



Short Introductions to the World Religions - Islam

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1. Islam is one of the world's largest and fastest growing faiths. The world population of Muslims is over 950 million. About 200,000 Muslims from diverse Asian and African countries live in Canada, besides those, of course, who were born here of Islamic parents and those who converted to Islam.

2. The Arabic word

"Islam" means "peace and submission", meaning the subordination of the human will to Allah, before whom all people are equal and in whose service all believers are equally rewarded. The word "Muslim" means "one who submits" his/her will to Allah. (It is wrong to call Muslims "Mohammedans").

3. Muhammad (570 - 632 C.E.) is revered by Muslims as the last of Allah's messengers. Other prophets who preceded him, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and even Jesus, are to be honoured as prophets of Allah. But it is to the prophet Muhammad that Allah gave his absolute and final revelation, the Qur'an.

4. Muhammad was 40 years old when he received revelations from Allah through the archangel Gabriel. The first little assembly gathered around him in Makkah (Mecca). He encountered years of resistance and persecution during which his message matured. Later he established

the Islamic state in Madinah. He fought holy wars to subdue a number of tribes. Islam spread out of the Arabian peninsula and was accepted by millions as the true way of life. (Distorted teaching about Islam and its history is still the source of Christian prejudice against Muslims.)

5. Islam acknowledges the close relationship with the "people of the book", Jews and Christians, and believes in the original writings of Judaism and Christianity. However, it is sceptical about the accuracy and reliability of their transmission throughout the generations.

6. The divine revelations to Muhammad were gathered in the Holy Qur'an during his life time. The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters or "Surahs". It is Allah's final revelation to mankind and is accepted as literally inspired. It has, therefore, to be recited in its original Arabic language.

7. Basic to the essence of Islam is

the sense of obligations. The most important ones are called the "Five Pillars", acts by which a Muslim demonstrates his faith:

(1) Belief (Iman): the Muslim declares his acceptance of Allah as the only one to be worthy of worship and of Muhammad as servant and messenger of Allah.

(2) Prayer (Salat): Muslims must pray to Allah, facing Makkah, five times a day.

(3) Charity (Zakat): Mandatory giving of cash savings, gold, silver, livestock and farming products which purifies the Muslim's wealth.

(4) Fasting (Sawm): Muslims must abstain from all foods, drinks and sexual activity each day during the month of Ramadan, from before sunrise to sunset, thereby trying to draw closer to Allah.

(5) Pilgrimage (Hajj): Every Muslim must make pilgrimage to Makkah once in his/her lifetime, if financially and physically capable.

8. "Shari"ah" is the Islamic law, a code of conduct laid out in the Qur"an and in

the "Hadiths" (sayings and practices of Muhammad), which is a comprehensive guide to the individual as well as the society as a whole.

9. The Mosque is the Islamic house of prayer. No images or pictures are allowed there. People wash their faces and limbs before prayers and remove their shoes when entering the mosque. Only men are required to pray in the mosque. For women prayers there are optional. However, men and women do not mix.

10. There is no priesthood and no sacrament in Islam. The "Imam" is the prayer leader and teacher.

11. The main divisions within Islam are Sunni and Shi'a. In theology and practice they are very much the same. Other sects see themselves as Muslims, but are not recognized by Islamic authorities.

12. The first Surah of the Qur'an embodies the sense of absolute submission, trust, praise, and hope that pervades the

faith of the Muslim.
It has been called
the "essence of the
Qur'an":

"In the Name of
Allah, the Merciful,
the Compassionate.
All praise belongs to
Allah, the Lord, the
sustainer of the
universe; most
Merciful, most
Compassionate,
Master of the Day of
Reckoning. Thee do
we worship, and
Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight
way, the way of
those whom You
blessed, those
whose portion is not
wrath, and who do
not go astray".

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