

Understanding Islam: the Beginning and Today

Key Concept:

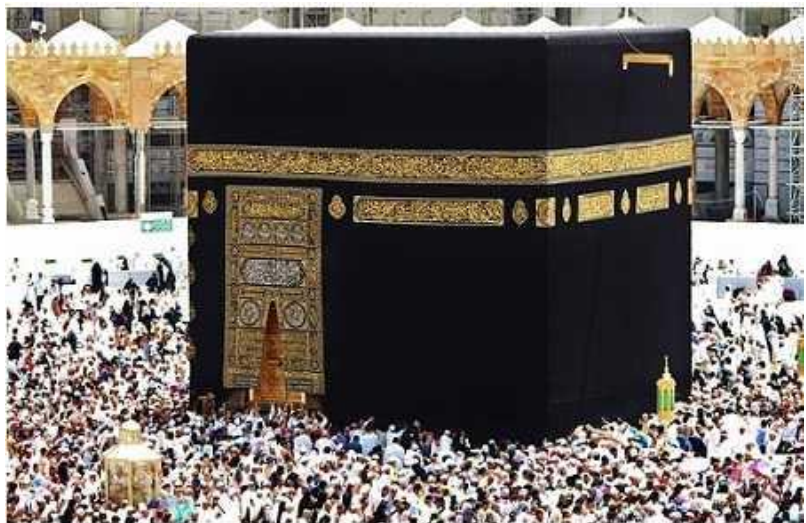
Religion - A belief system that influences the development and culture of a civilization.

The Arabian Peninsula Before Muhammad

The majority of Arabs living on the Arabian Peninsula at the beginning of the first century were nomads, people who traveled from place to place with no permanent home. These people worshipped many gods and developed into various competing tribes. Many families within these tribes created caravans, traveling across the desert carrying their wares on camels, as well as herding sheep. Scarce resources, such as water and grazing land, developed a warlike culture on the Arabian Peninsula, and caravan raiding became as common as the caravans themselves.

The Holy City of Mecca and Muhammad

In 570 CE the wealthy caravan city of Mecca acquired a reputation as sacred because it housed idols, statues of many gods, in the Kaaba, a cube-like black shrine for prayer. Furthermore, the wealthy merchant class sold idols to pilgrims visiting the holy city. Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic faith, was born in Mecca. As he grew, the inequity he witnessed between the poor and wealthy merchant class troubled him. At the age of forty, Muhammad was meditating in a local cave when his life



forever changed. According to Muslims, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him to recite the word of God. The ability to quote the word of God made him a prophet, or messenger of God.



He believed that by worshipping one god, Allah, it would unite his people. Mercy and kindness would be at the center of his new religion that he would call Islam, which means "submission." Muhammad would call his followers Muslims which means "followers of Islam."

Muhammad's Teachings

The word of God, as interpreted by Muhammad, was written down in Arabic and recorded in the Qur'an or Koran, the holy book of Islam. In addition to the Qur'an, the

hadith, a collection of records of Muhammad's words and daily actions (referred to as Sunnah, or habits) also provides Muslims with guidance on how to live. This critical part of a Muslim's life defines how one should live a life that best follows that of the founder, Muhammad.

The Five Pillars of Islam



The Islamic faith stands on five principles or pillars, written in the hadith. The first, Shahadah, states that all believers will only worship one god, Allah. The second, Salat, dictates that all Muslims will worship five times a day. At sunrise, noon, midafternoon, twilight, and night, facing in the direction of Mecca, Muslims will bow in prayer. The third pillar is Zakat or the giving of alms. All Muslims are expected to contribute a portion of their earnings to the helping of others: the poor, the widows, and the orphans.

Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan is the fourth pillar, and is known as Sawm. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and during the entire month Muslims do not eat or drink from dawn to dusk. They may eat only during the night, and at the end of the month they celebrate with a feast with their family and friends. The fifth and final pillar of the Islamic faith is Hajj. At least once in a Muslim's lifetime, they are to visit the city of Mecca and pay respect to the Kaaba.

