it's charity. You are giving someone some portion of happiness.' And I find that kind of philosophy on life just amazing. The Prophet is truly a role model, his life is an example for all Muslims everywhere."

Mohammed died shortly after this and was buried in Medina. After his death, his disciples took on the enormous task of writing down Mohammed's words in Arabic, thereby creating the first written form of the Koran, Islam's holiest text.

THE EARLY HISTORY

Following the death of Mohammed, the Arabs began to conquer and convert the countries around them. Within three years, from 636 to 639 C.E. Palestine and Iraq, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt all fell to Muslim conquerors.

Generally, the conquerors were tolerant of existing religions, particularly the monotheistic Judaism and Christianity, and did not force Islam on their subjects.

From this time onward, the faith and its influence spread rapidly and in less than fifty years half of the known civilized world, from Spain to the borders of China, was in the hands of Muslims.

In the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, art, architecture, and science flourished in centers of Islamic culture. Drawing on the diverse art forms of the lands it had conquered, a truly brilliant civilization developed.

The faith continued to be spread all across Asia, and to the islands of Indonesia, by wandering Sufis, the mystics of Islam. And by Arab traders who brought their religion as well as their goods to distant lands.

Sometimes the traders would marry local women and then have their children brought up as Muslims. In this way Islam continued its spread.

THE FAITH

There are two main sects in the religion of Islam. Ninety percent of all Muslims belong to the group known as Sunis. Most of the remaining ten percent are Shiites.

While these two groups were both born during the very earliest period of Islamic history, and share all of the basic beliefs of

Islam, they differ over the choice of Caliph, or successor to Mohammed as leader of the Islamic community.

The Sunnis believe that the honor should go to an elected member of the tribe of Mohammed.

The Shiites believe that the position is God-given only to descendants of Mohammed. Since Mohammed had no sons that lived, Shiites believe the lineage descends through his son-in-law, Ali.

In addition to the two major sects, there are a number of very small sub-groups. Among these are Sufis, or Dervishes, the mystics of Islam, who originated in the first generation of Mohammed's followers.

Another sub-group is the Black Muslims. The term Black Muslim usually refers to the organization called "The World Community of Islam in the West," originally "The Nation of Islam," headed by its prophet Elija Mohammed.

In the U.S., the Black Muslims are a sect, which combine the tenants of Islam with Black nationalism, the desire for a Black homeland.

While relatively small in number they have focused on education, economics, and political aspirations in the black community.

The life of all Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite, is governed by five main principles, called the five pillars of Islam.

The first pillar is expressed in the creed: "There is no God but Allah; Mohammed is the messenger of Allah."

The second pillar of faith is prayer, which is performed at five specified times each day while facing toward Mecca.

The third pillar is almsgiving. This consists of supporting the poor of the community, giving to the support of Mosques, and for religious training. It is believed that these acts of generosity purify one's personal wealth.

The fourth pillar is the fast of Ramadan. During this month, which celebrates Mohammed's first revelation, the faithful do not eat from sunrise to sunset each day.

The fifth pillar of faith is the "hajj," the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, which only Muslims can enter.

It is very important for devout Muslims to attempt to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their lifetime - no matter where they live.

Here they perform certain prescribed rituals, such as wearing the pilgrims white seamless garment, which symbolizes the equality of all Muslims.

While in Mecca, there is no visible difference between Muslims from different nations or from different social or economic groups. Their common religious purpose dissolves any distinctions between them, they relate to each other as equals, all seekers of God.

"You feel you are one of this whole world, the world of people there, they maybe kings, they may be professors, they are doctors, engineers, and ordinary people, uneducated, illiterate. And they are all having one purpose there to stand in front of God as one to one, one to one. There is nobody in between you and your God."

The Kaba, an ancient holy place, which Mohammed captured from Arab pagans and dedicated to Allah, is the holiest shrine of Islam. The Kaba is draped in a sacred carpet, the Kiswa, which is renewed each year.

Pilgrims walk seven times around the Kaba and kiss the black stone mounted in its corner as a sign of their devotion.

For Muslims there is no greater joy than to have completed the "hajj." This pilgrimage to Mecca is considered to be their life's most sacred duty.

The five pillars of Islam give support to the lives of the follow-

ers of Islam and provide regular practices through which religion becomes part of daily life.

THE MOSQUE

The word "mosque" means "place of prostration," a place to humble oneself before God. The mosque has no religious focal point other than the "mihrab," or niche, which indicates the direction of Mecca and thus the direction the faithful should face while praying. It has no furnishings except for prayer mats or rugs.

