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A Guide to Islamic Sects

By Jim Myers

Beginning as the faith of a small community of believers in Arabia in the seventh century, Islam rapidly became one of the major world religions. The core of this faith is the belief that Muhammad (c. 570-632), a respected businessman in Mecca, a commercial and religious center in western Arabia, received revelations from God that have been preserved in the Koran. The heart of this revealed message is the affirmation that "there is no god but Allah (The God), and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The term *islam* comes from the Arabic word-root *s-l-m*, which has a general reference to peace and submission. Specifically, Islam means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is one who makes that submission.

This submission or act of Islam means living a life of faith and practice as defined in the Koran and participating in the life of the community of believers. The core of this Islamic life is usually said to be the Five Pillars of Islam: publicly bearing witness to the basic affirmation of faith; saying prescribed prayers five times a day; fasting during the month of Ramadan; giving a tithe or alms for support of the poor; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during the believer's lifetime, if this is possible. The Koran is not seen as presenting a new revelation but rather as providing a complete, accurate, and therefore final record of the message that had already been given to Abraham, Jesus, and other earlier prophets. Notice that Jesus is not considered either God or divine in Muslim theology.

The second phase of Muhammad's career and the early life of the Muslim community began when Muhammad accepted an invitation from the people in Yathrib, an oasis north of Mecca, to serve as their arbiter and judge. In 622 Muhammad and his followers moved to Yathrib, and this emigration, or *hijrah*, is of such significance that Muslims use this date as the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The oasis became known as the City of the Prophet, or simply al-Medina (the city).

In Muslim tradition the sociopolitical community that was created in Medina provides the model for what a truly Islamic state and society should be. In contrast to tribal groups, the new community, or *ummah*, was open to anyone who made the basic affirmation of faith, and loyalty to the ummah was to supersede any other loyalty, whether to clan, family, or commercial partnership. The political structure of the new community was informal. Although Muhammad had great authority as the messenger of God, he could not assume a position as a sovereign monarch because he was only human and only a messenger. The emphasis on the sole sovereignty of God provides an important foundation for Islamic political thinking throughout the centuries, challenging both theories of monarchy and absolutism, as well as later theories of popular sovereignty.

Below are some of the major sects within Islam, which has 1.3 billion followers:

Sunni:

Accounts for 85 percent of the Islamic world and claim to be the direct continuation of the faith as defined by Muhammad. They acknowledge the religious authority of a ruling caliph, the major point of contention with the breakaway Shiite movement. They derive their name through reliance on the "Sunnah" or the observed sayings, lifestyle and practices of Muhammad as recorded in writings called the Hadith. They accept the "Sunnah" as a source of spiritual wisdom, while the Shiite insists on the primacy of the Koran.

Shiite:

The smaller of the two major branches of Islam, and account for at least 10 percent of all Muslims. They originally were followers of the fourth caliph, Ali, who was Muhammad's son-in-law through the prophet's daughter Fatima. Ali claimed that Muhammad on his deathbed selected Ali as leader of the faith, but Ali was murdered during the fifth year of his reign. They formally broke away from Muslim leaders recognized by the Sunni around 680. A principal belief of the Shiite is that no caliph since Ali has been legitimate. The movement became popular among disaffected non-Arab Muslims who feared they were held in lower esteem within the faith.

Kharijis:

Accounting for less than 1 percent of all Muslims, the Kharijis were the first major schism within Islam. They broke away in 658 when they rejected the use of arbitrators empowered to decide major issues within the faith.

Druze:

A secretive Islamic group concentrated in Lebanon around Mt. Hermon and in the mountains near Beirut and Sidon. Most Muslims consider the sect blasphemous since it declared that God was manifested in human form as the Egyptian caliph al Hakim Bi-amr Allah 1,000 years ago. They number at least 250,000. The Druze do not accept new members, virtually never discuss their faith and often pose as members of the dominant religion where they live.

Alawi:

A small branch of Islam that broke away from the Shiite in the Ninth Century under the leadership of Ibn Nucair Namin Abdi. Almost exclusively found on the Syrian coast plains, the Alawi have 1.5 million members including Syrian President.

Ismali:

A Shiite sect that believes the succession of spiritual leadership should have continued through the sons of Muhammad Ibn Isma'il. The Ismali believe that Islam has never been without a living Imam, even though clearly recognized spiritual authority became increasingly rare as Islam matured.

Ahmadiyyah:

Founded in Qadian, India, by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who died in 1908. Ahmadis believe their founder was a renovator of Islam, a position most of the world's Muslims consider to be heretical. The group has many enthusiastic missionaries.

Sufi:

These are the mystics within the Muslim faith, a religious order that follows mystical interpretations of Islamic doctrines and practices.

Wahhabi Movement:

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab began a campaign of spiritual renewal in the smaller city states of Arabia in the mid- 1700s. His extremely traditional group opposed all innovations within Islam, often using violence to enforce its views. The group threatened to become the first nation state in Arabia, prompting a crackdown by the Egyptian army in 1818. Today, Wahhabism is quite strong in Saudi Arabia. It demands punishment for those who enjoy any form of music except the drum and severe punishment up to death for drinking or sexual transgressions. It condemns as unbelievers those who do not pray, a view that never previously existed in mainstream Islam. Wahhabism has been an inspiration to Osama bin Laden.

SOURCES:

<http://www.rickross.com/reference/islamic/islamic27.html>
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