

Introduction

Islam, major world religion. The Arabic word islam literally means “surrender” or “submission”. As the name of the religion it is understood to mean “surrender or submission to God”. One who has thus surrendered is a Muslim. In theory, all that is necessary for one to become a Muslim is to recite sincerely the short statement of faith known as the shahadah: I witness that there is no god but God [Allah] and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

Although in an historical sense Muslims regard their religion as dating from the time of Muhammad in the early 7th century ad, in a religious sense they see it as identical with the true monotheism which prophets before Muhammad, such as Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), and Jesus (Isa), had taught. In the Koran, Abraham is referred to as a Muslim. The followers of these and other prophets are held to have corrupted their teachings, but God in His mercy sent Muhammad to call mankind yet again to the truth.

Traditionally, Islam has been regarded by its followers as extending over all areas of life, not merely those (such as faith and worship) which are commonly viewed as the sphere of religion today. Thus many Muslims prefer to call Islam a way of life rather than a religion. It is for this reason too that the word Islam, especially when referring to the past, is often used to refer to a society, culture or civilization, as well as to a religion. While a history of Christianity will usually cover only matters relating to religion in a narrow sense, a history of Islam may discuss, for example, political developments, literary and artistic life, taxation and landholding, tribal and ethnic migrations, etc. In this wider sense Islam is the equivalent not only of Christianity but also of what is often called Christendom.

Adherents of a religion may differ among themselves regarding what constitutes the essence of the religion, what is more important or less important, what is right belief and what heresy, etc. Modern students of religions, when attempting to describe a particular religion, may attempt to get around this problem by accepting the definitions given by some authoritative body or individual such as a Church council or the pope in Roman Catholicism. Such an expedient is not really possible for someone wishing to discuss Islam, however, since, at least before the modern period, there has been no body claiming to be the central authority for all Muslims. Instead, religious authority and power has been diffused at a local level among countless scholars and religious officials who lack a clearly defined hierarchy or organization. An individual obtains religious authority as a result of a consensus regarding his learning and piety. In theory, at least, most positions of such authority are open to all.

In modern times there have been attempts to promote the idea that particular bodies or individuals have a special authority in Islam. In Sunni Islam, for example, the council of the Azhar university in Cairo is sometimes regarded as having a special authority while among the Shiites of Iran a hierarchy of religious scholars has developed and been recognized by the state. Even so, no body or individual has managed to establish itself as authoritative for all Muslims, and claims to be so are always contested.

It is not possible, therefore, to make many general statements about what Islam is or is not, without their being open to contest by groups or individuals with a different view of the religion. Certain ideas and especially practices have become so widely accepted among Muslims in general that they might be viewed as distinguishing features of Islam but even then there will be groups or individuals who reject them but still regard themselves as Muslims. In general, one

should avoid terms like “orthodoxy” and “heresy” when discussing Islam.

The Emergence and Early Expansion of Islam

Traditional accounts of the emergence of Islam stress the role of Muhammad, who lived in western Arabia (Al ʿijaz) at the beginning of the 7th century ad. Muhammad experienced a series of verbal revelations from God. Among other things, these revelations stressed the oneness of God, called mankind to worship Him, and promised that God would reward or punish men according to their behaviour in this world. Muhammad was to proclaim God's message to the people among whom he lived, most of whom practised polytheism.

After an initial period in which he was rejected in his home town of Mecca, Muhammad was able to found a community and a state with himself as its head in the town which soon came to be called Medina. By the time of his death in 632, several of the Arab tribes and a number of towns, including Mecca, had submitted to Muhammad and accepted Islam. Following his death the caliphate was established to provide for succession to Muhammad in his role as the head of the community, although prophecy, in the form of immediate verbal revelations from God, ceased with Muhammad.

Shortly after his death the process of collecting together all the revelations which he had received in his lifetime began. The tradition is not unanimous, but it is widely accepted that this work was completed under Uthman (caliph 644-656) and that it was in his time that the revelations were put together to form the text of the Koran as we know it.

