

Peter Haralamos ©

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The Rise of Islam

Islam is the world's youngest major religion yet over one billion people practice it. Islam began in the Arabian Peninsula, and quickly spread to areas as distant as India and Spain. Islam centers around an influential man named Muhammad, who was alive during the years 560-632. Islam became a faith that brought together the people of Arabia, Southwest Asia, and Persia.

Before Muhammad came along, the Arabian Peninsula was full of disorganized and polytheistic nomads. Muhammad was an orphan since he was six years old, and received no formal education. Muhammad spent long lonely periods of time in the desert, which changed his life. According to Islam Muhammad was visited by the angel Gabriel, who commanded him to declare himself the one and only true prophet of God. Muhammad instantly rose to the level of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. He taught that his god was the same as the Jews and Christians. He taught Islam – total submission to god's will. Many of Muhammad's teachings were based on Christianity. He taught about heaven and hell, immortality, and monotheism. Muhammad's strict ethical and social commandments were the based on Judaism.

At its simplest form, Islam means that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the only messenger of god. The practice of Islam entails the five pillars of faith, declaration of the central belief – the confession of faith, reciting prayers five times a day, giving money to the Islamic community, fasting from dawn until sunset during Ramadan (the time when Muhammad received his divine calling), and making the Hajj or pilgrimage to Muhammad's birthplace, Mecca. The cubical structure everyone encircles is called the Kaaba. Its origins

are unclear some say it was built by Abraham and Ishmael to signify the link between Islam and Judaism while others believe it is the very spot where Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac.

After struggling to convert his hometown citizens, Muhammad went on a journey called the hijra. This journey led him to a neighboring town, Medina, where he converted many people. He took these new followers back to his hometown where he conquered the city, destroyed the idols, and became a spiritual leader. Muhammad's religious conversion only lasted ten years from 622, the beginning of the Muslim calendar, to his death in 632, but his teachings are still converting people faster than any other religion today.

The Koran, the book of the Muslims was not written by Muhammad. His followers who had memorized his teachings and found notes left behind by Muhammad compiled it. It is considered by Muslims to be the infallible word of god. It condemns drinking wine, eating pork and gambling. It allows polygamy and requires women to cover their bodies. It considers men to be above women and allows divorce to be pronounced twice. It requires its followers to convert or kill the unbelievers, which are the Jews and Christians. It forbids Muslims from being friends with unbelievers. It promotes war, aggression and conversion through violence. It regards Jesus as just a special prophet and denies He is deity and the trinity. The Koran states that the Jews have corrupted the scriptures and that the Christians worship Jesus as the Son of God and not Allah. It requires Jihad, a holy war against all infidels and unbelievers.

The Sunni-Shiite split occurred because Muhammad left no successor. The people wanted religious leaders. The Sunni are the orthodox of Islam. Ninety percent of the modern Muslims are Sunni, who believe leaders should be chosen by the amount of their

faith. The Shiites say that they are direct descendants of Muhammad and believe that only they should rule.

Islam is an attractive religion for many different types of people with very different purposes in life. It is the fastest growing religion and soon will probably be the faith that has more believers than all the others combined. Islam has come a long way since its birth in Arabia in 622, and shows no sign of letting up. It will continue to drastically affect and shape the whole world as time passes.