

History of Islam

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Islam was founded by Muhammad (full name: Muhammad Ibne Abdullah). Muhammad was born around 570 a.d. in Mecca which is now located in Saudi Arabia. Mecca was then the cultural and religious center of Arabia.

Around 35 Muhammad assumed the habit of going outside of Mecca to Mt. Hirah for meditation and contemplation. There was a cave there and he often went there for solitude. It was during one of these times of meditation that Muhammad said an angelic being appeared to him, calling him. This disturbed Muhammad (Qur'an 81:19-29) and he told his wife Khadija that he thought he had been visited by an evil Jinn. Jinn are supposed to be living beings like people, but not angels, who were created from fire and are invisible, yet dwell on the earth. A short time later, in the year 610 (believed to be the 26th of Ramadan), while in a cave on Mt. Hirah, Muhammad said that the angel Gabriel appeared to him and commanded him to recite (96:1-19). This recitation became the Qur'an. In these encounters with the angel Gabriel, sometimes he would see the angel, other times he would only hear him, and at others he only heard the sound of a bell through which the words of the angel came.

It became the mission of Muhammad to proclaim the truth of Islam, given to him by Allah, through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad called the people of his area to repent from their idol worship, to do good, and to serve the one and true God, Allah. He taught that man is God's slave and it is his duty to submit to God and obey him. He said that the Day of Judgment was coming and that a man's works will be weighed on that day. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad may, by Allah's grace, be saved and enter Paradise which is full of sensual pleasures. The unsaved go to hell. His first converts were his wife, Khadija, his cousin Ali, and his adopted son Zaid ibn Haritha. Soon afterwards, Abu Bakr also believed. In his first three years of proclaiming Islam, he had 40 converts.

In the year 620 Muhammad lost his beloved uncle Abu Talib (who never became a Muslim) and his wife Khadija. "After a few months Muhammad sought comfort by marrying the widow of one of the believers named Sawdah. He also later married Ayisha, the seven-year old daughter of his friend Abu Bakr, who he took into his home three years later." According to Muslim historians, Muhammad had 12 wives when he died.

In 632, Muhammad delivers his last sermon, later falls ill, and dies in the presence of his favorite wife, Aisha, and her father, Abu-Bakr. He was buried in Medina in his own house. His father in law, Abu-Bakr, becomes Caliph, the religious leader of Islam. Today, there are about 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide.

The Sects of Islam

According to the Traditions, Muhammad predicted that his followers would become divided into seventy-three sects, every one of whom would go to hell, except one sect, the religion professed by himself and his companions. However the number of Islamic sects, now over 150, has far exceeded Muhammad's prediction.

Summaries of the major sects within Islam

Sunni Muslims

Sunni Muslims are followers of the Hanifa, Shafi, Hanibal and Malik Schools. They constitute a 90% majority of the believers in Islam, and are considered to be mainstream traditionalists. Because they are comfortable pursuing their faith within secular societies, they have been able to adapt to a variety of national cultures, while following their three sources of law: the Qur'an, Hadith and consensus of Muslims.

The Sunnis are by far the largest sect in the Muslim world. They take the title of Najiyah, meaning those who are being saved. They acknowledge the first four Khalifs as the rightful successors of Muhammad. They received the "six correct books" and belong to one of the schools of jurisprudence founded by the four Imams.

The Sunni emphasize the power and sovereignty of Allah and his right to do whatever he wants with his creation, as strict predeterminism is taught. Its rulership is through the Caliphate, the office of Muslim ruler who is considered the successor to Muhammad. This successor is not through hereditary lineage. The Sunni believe, based on specific provisions of the Qur'an and the Sunna, that the Muslim people are to be governed by consensus (ijma') through an elected head of state, the khalifa, according to democratic principles.

Shi'ite Muslims

The Shi'ites (also known as the Ja'firi school) split with the Sunni over the issue of the successor to Muhammad. This split occurred after the assassination of the fourth caliph in 661. Shi'ites believe that the successor to Muhammad should have been Ali, his son in law, and that subsequent successors should have been through his lineage through his wife Fatima. The shi'ites strenuously maintain that they alone are right in their understanding of Islam, and like the Sunnis, they call themselves "al-Muminun," or the "true believers." They believe in the divine right of the successors of 'Ali. His rightful successor is now concealed, they say, but will appear at the end of the world as the "Mahdi," the one rightly guided by Allah, thus able to guide others. They reject the "six correct books" of the Sunnis, and have five collections of their own.