The most important beliefs, institutions, and ritual practices of Islam are traditionally seen as originating in the time of Muhammad, and frequently they are understood to be the result of divine revelation. Sometimes a Koranic passage is seen as the source or justification of a practice or belief. Not all of them, however, can be associated with a relevant Koranic text and often they are seen to have originated in the practice of the prophet Muhammad himself. Since he was a prophet, much of what he said and did is understood not as merely the result of personal and arbitrary decisions but as a result of divine guidance. Thus the practice of Muhammad, which came to be known as the Sunna, serves as an example and a source of guidance for Muslims alongside the Koran, especially for Sunnis.

Under the caliphs who governed the community and state following Muhammad, a period of territorial expansion began, first in Arabia and then beyond its borders. By about 650 Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the western parts of Persia had been conquered by Arab forces which acknowledged the leadership of the caliphs in Medina. In about 660 the caliphate passed into the control of the Umayyad dynasty which was based in Syria. Under the Umayyads a second wave of expansion took place. By the time that dynasty was overthrown in 750 it controlled territories extending from Spain and Morocco in the west to Afghanistan and central Asia in the east.

Modern scholarship has tended to show the emergence and expansion of Islam as a more gradual and complex process than is apparent from the traditional accounts. By emphasizing the relative lateness of the Muslim accounts of the early history of Islam (there is little which can be dated in the form in which we have it to before about 800), it has raised the possibility that

the traditional accounts should be understood as reflecting rather late views. It has suggested that the period when Islam was developing outside Arabia following the Arab conquest of the Middle East is of crucial importance. It has emphasized, as is clear from the traditional sources themselves, that the Arab conquests may have expanded the area under the control of the caliphs but that the spread of Islam at a personal level was much slower. The conquerors did not force the people they conquered to become Muslims and probably did not even intend that they should do so. The acceptance of Islam as a religion by the non-Arab peoples under the rule of the caliphs was a slow, uneven, and never-completed process, motivated by many things, some of which are not properly understood. It is also now better understood that these non-Arab peoples, gradually accepting Islam (and identifying themselves as Arabs at the same time), had much to do with the emergence of Islam as we know it.

Main Beliefs

Muslims believe that there is one God, Allah; that Muhammad was a prophet sent by God to mankind; and that the Koran is the collection of the revelations which God made to Muhammad. The Koran thus contains the words of God in a literal sense and is often referred to as the Speech of God (kalam Allah).

The vast majority of Muslims accept that Muhammad was the last in a series of prophets sent by God and that there can be no other after him. The Koranic phrase “the seal of the prophets” is understood by them in this sense. Some groups have regarded themselves as Muslims while recognizing prophets, or something like prophets, after Muhammad, but their status as Muslims has been contested by the majority of the community.

The concept of “prophet” in Islam shares much with the idea as it had developed in Judaism and Christianity by the early centuries of the Christian era. The Arabic word nabi, which is one of the two most frequent words for “prophet” in Islam, is related to the Hebrew nebi, the most usual word for “prophet” in the Old Testament. The basic idea is of someone who is given a message by God to deliver either to mankind as a whole or to a specific group. Muslim tradition recognizes numerous prophets sent by God before Muhammad, and most of them are known in Jewish and Christian tradition from the Bible and other writings.

In Muslim belief, it came to be commonly held that some of the earlier prophets had been entrusted with a revelation just as Muhammad had been sent with the Koran, and in essence these revelations were identical with one another. The revelation of Moses was the Torah and that of Jesus the Gospel (injil in Arabic, ultimately from Greek evaggelion). According to this concept, there is only one Gospel and it is the book of revelation entrusted to Jesus. It is not the same as any one of the four gospels preserved in the New Testament, which are different accounts of the life of Jesus. In the Koran and other writings Jesus is referred to as the Messiah (Masih) and as the Word of God. He was miraculously born of the Virgin Mary and his life was associated with many miracles. Nevertheless he was not the “Son of God”, a concept which Islam rejects as a physical and logical impossibility. He did not die on the Cross, even though it seemed so to those who were present. Instead someone else died in his place and God raised Jesus up to Himself.

