Islam

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Islam

Islam, meaning peace or submission, is a major world religion founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century C.E. Muslims (literally “ones who submit”) number more than 1 billion, approximately one-fifth of the world's population. Because of the perceived negative portrayal of Islam in the media, particularly in the United States and other Western countries, Muslim organizations have begun to stress that traditional and moderate Islam—which is observed by a large majority of the global Muslim population—is family-centered and nonviolent.

Muslims have contributed to world civilization in various fields and disciplines, including astronomy, calligraphy, chemistry, mathematics, medicine, and physics. Islam remains relevant for scholars in multiple fields for several reasons: (1) Islam contains a religious legal code and theology that not only considers the relationship between the individual and Allah (God) but also addresses the importance of the relationship between humankind and its environment (e.g., economical, ecological, political, and social); (2) Muslims, in addition to contributing to world civilization in the arts and sciences, have a unique and rich history involving miraculous origins, faith in a divine being and the message of a sacred text, and a conquest and geographic expansion (perhaps larger than that of the ancient Greeks and Romans); and (3) Islam continues to generate headlines around the world because of the actions of a small number of militant, radical Muslim groups who perpetrate acts of terror.

Foundations and Spread of Islam
The prophetic and revelatory career of Muhammad (b. 570 C.E.) and the development of the Quran as divinely inspired scripture led to the founding of Islam as a major world religion in a relatively short period. Muhammad was born to the Banu Hashim tribe in Mecca, not only a commercial
center for caravan traders who transported goods along Arabia’s west coast from southern Arabia and East Africa to Syria, but also the home of the Kaaba sanctuary that housed approximately 360 idols. Beginning at age 40 (610 C.E.) until his death in 632 C.E., Muhammad reported that he received a series of revelations from the archangel Gabriel. Following Muhammad’s first revelatory experience on Mt. Hira, his wife (Khadija) and Christian cousin (Waraqa ibn Naufal), both accepted the revelation, and the latter compared the experience to that of Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Word concerning the revelations quickly spread and Muhammad gained many followers. As Muhammad’s popularity grew, so did hostility toward him and his followers. Muhammad eventually fled Mecca with his fledgling faith community in 622 C.E. and migrated approximately 200 miles to the town of Yathrib, later known as Medina. After the hijra (emigration), Muhammad established the umma (Muslim community) that was based on the laws and guidance of the revelations (i.e., the Quran). Muslims thereafter marked 622 C.E. as the first year of the Islamic calendar. In 630 C.E., Muhammad and a large number of followers returned to Mecca, cleared the idols out of the Kaaba sanctuary, and dedicated the sacred space to the worship of one deity, Allah.

Following Muhammad’s death in 632 C.E., the umma split into two major factions. One segment of Muhammad’s followers maintained that the Prophet had prepared Ali bin Abi Taleb, his son-in-law, to lead the umma after his death. This group came to be known as Shi’at Ali, or the Party of Ali (commonly referred to as Shi’ites). The other segment of Muhammad’s followers rejected the claim that Muhammad had handpicked Ali to be his successor, and understood that the umma was sufficiently educated to choose their new leader after Muhammad’s death. This group selected Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr, as the new leader and referred to themselves as Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jama’a, or People of the Sunnah and the Community and are commonly referred to as Sunnis (denoting a clear path or practice). Today, approximately 80 percent of the world Muslim population follow Sunni Islam.

Muhammad’s message spread rapidly throughout the region in the 7th century, and by the 10th century, Islam had spread from Morocco to the southern tip of Africa, and from Spain and Portugal in the West to China and India in the East.

Islam in America
It is unclear when Muslims first came to the United States. Some historians claim that Muslims traveled to North America with Spanish explorers after their expulsion from Spain in the late 15th century. That African Muslims were first brought to the United States as slaves is more likely the case. Researchers have estimated that as many as 15 percent of African slaves brought to the United States were Muslim. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, most of the Muslim immigrants to the United States originated from the Middle East and North Africa. By 1952, more than 1,000 mosques had been built in North America. The current Muslim population in the United States is intriguing, as demographers estimate that nearly half of the Muslim population in the United States are African Americans who have converted to Islam. The highest concentration of African American Muslims is in Illinois. Also intriguing is the fact that the majority of Arab Americans in the United States are not Muslim, but Christian. Today, the estimated American Muslim population ranges between 4 and 6 million.

The Muslim American Family
Although research on American family life is plentiful, research on the Muslim American family is scant at best. Part of the reason for this reality is that only in the last 15 years or so has the field of religion and family received significant attention. A majority of that research addressed issues relevant to religious families in general, or specifically of the dominant religion (Christianity). The field of religion and family vis-à-vis the American Muslim community will hopefully provide useful information in the near future that policymakers, social workers, therapists, and others can rely on to assist one of America’s fastest-growing populations.

