

# Islam

*by Steven Corey*

In the seventeenth century A.D. Muhammad, thought to be the last prophet in a line that includes, Abraham, Moses, the biblical prophets, and Jesus, founded a strict, monotheistic religion in reaction to the polytheism and lawlessness of the existing Arab culture. Within a century Islam had conquered an area greater than the Roman Empire at its height. Today Islam is almost the sole religion of all Arab countries and has major communities in Africa as well.

Muslims reject the title 'Mohammadism', for Muhammadism is thought to be only a carrier of the truth and not divine in any way.

The Qu'ran (Koran), for the most part is a series of short teachings, is intensely revered by Muslims as the final word of God, the culmination of what was only begun in the Bible. The word Islam refers to the peace that comes from surrender to God.

**Shi'ites** believe that religious leaders should also be political rulers, whereas the majority of Muslims, the **Sunnites**, believe in a separation of the two realms. **Sufis** form the mystical branch of Islam, teaching an arduous path of self-denial culminating in union with God.

## God

**Allah** means 'the God', indicating the radical monotheism of Islam. 'We shall not serve anyone but God, and we shall associate none with Him' (Koran 3.64). Any division of God is rejected, including the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. (It is not meet for God to have children [19.92])

The majesty and might of Allah is often portrayed in the Koran, and it is emphasized that his purposes are always serious. Justice is Allah's most important feature for Muslims.

Allah is also merciful and compassionate, but that mercy is shown mainly in his sending messengers who proclaim the truth of man's responsibility to live according to Allah's dictates.

## Man And The Universe

Muslims see the universe as created by the deliberate act of personal, omnipresent God. The universe is not considered an illusion in any way and is basically good, being given for the benefit of man. Muslims respect for the world order led to the development in Arab countries long before development in Europe.

Muhammed did not produce miracles but simply proclaimed the message of Allah. Thus the presence of God in the world is seen not through supernatural signs but through the wonderful order of nature and the one great miracle, the Koran. Muslims generally do not expect miraculous deliverance from suffering in this life but believe that good deeds will be rewarded in the next life.

Man is considered a sort of vice-regent, in charge of creation under the authority of God. His purpose – and the goal of Islam – is to make a moral order in the world.

Man is endowed with **Taqwa**, a sort of divine spark manifested in his conscience that enables him to perceive the truth and to act on it. Conscience is thus of the greatest value in Islam, much as love is the greatest value to the Christians.

But Islam is in no way pantheism. Man may cultivate his Taqwa and so live according to the way of Allah, or he may suppress it. Man thus deserve or is undeserving of God's guidance.

## **Salvation And The Afterlife**

The Koran rejects the notion of redemption; salvation depends on man's actions and attitudes. However **Taubah** (repentance) can quickly turn an evil man toward the virtue that will save him. So Islam does not hold out the possibility of salvation through the work of God but invites man to accept God's guidance.

The final day of reckoning is described in awesome terms. On the last day every man will account for what he has done, and his eternal existence will be determined on that basis: 'Every man's actions have we hung around his neck, and on the last day shall be laid before him a wide-open book' (17.13)

Muslims recognize that different individuals have been given different abilities and various degrees of insight into the truth. Each man will be judged according to his situation, and every man who lives according to the truth to the best of his abilities will achieve heaven. However, infidels who are presented with the truth of Islam and reject it will be given no mercy.

The Koran has vivid descriptions of both heaven and hell. Heaven is depicted in terms of worldly delights, and the torments of hell are shown in lurid detail. Muslims disagree as to whether these descriptions are to be taken literally or not.

## **Morals**

Islam presents a 'straight path' of clear-cut duties and commands. Islamic morals are a combination of genuine acts of love and justice on the one hand and legalistic performances on the other.

Muhammed is pictured in the Koran as a loving person, helping the poor and slow to take revenge. Nevertheless the firm belief that Muslims possess the one truth has led to much violence on the behalf of Allah through the ages.

Although the Koran actually worked to elevate the horribly degraded position of women in Arab society, women continue to be regarded more as possible temptations to sin for men than as human beings with their own responsibilities before God. Many take the Koran's approval of multiple wives to be applicable only to ancient times.

## **Worship**

Muhammed is not worshipped; only God is. Because of strict rules against depictions of human forms in art there is a strong impetus against idolatry or saint-worshipping in Islam. Allah is extolled in hymns that depict his power and majesty. But even Allah cannot be ultimately leaned on for salvation, because salvation is man's responsibility. Thus his guidance, in the form of words rather than persons, is emphasized.

For that reason the Koran is revered as perhaps no other book. It is probably the most memorized book in the world.

Acts of worship in Islam are embodied in the 'five pillars'. A Muslim must;

- 1) recite the basic creed, 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is His prophet'.
- 2) recite prayers in praise of Allah five times daily while facing Mecca;
- 3) give money to the poor;
- 4) fast for one month a year; and
- 5) make a pilgrimage at least once during his lifetime to Mecca, the city where Allah revealed the Koran to Muhammed.