Some of the Muslim ideas about prophets and prophethood, and about Jesus, are similar to those associated with Judaeo-Christian groups whose existence is attested in the early centuries of the Christian era. Some scholars have suggested that descendants of those groups had an influence on the emergence of Islam.

In addition to the physical world, God has also created angels and spirits. The angels have various roles, among them the conveyance of God's revelation to the prophets. The spirits are usually known as the jinni. They inhabit this world and may affect human beings in various ways. Some are good and capable of obtaining salvation, others are evil and sometimes known as satans. The chief satan, the Devil, known as Satan or Iblis, is sometimes thought of as a disobedient angel, sometimes as a jinni. He has been allowed by God to roam the world and do evil deeds.

The world will end, and Islam has a rich body of eschatological and apocalyptic tradition. Before the world ends the Mahdi, a sort of Messiah figure, will appear to inaugurate a short period in which the world will be filled with justice and righteousness. The idea of the Mahdi is more prominent in Shiite Islam (see below) but is not limited to the Shiite tradition. After death, each human being will be judged and will either achieve salvation or be consigned to damnation according to his or her beliefs and deeds while alive.

Islamic Law

Although the essence of Islam is acceptance of the one God and of the prophethood of Muhammad, in practice adherence to Islam has traditionally been manifested by living a life according to Islamic law within an Islamic community. The law is regarded as of divine origin: although it is administered and interpreted by human beings (and, as in most religions, that means men rather than women), it is understood as the law of God. The law is known as the Shari'ah. To obey the law is to obey God. One should not underestimate the importance of questions of belief and dogma in Islam, but generally speaking for Muslims, Islam has been more a matter of right behaviour than of concern with the niceties of belief.

Traditionally, Muslims have held that the law was revealed by God in the Koran and in the Sunna. In addition to those two theoretical sources, different groups within Sunni and Shiite Islam accept that law may be derived from certain subsidiary sources such as the consensus of the Muslims (usually called *ijmaa*), the informed reasoning of individual scholars (often called *ijtihad*), and various more specific and limited forms of these.

Many modern scholars have accepted the views of Joseph Schacht, who argued that the idea of the Sunna and the theory of the sources of Islamic law did not really develop until the 9th century and that Islamic law is not really derived from the Koran and the Sunna. Rather, according to this view, it has evolved gradually from a variety of sources (such as earlier legal systems and ad hoc decisions made by early Arab rulers), and the classical Muslim theory of the sources of Islamic law was developed by the early Muslim scholars (culminating in the work of al-Shafii) in order to put the positive law which had evolved in the first centuries of Islam on a proper Islamic basis. These scholars, it is argued, looked at the law as it existed in their own day; reformed, rejected or accepted it; and then sought to portray it as deriving from the Koran,

the Sunna or one of the other classical sources. Since there was a limit to what could be attributed to the Koran (which is relatively short and only partly concerned with establishing legal rules on a few questions), it was the Sunna (as reported in the hadiths) which was in practice most important. Since there was virtually no limit to the way in which hadiths could be interpreted or reworded, and new ones put into circulation, it was usually easier to find a hadith to support a particular legal rule than it was a Koranic text.

After the classical theory of the sources of law had come to be accepted, many and voluminous law books and hadith collections were produced, and law became the predominant expression of Islam. Islamic law concerns itself with far wider areas of public and private life than does a modern secular legal system. Economics, politics, matters of diet and dress, penal and civil law, warfare, and many other aspects of social and private life are, in theory at least, regulated by Islamic law. To live a life according to the law has probably been the main religious ideal for most Muslims, although one should not conclude that Islam is merely a legalistic religion. Modern Islamic states have frequently adopted legal codes based on those of the West and have limited the sphere governed by Islamic law to personal and family matters: inheritance, marriage and divorce, etc. Even in these areas reforms have been made to traditional Islamic law, but these reforms are usually justified by reference to the traditional doctrine of the sources.