Like any religious philosophy, Islam has produced a variety of lifestyles on the spectrum of religious observance. Islamic law, however, tends to be more “traditional” concerning family life. Laws regarding, for example, gender roles, marriage and divorce, and parenting are codified in the Quran and hadith (a body of traditions concerning the Prophet Muhammad’s life and revelations).
The Role of Women
Perhaps the most controversial issue in Islam today, other than terrorism, is the role of women in society. Many Western commentators and feminists discuss issues pertaining to women in Islam at length on college campuses and in the media. Traditional Islam teaches that men and women must fulfill particular societal and familial roles to perpetuate a moral and productive society. Confusion of gender roles, it is posited, will corrupt society and lead to the breakdown of the family. The specific word in Arabic describing this societal degeneration is *fitna*, which refers to disorder, mischief-making, rebellion, and temptation. The Prophet Muhammad purportedly taught that the most threatening *fitna* to men (i.e., men’s spiritual progression) is women. This teaching has perhaps contributed to distortions of certain laws and exaggerations of various customs among some uneducated Muslims who have promoted (or tolerated) female slavery, female genital mutilation, and “honor killings.”

Some Muslim feminists have argued in response to traditionalists, as well as to the more uneducated segments of Islam who perpetuate “extreme” practices previously mentioned, that rigid dogmas of female submission to men, the full-body covering and *niqab* (veil), “honor killings,” and genital mutilation must not be attributed to the fundamental teachings of Islam and that these practices do not originate with Muhammad or the Quran. Rather, these traditions developed and were perpetuated as a result of a variety of complex economic, political, religious, and social conditions and norms. Muslim feminists and others have also argued that the Prophet Muhammad was a radical dissenter of his contemporary Arabian tribal customs regarding women, as he taught, among other things, that women must be afforded economic protection and property rights, that marriage contracts are necessary to protect women’s child-custody and divorce rights, and that polygyny must be limited and practiced under stringent guidelines. In other words, the laws concerning family life and gender roles in the Quran and hadith must be reconsidered, and the strict and arguably unethical preferences of some Muslim cultures and tribes must not be confused with the fundamental principles of Islam.

Regardless of which argument is more credible, these issues will be debated with a great amount of zeal for years to come. Regarding the American Muslim community, it appears that a more moderate and sensitive approach to family life and women’s rights is in place, particularly among the majority of American Muslims (including African American Muslims and converts to Islam) who were born or raised in the United States.

Marriage, Divorce, and Fertility Rate
Marriage in Islam is of upmost importance. According to Islamic law (Sharia law), Muslims are required to marry. In fact, one hadith posits that the prayer of a married man is equal in the eyes of God to 70 prayers of a single man. In most (if not all) Muslim communities, a marriage is bound by a contract, which posits various stipulations depending on the community. These stipulations usually include the legalization of sexual relations between the husband and wife; the entitlement of the wife to adequate housing, food, clothing, and dowry; and the obligation of the man to financially provide for the family, thus encouraging the wife to remain in the home to raise children.

Islamic law also permits a man to marry up to four women, but only if he is capable of treating them equally. Women, on the other hand, are permitted to marry only one man at a time. A man is also permitted, according to most Islamic legal scholars, to marry a non-Muslim woman of another monotheistic faith (usually Jewish or Christian). However, Islamic law prohibits a woman from marrying a non-Muslim.

According to the Quran and hadith, divorce, although permissible, is detested by God. A man may divorce his wife with no justification before a court, but he must honor the marriage contract and grant his wife the necessary rights. Islamic law does not allow a woman to divorce her husband; however, she may appeal to a judge for a divorce that may or may not be granted to her. That Muslim divorce rates are low based on Islamic law is expected. The Muslim divorce rate in the United States hovers around 30 percent, which is significantly lower than the general population (50 percent) but generally higher than divorce rates in predominantly Muslim countries.

In addition to having relatively low divorce rates, the Muslim community in most countries has been known for having large families. The past decade, however, has experienced a dramatic shift in the fertility rate among Muslims worldwide. The total
fertility rate of the 49 Muslim-majority countries dropped from 4.3 in the early 1990s to 2.9 by 2010. In Iran, for instance, the fertility rate dropped by more than 70 percent between 1975 and 2005. Researchers estimate that by 2030, the total Muslim fertility rate worldwide will drop to 2.3 children per woman. The fertility rate among Muslims in the United States has also declined rapidly. Researchers have suggested that this shift reflects the attitude and agency of couples, rather than, for example, access to birth control.

Muslim American family life proves to be an exciting and beneficial field of research for clinicians and scholars in several disciplines, but particularly family scholars and other social scientists who seek to understand the complex phenomena relevant to this religious community.

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See Also: Catholicism; Christianity; Judaism and Orthodox Judaism; Middle East Immigrant Families; Sharia Law.

Further Readings