There is no formal clergy in Islam - no person to stand between the worshipper and God. Hypothetically, any Muslim could lead prayers.

However, it is usually the leader of the mosque, or Imam, who teaches and conducts the services.

Mosques are more than just places of worship. They serve as community centers. Here in Ajmer, India, tea is made for the more than 2,000 people who are fed at the mosque each day.

Often schools are found in mosques. Students use the Koran as a standard text for many subjects since it is considered to be the supreme authority on law, science and the humanities, as well as on religion.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Much can be learned of the traditions of Islam by examining some of its rich artistic heritage.

Islamic art grew from a blend of ideas, which came from many cultures, which were absorbed during centuries of conquest. However, the influence of the religion, which is the most important of all the elements in Islamic art, always predominates above all else.

One of the expressions of Islamic art is seen in the Arabic language itself. Until the time of the Prophet Mohammed, Arabic was primarily a spoken language and was seldom written down. But then the Koran, the word of God, was revealed and was written down in this language.

In order to read the Koran, the faithful had to learn to read Arabic. In this way the language spread with the religion.

Since Arabic is the sacred language of the Koran, the word of God, its script is treated as a visual art of the highest order.

Calligraphy, literally "beautiful writing," is used in the decoration of the interiors and exteriors of buildings, especially mosques.

The visual beauty of the verses from the Koran, written in calligraphy, makes any additional pictorial decoration seem unnecessary. However, the loveliest use of calligraphy is reserved for the Koran itself.

In much of the Islamic world, pictorial painting generally was, and is, reserved for representing non-religious themes.

When painting religious scenes the face of the prophet, in particular, is never painted in, and Allah is never portrayed.

"Islam wanted to eliminate all these kind of things so that people could concentrate on God. No god has no form and we cannot imagine him as a human being. So the emphasis became, more abstract. The emphasis changed from pictorial representation or emphasis on the human being to more abstraction, so that the infinity of God is represented."

Many Muslims believe that the pictorial representation of the human form, and even of animals, is trespassing upon the realm of Allah.

Islamic art tends toward geometric patterns and delicate tracery as seen on this pierced stone screen, and the decoration on this page of the Koran.

This is in marked contrast to Buddhism and Christianity, which both developed strong traditions of representation in religious art.

While there is a wealth of beautiful painting that has come from Islamic masters, Muslim artists also created elegant works in other media, such as pottery, glass work, metalwork, jewelry, and textiles. All were forms of art, which were highly developed, in the Islamic culture.

Perhaps the strongest form of Islamic expression is found in its architecture.

From the great mosques, to the palaces and tombs of the Mogul rulers of India, Islamic architecture ranks among the finest in the world.

The best known of these works, the Taj Mahal, is perhaps the most famous building in the world. Built as a tomb for the wife of Sha Jehan in 1629, it is a masterwork of masons, jewelers and calligraphers.

COLONIALISM

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were large declines in the political and military fortunes of Islamic society.

By 1850, Europeans dominated all three of the great Muslim empires, the Ottoman in Turkey, the Mogul in India, and the Persian in Iran.

The Renaissance, the discovery of the New World, and the Industrial Revolution, combined to give Europe the strength to bring much of the Islamic world under its influence.

This colonial domination caused a great crisis in the Islamic world. During this time, Muslims began to doubt the power of their faith and their place in the world. The British and the French were in control of Egypt and North Africa areas which were very steeped in the Islamic religion, its culture and tradition.

The British established themselves in southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf to protect the trade route to India. The Dutch controlled Indonesia and the British held Singapore.

The situation was intolerable to people who for so long had been the proud rulers of so much of the world.

By the end of the nineteenth century an Islamic renaissance had begun. It did not gain much momentum until the period between World Wars I and II.

After World War II, one previously colonized country after another achieved independence, and today the colonial system has disappeared from the Islamic world.

In spite of this, some of the resentment and anger against the west found in Islamic countries dates from the colonial era and wars continue to break out in the name of protecting the religious beliefs and culture of the Islamic nations.

THE FUTURE OF ISLAM

Islam has had a great influence on the world from the earliest days of the faith.

Because it has met the spiritual needs of so many people from all walks of life, it has spread rapidly over a large part of the globe.

The areas where Islam is strongest are also the areas that are experiencing the fastest population growth.

As this trend continues, Islam is destined to grow and to have an ever-greater influence on the world and its people.