The Practices of Islam

Five duties have traditionally been seen as obligatory for all Muslims, although some mystics (Sufis) have allegorized them and many Muslims observe them only partially. These duties are the so-called five pillars of Islam: bearing witness to the unity and uniqueness of God and to the prophethood of Muhammad (shahadah); prayer at the prescribed times each day (salat); fasting during the month of Ramadan (sawm); pilgrimage to Mecca, and the performance of certain prescribed rituals in and around Mecca at a specified time of the year (hajj); and paying a certain amount out of one's wealth as alms for the poor and some other categories of Muslims (zakat). The first of these pillars balances external action (the recitation of the shahadah) with internal conviction (although different groups within Islam have held different views about the relative importance of recitation and belief in the shahadah); the other four, although they take belief for granted, consist predominantly of external acts.

There are other duties and practices regarded as obligatory. As in Judaism, the eating of pork is prohibited and male circumcision is the norm (the latter is not mentioned in the Koran).

Consumption of alcohol is forbidden. Meat must be slaughtered according to an approved ritual or else it is not halal.

In some Muslim communities practices which are essentially local customs have come to be identified as Islamic: the wearing of a sari, for example. There are variant practices concerning the covering of the head or face of a woman in public. A Koranic text is interpreted by some to mean that the entire head and face of a woman should be covered, by others as indicating that some sort of veil or head scarf should be worn. Others argue that the Koran does not require any such covering.

Sacred Places

The centre of Muslim life, apart from the home, is the mosque or masjid (Arabic, “place of prostration in prayer”) where the prescribed prayers are performed five times daily (in some Shiite groups only three times daily). The prayers are performed while facing Mecca, the site of the Kaaba and the birthplace of Muhammad, and the mosque wall which is closest to Mecca has a niche known as the mihrab built into it to show the direction of the holy city.

The Kaaba at Mecca, a simple and relatively small cubical building, is often referred to as the “house of God”, although without any implication that He is present there more than anywhere else. It is explained as having been built by Abraham at the command of God. At the time when he built it, Abraham called all peoples at all times to come there and perform the ceremonies of the hajj. In the south-east corner of the Kaaba on the outside wall is fixed a black stone which receives special reverence and is often said to have originated from Paradise. It was sent down to comfort Adam in his grief when he was expelled from there. By the time of Muhammad the pure monotheism which, according to Muslim belief, had been instituted at Mecca by Abraham, had become corrupted by idolatry and polytheism, and it was the task of Muhammad to restore the pure religion and re-establish monotheistic worship at the Kaaba. Around the Kaaba there has grown up a huge mosque known as al-Masjid al-Haram (“the sacred mosque”).

In addition to Mecca various other places have a special status in Islam. At Medina, the town to which Muhammad moved when his preaching in Mecca had aroused opposition, the second holiest mosque in Islam grew up around his tomb. Jerusalem is the third most revered sanctuary, in part because of its association with prophets before Muhammad, in part because of the tradition that Muhammad was miraculously taken there from Mecca by night. From there he is said to have been taken up to heaven before being returned on the same night to the place where he had been sleeping in Mecca. Above the huge rock in Jerusalem which is regarded as the very place from which Muhammad's ascension began, the Dome of the Rock was built. This is one of the earliest and most beautiful buildings of Islam, first constructed around 690 on the orders of the caliph Abd al-Malik.

For Shiite Muslims other cities, often associated with their Imams, achieved a special status: An Najaf and Karbala' in Iraq, and Mashhad and Qom in Iran, are the most important.