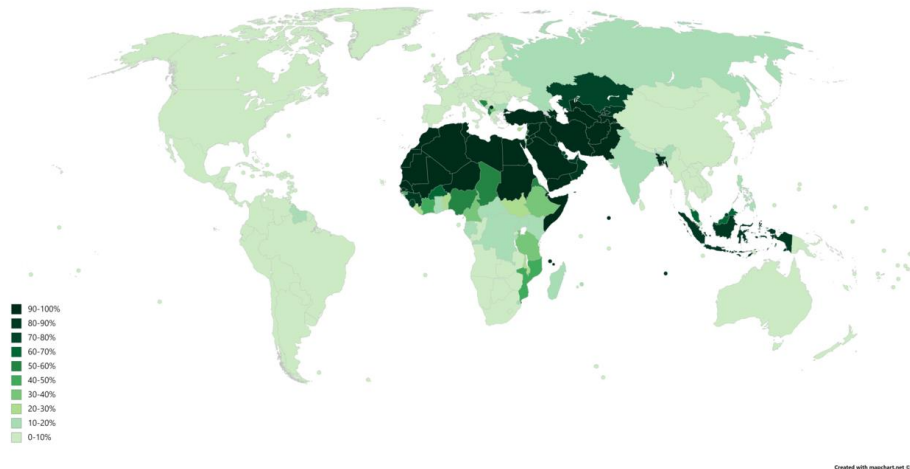
Leadership After Muhammad

After the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, there was some controversy as to who should become the new leader of the Islamic people. Some believed that the new leader should be elected from among Muhammad's worthy companions. Those were people who had studied under the great leader. The first elected caliph, or highest leader, was Abu Bakr, a close friend and advisor of Muhammad. Today, the people who still support the idea that devout Muslims like Abu Bakr can lead, are known as Sunnis. However, there were those who believed that the new leader should be a blood relative,

like monarchs inherit the throne. They named Muhammad's cousin/brother-in-law, Ali bin Abu Talib the new leader. These believers became known as Shiites, or Shia.

These two groups still exist today. Out of the approximately 14 million Muslims

globally, 90% of Muslims are Sunni. **This map shows where Islamic believers exist.**



Islamic Law

During the third century, Muslim scholars developed the Shariah, or Islamic law. In Arabic, this word means “path” or “way” and is a detailed system of religious law based on Muhammad's teachings and example. Shariah law contains two main sections. The first deals with the different aspects of worship including how to pray and fast. The second section deals with the various types of human interaction. This section includes such topics as food and drink (Muslims are not allowed to eat pork), warfare, marriage, and divorce.

Modern legislation (laws), along with Muslim legal scholars who are attempting to relate the will of Allah to the 20th century, have reopened the door to interpreting the Shariah as Muhammad intended. This happened even in highly traditional Saudi Arabia, where Islam began. While most Muslim countries have adapted Islamic law to relate to modern Western culture, some countries, like Iran, adhere to strict classical Shariah. In these cases, Shariah from the time of Muhammad is mandated and often offer harsh punishments to Western standards. As with most early law, early Shariah has a controversial “eye for an eye” penalty for misconduct.

Complete the following questions by using the reading.

1. Describe the Arabian Peninsula before Muhammad.

2. Economy: Write an excerpt from the reading that best supports the idea that merchants benefited from pilgrims who visited Mecca.

3. Religion: Describe the Five Pillars of Islam.

4. Leadership: Where would you find dietary restrictions for followers of Islam?

5. Religion: What was the main reason for Muhammad creating the Islamic faith?

6. Leadership: How did the selection of the leader after Muhammad's death lead to two different branches of Islam?

7. Religion: Why are the Koran and hadith important to Muslims?

8. Religion: Give two reasons why you think it is important for Muslims to pray five times a day.

9. Leadership: According to the reading, how is Shariah in modern Iran and modern Saudi Arabia different?

10. What is a synonym for caravan?