Shi'ism is broken into three main sects. The Twelve-Imam (Persia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria); the Zaydis (Yemen); the Ismailis (India, Iran, Syria, and East Africa). Each group has differences of doctrine.

Shi'ite theology includes a doctrine known as the five supports. These are Divine Unity (tawhid), prophecy (nubuwwah), resurrection of the soul and body at the judgment (ma'ad), the Imamate (imamah), and justice ('adl). The first three are found in Sunni Islam, albeit with some differences of emphasis. The Imamate, however, is the essence of Shi'ism, and the last, justice, is an inheritance from the Mu'tazilites, or rationalists, whose system is in many ways perpetuated in shi'ite theology.

Shi'ites are numerous in Iran, where they have deposed the Shah and in his place, installed the Ayatollah Khomeini and enforced Islamic law as the rule of the government. Khomeini has gone beyond that by declaring that his command is as good as that of the prophet Muhammad.

Wahhabis

The founder of the Wahhabi sect was 'Abd al-Wahhab, born in Nefd in A.D. 1691. He maintained that the Muslims had departed from the precepts of Muhammad. He accepted only the Quran and the Traditions, rejecting the two other foundations, Ijma and Qiyas. He condemned the worship of dead holy men at tombs. He said, "They run there to pay the tribute of their fervent prayers. By this means they think that they can satisfy their spiritual and temporal needs. From what do they seek this benefit? From walls made of mud and stone, from corpses deposited in tombs. the true way of salvation is to prostrate one's self before Him who is ever-present and to venerate Him - the one without associate or equal."

The war cry of the Wahhabis was "Kill and strangle all infidels which give companions to Allah." On the day of battle, the Wahhabi founder gave each soldier a letter addressed to the Treasurer of Paradise. It was enclosed in a bag which the warrior suspended from his neck. The soldier believed that by dying in battle he would go straight to Paradise, without being examined by the angels Munkar and Nakir. Many Iranian prisoners today have confided to their Iraqi captors that they were duped into hanging a small Quran around their necks so they would become invisible in battle and not be seen by their enemies.

The Wahhabis condemn astrology, trusting in omens, and believing in lucky or unlucky days, as well as praying at tombs. They disallow the use of a rosary but attach great merit to counting the ninety-nine names of God on their fingers.

Suffis

The meaning of the name Suffi is disputed. Suffis are a Muslim sect that have set aside the literal meaning of the words of Muhammad for a supposed spiritual interpretation. Their system is a Muslim adaptation of the Indian Vedantic philosophy. They believe that only Allah exists. All visible things are really distinct from Him. There is no real difference between good and evil. Allah fixes the will of man. In fact, transmigration is accepted. The principal occupation of the Suffi is meditation on the unity of God and the remembrance of God's name so as to obtain absolution.

Suffis are most numerous in Iran, once called Persia. The three chief Persian poets, Jami, Sa'di, and Hafiz were Suffis who dwelt on love to God. Many of the writings of the Persian Suffis contain indecent passages. The Suffis are divided into innumerable sects which find expression in the numerous order of Faqirs, or Darweshes. Faqirs are divided into two great classes, those who govern their conduct according to the principles of Islam and those who do not, although they all call themselves Muslims.

Bahaiism

The Bahai sect began with a man who was born in 1817 in Tehran, Persia, and whose real name was Mirza Hussayn Ali. In 1847 he declared that he was the glory of Allah, "Bahau Allah" from two Arabic words. His acquaintance with a religious movement led by a man called the Bab(Gate) convinced him that he himself was the prophet that the Bab had predicted would appear.

In 1850, the Persian government executed the Bab for his teachings, and Mirza took over the leadership of the movement. In 1863, ten years after he was banished to Baghdad, Bahau Allah declared he was the expected prophet. From 1868 until his death in 1892, he lived in a prison colony in what is now Akka, Israel. He tried to unite the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam through his writings, which comprise 100 volumes.

Bahais believe in good works, nondiscrimination, and a federated world government. Their headquarters are in Haifa, Israel, and they have over 17,000 local counsels, called local spiritual assemblies, with 1,500,000 adherents. Ten percent of them live in India.