**Student Reading: Islam**

Islam <<ihs LAHM or ihz LAHM>>, is the name given to the religion preached by the Prophet Muhammad in the A.D. 600's. Islam is an Arabic word that means surrender or submission. God is called Allah (pronounced ah LAH in Arabic), which means The God. A person who submits to Allah and follows the teachings of Islam is called a Muslim. This article discusses the beliefs and practices of Islam.

Muhammad was born about A.D. 570 in the Arabian city of Mecca. Muslims believe that in about 610, he began to receive revelations from Allah that were transmitted by the angel Gabriel. These revelations took place in the cities of Mecca and Medina over about a 22-year period. They were assembled in a book called the Qur'ān <<ku RAHN or ku RAN>>, sometimes spelled Koran. The Qur'ān is the holy book of Muslims, who believe it contains God's actual words. Muslims do not consider Islam to be a new religion that began with Muhammad. They believe that its teachings contain the same message given to all prophets and messengers since the creation of Adam.

**The Five Pillars of Islam**

The formal acts of worship called the Five Pillars of Islam provide the framework for all aspects of a Muslim's life. The pillars consist of shahadah, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage.

**Shahadah** is the first pillar and is considered the basis of all other pillars of the faith. Shahadah <<shuh HAHD uh>> is an Arabic word that means an act of bearing witness. It consists of two statements: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah," and "I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." The first statement declares that there is only one God and that God alone is worthy of worship. The second statement says that Muhammad is God's messenger.

**Prayer.** Muslims are required to pray five times a day—just before dawn, at midday, in midafternoon, just after sunset, and at night. Prayer, called salāt <<suh LAHT>>, is the most important demonstration of a Muslim's devotion to God. A crier called a muezzin <<moo EHZ ihn>> makes the call to prayer. If the prayer is performed in a mosque, the muezzin traditionally calls worshipers from a tower called a minaret. Before making their prayers, Muslims must wash their hands, their face, parts of their arms and head, and their feet in a ritual manner. When praying, Muslims stand facing the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

**Almsgiving** is required as a way of assisting the poor. The Arabic term for almsgiving is zakāt, which means purification. Muslims "purify" their wealth by giving a certain percentage of it to the needy and recognizing that all things ultimately belong to God. Zakāt is paid once a year, in the form of a tax. Most zakāt contributions go to mosques, Islamic centers, or welfare organizations.

**Fasting.** Every Muslim must fast in the month of Ramadan <<ram uh DAHN or rahm uh DAHN>>, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The Islamic calendar is lunar, so each month follows the phases of the moon and lasts 29 or 30 days. As a result, Ramadan falls at different seasons of the year. The Qur'ān instructs Muslims to fast from dawn to dusk during Ramadan. Because fasting can be physically demanding, some people are excused. Those excused include the sick, the injured, the elderly, and pregnant or nursing women.

**Pilgrimage.** The Qur'ān commands Muslims to make a hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to make the journey. Muslims believe that Abraham and Ishmael (his son) built the Kaaba <<KAH buh>> as the first house of worship to God. The Kaaba is an empty cube-shaped building in the center of the Great Mosque in Mecca. One of the requirements of the hajj is that men wear two pieces of unsewn white cloth. Women must wear a long white gown and headscarf. While wearing these garments, a pilgrim may not kill any animal or insect, remove any hair from his or her body, or engage in any sexual act. Another requirement is that pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction.

**Divisions of Islam.** There are several historic divisions in Islam. The great majority of Muslims belong to the Sunni <<SOON ee>> division. They follow a traditional and widely held interpretation of Islam.

These Muslims follow a strict approach to religion. They reject modern and popular interpretations of Islamic law and view them as too permissive. They insist instead on precise adherence to the Qur'ān and Hadīth, as they interpret those writings.

The next largest division is the Shī`ah <<SHEE ah>>, whose members are called Shī`ites. Shī`ite Muslims honor Alī ibn Abī Tālib, a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, and Alī 's descendants, whom they believe should be the leaders of the Muslim community. Shī`ites believe that Ali was Muhammad's rightful successor.

**Islam Today**

Islam is the world's second largest religion after Christianity. About 1 1/2 billion people follow Islam. Today, Muslims live in every country in the world. Although Islam began in Arabia, about half of the world's Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia. The countries with the largest Muslim populations are Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan. About one-fifth of all Muslims live in the Middle East.

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