The Islamic Year and Festivals

The Islamic era is known as that of the hijra (sometimes Latinized and Anglicized as Hegira) since its starting point is the year in which Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina (ad 622), an event known in Muslim tradition as the hijra (variously translated as “flight”, “emigration” or “exodus”). The calendar is based on the Moon rather than the Sun, a year consisting of 12 months, each counted as the time between the appearance of one new moon and that of the next. The year thus lasts for about 354 days, approximately 11 days less than the solar year used in the common calendar. Since intercalation is forbidden in the law, the

Islamic year bears no fixed relationship to the seasons. Relative to the solar year, each day in the Muslim year falls 11 days earlier each year. Thus the festivals and major events of the Muslim year eventually circulate through all the seasons.

The Hijri year begins with the month of Muharram, but no special significance is attached to the new year's day. The ninth month of the year, Ramadan, is the obligatory month of fasting, and every Muslim who has the duty to fast (there are some who are relieved of it because of illness or another reason) should abstain from food, drink, and sexual pleasure during the hours of daylight. The first day of the tenth month, Shawwal, marks the end of the fast and is a day of great rejoicing. It is the major festival of the year and is variously known as "the great festival", "the festival of the breaking of the fast" or simply "the festival" (al-eed). The last month of the year is Dhul-Hijjah, and the first half of it is the time for the annual ceremonies connected with the hajj at Mecca. The core of the hajj, when all the pilgrims take part together, occurs between the eighth and tenth of the month. On the tenth the pilgrims sacrifice a great number of animals at Mina, close to Mecca, and in many parts of the Islamic world sacrifices are also performed on this day. This is known as "the lesser festival" (al-eed al-sagheer) or "the festival of the sacrifice" (eed al-qurban or eed al-adha).

The tenth day of the first month, Muharram, is called Ashura (an Aramaic word meaning "tenth"). This has a special importance for Shiite Muslims. On it they commemorate what in their view was the martyrdom of their third Imam, Husain, the son of Ali ibn Abi Talib. He was killed on Ashura day in 680 at Karbala' in Iraq, fighting against a Muslim ruler whom the Shiites regard as a usurper and tyrant. For Shiites the day is a sad one, marked in some places by processions, public weeping, and even sometimes self-flagellation.

Other events and festivals occur at various times during the year but do not have the official religious significance of those just mentioned. For example, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (mawlid al-nabee) is widely celebrated in the fifth month of the year and in some places is marked by the recitation of poems in his honour. This festival, however, seems to be quite late in origin. Since the precise date of Muhammad's birth is not known, the month was probably chosen because it is the most widely accepted date for his death and a symmetry between birth and death was assumed. For the Shiites the birthdays of Ali and his wife Fatima are also celebrated.

One of the odd-numbered days towards the end of Ramadan (the precise day is disputed) is marked with reverence as the "night of power" (lailat al-qadr) when, it is widely believed, God makes His decrees concerning everything which is to occur in the following year.

Friday is sometimes referred to as the Muslim sabbath, like Saturday for Jews and Sunday for Christians. It is not officially a day of rest, but the midday prayer service on Friday is the most important of the week, should be observed, if possible, in a large congregational mosque, and has a more elaborate form than that of the normal prayer service. The ritual contains a special sermon (khutba) delivered by a preacher who stands on a minbar, a sort of pulpit which is a prominent part of the furniture of a mosque.

The Main Groups of Islam

In the period of its early development Islam developed three main divisions: Sunni, Shiite, and Kharijii. Historically, the division between them is said to go back to a civil war between the Arabs between ad 656 and 661, following their conquest of the heartlands of the Middle East. As religious groups in the form in which we know them, however, the three traditions took considerably longer than that to emerge. The two most important of them, the Sunni and the Shiite, did not really crystallize before the 3rd to 9th centuries. The fundamental issue which divides the three groups is that of authority—who should be the source of authority in Islam and what sort of authority they should have.

Muslim Mysticism

From an early period in the development of Islam some individuals and groups began to feel that it was not enough simply to live according to the law and hope to achieve salvation in that way. They desired a stronger religious experience and sought to become closer to God through a variety of devotional and meditational practices, and sometimes through an austere ascetic way of life. Those who engaged in such practices came to be called Sufis. The characteristic aim of Sufism was to obtain a direct experience of God. This is a form of spirituality which has similarities in religions other than Islam and is usually referred to as mysticism. It has often been viewed with suspicion by non-mystical religious authorities who see it as a threat to institutional religion. The practices and beliefs of the Sufis came to be feared as possible rivals to those followed by the majority of ordinary Muslims.

In 922 a leading Muslim mystic, al-Hallaj, was executed by the ruling authorities for claiming, so it was alleged, that his experience of God had been so immediate that he had become completely united with the divinity. This was described as a form of polytheism by his opponents. Nevertheless, Sufi ideas remained attractive to many. It is al-Ghazali, one of the pivotal figures in the history of Sunni Islam, who is credited with bringing about the compromise which made it possible henceforth for Sufism to be regarded as a legitimate and important expression of Islam. Al-Ghazali argued that it is important to understand the deeper meaning of the law and not just to adhere to it blindly.

In the centuries following al-Ghazali the influence of Sufism in Islam became more widespread as various orders or “paths” (tariqas) came into existence. These are brotherhoods of Sufis which are distinguished by the allegiance they owe to a particular Sufi master. They involve a process of initiation and they appeal to various social classes. Some of them have a local basis, others cover large areas of the Islamic world. They provide not only an important means for the expression of spirituality in Islam but also a focus of loyalty within a universalist religion.

Islam in the Modern World

From the end of the 18th century onwards the Islamic world began to experience the increasing pressure of the military and political power and technological advances of the modern West. After centuries of Islamic political and cultural strength and self-confidence, it became clear that at the economic and technical level at least the world of Islam had fallen behind. Part of the shock came from the fact that the Western countries were at least nominally Christian, and yet Muslims regarded Islam as the final revelation which had supplanted Christianity.

In the 20th century the creation of the state of Israel in an area which was regarded as one of the heartlands of Islam strengthened the feeling of many Muslims that there was a crisis facing them which involved their religion.

One response was to argue that Islam needed to be modernized and reformed. This point of view has been held by a number of intellectuals, and various proposals for reforming the religion in what is understood as a modernist direction have been made.

Islamic Fundamentalism

The second half of the 20th century has seen the rise and domination of what may be seen as the opposite approach to discovering a solution to the perceived “crisis of Islam”. It has been argued by many that the crisis facing the Muslims was a result of the willingness of many Muslims to follow the false ideas and values of the modern secular West. What is needed, it is argued, is a reassertion of traditional values. From this point of view, the crisis of Islam is seen as the result of the corruption of nominally Muslim governments and the creeping growth of secularism and Western influence in the Muslim world. Frequently, but not always, those who argue in this way espouse the use of violence in the cause of overthrowing unjust and corrupt governments. This approach is often referred to as Islamic fundamentalism.

The validity of this expression is open to question and is frequently rejected by Muslims themselves. The ideas of religious “fundamentalism” seems to have originated in discussions of Christianity, where it is usually used with reference to those groups of Christians who insist that the Bible is literally the word of God and that it alone should be regarded as authoritative by Christians. In this context “tradition” is usually regarded negatively as something which has corrupted the original true form of Christianity taught by Jesus.

Many Muslims do not like the use of the expression with regard to Islam since, they say, all Muslims accept that the Koran is the word of God in a very literal sense and so all Muslims are fundamentalist. Furthermore, although some “fundamentalists” try to argue that only the Koran is the true source of Islam, most accept many parts of non-Koranic tradition even though they may reject other parts. Muslim groups which are often lumped together under the heading of “fundamentalist” in fact have many differences between them.

Modern proponents of this style of Islam can find their precursors in earlier centuries. Ibn Taymiyya is often cited by them since he argued for a purification of Islam from what he considered to be accretions and corruptions which had entered it by his own day. Ibn Taymiyya influenced later figures such as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the father of Wahhabi, and it is perhaps ironic that the Saudi kingdom which came to power as a result of the strength of Wahhabi in Arabia is now one of the most prominent targets of the charge of corruption and of

serving as a vehicle for Western influence in the Islamic world.

Among the Sunni Muslims one of the oldest of the modern “fundamentalist” movements is that of the Muslim Brothers, which was founded in 1929. Its most influential theorist was Sayyid Qutb who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966. More recently groups such as Hamas in Gaza and Palestine, Gamaat al-Islamiyya in Egypt, and the Fronte Islamique de Salvation (FIS) in Algeria have emerged with individual local aims but with the common objective of installing what they see as a proper Islamic government, running a state based on Islamic law, in the country where they are active. In Europe the Hizb ut-Tahrir has attracted some following, and in Malaysia the Arqam movement.

Among Shiite Muslims this form of Islam achieved its greatest success with the overthrow of the ruling dynasty in Iran (Persia) and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. The Islamic Republic governed by Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors then offered support to groups such as Hizbollah in Lebanon as well as to Sunni movements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

The ability of such groups to capture the headlines, and the difficulties they have posed for governments, Muslim and non-Muslim, in many parts of the world, has sometimes led to the claim that Islam is of its very nature fundamentalist (which in this context usually means aggressive and expansionist). This claim is sometimes supported by reference to the importance of the doctrine of jihad (holy war) in traditional Islam and the importance of the Arab conquests in the earliest stages of the emergence of Islam.

In reality, however, Muslims, like followers of other religions, have behaved in a variety of ways and presented various images of their religion according to differing historical contexts. While it would be wrong to underestimate the strength of movements such as those named above, or their ability to attract the sympathy of other Muslims, it would equally be wrong to overestimate the degree of unity between the various manifestations of “Islamic fundamentalism” or to fall into the trap of thinking that each religion is characterized by a particular spirit or quality which is unchanging and always dominant.

Islam as a World Religion

There are no exact figures for the number of Muslims in the world today. It seems clear, however, that in terms of numbers Islam at least matches those of Christianity, the other most widespread religion today.

From its heartlands in the Middle East and North Africa the religion spread before the modern period to many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, to central Asia, to the Indian subcontinent, and to East and South East Asia. In Europe, Sicily and most of Spain were part of the Islamic world during the Middle Ages, and most of the Balkans came to be ruled by the Muslim Ottoman Empire, with its capital at Istanbul, at various times between about 1300 and the end of World War I. In modern times Islam has spread as a result of emigration so that there are now large Muslim communities in parts of western Europe, North America, South Africa, and Australia. The Sunni form of the religion is dominant in most countries apart from Iran, but there are large Shiite populations in Iraq and Lebanon, in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia, and, to a lesser

extent, in Central and South Asia.

It is a mistake to think that Islam has always been spread by warfare. Although, as has been noted above, its birth was associated with the Arab conquest of the Middle East and North Africa in the 7th century, and although it entered the Balkans as a result of the Ottoman expansion from 1300 onwards and spread in west Africa following a jihad in the 18th century, the religion of Islam has not generally been forced upon people by the sword. Periods of military conquest have usually been aimed at expanding the territories under Muslim rule rather than at forcing the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam.

Conversion to Islam has usually followed quite slowly, sometimes against the wishes of the Muslim rulers, after a territory has come under Muslim rule. The adoption of Islam as their religion has usually resulted from the wishes and actions of people wanting to become Muslim, not because it was forced upon them against their will. Why some people have been attracted to Islam and others not is a complex question involving many different religious, social, political, and economic factors. In some parts of the world, trade and the cultural attraction of Islamic civilization have been as important as preaching in the spread of the religion. Sufi brotherhoods have also done much to spread the religion in particular areas.

Like Christianity (and like Buddhism) Islam is a universal religion open to all irrespective of nationality, gender or social status. Of course, normal ethnic and social divisions exist among Muslims, but one of the attractions of Islam is its insistence on the fundamental equality of all Muslims before God. One of its greatest strengths has been the way in which various peoples have been able to find a sense of their own identity in Islam.

Cited By

"Islam," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2003

<http://uk.encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All Rights Reserved.