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BASIC FACTS

I. Overview

Islam is the religious faith of over one billion people on the planet, with one in six claiming it as their faith heritage. This makes Islam the second most practiced faith on earth. The word Islam means “committing oneself (to the will of God)” and shares the same root consonants as the Arabic word for “peace”. The adherents of Islam refer to themselves as Muslims (or Moslems, those who submit). Often described as the third of the great monotheistic religions (the others being Judaism and Christianity), Islam is noted for its stark and often uncompromising assertion that Allah (Arabic for The God) alone is the sole creator and sustainer of the universe. While the religion historically appears later than the other monotheistic faiths, Muslims believe Islam (as it was practiced by Muhammad or Mohammed, the final Prophet of God) was a return to the true faith that was once embodied in Judaism and Christianity, but had been later obscured or corrupted by the passage of time. The central repository of divine revelation is the Qur'an (also spelled Koran), which Muslims believe came to Muhammad from God via the Arch-Angel Gabriel. Within this Holy Book and the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (known as Hadith), Muslims were able to construct a culture and society that was unrivaled in power, wealth, and learning for over a thousand years.

II. Basic Principles

While similar in many ways to the other monotheistic religions, Islam does place an extreme emphasis on both personal intention, and on public observance. The religion denotes five major tenants (or pillars) of belief. These are: the Declaration of Faith, Prayer, Almsgiving, Ritual Fasting, and Pilgrimage.

a. The Declaration of Faith (in Arabic the Shahada) lies at the core of Islam and clearly defines the religion. It states: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet or Messenger.”

b. Following the tradition of the Prophet, many Muslims pray five times a day. Devotions begin at dawn (Fajir), continue at noon (Zuhr), at mid-afternoon (Asr), at sunset (Maghrib), and conclude at night (Isha). Additionally, Muslims are entreated to pray their Zuhr prayers communally on Fridays, which is known as Juma (derived from the Arabic verb “to gather”). During this service, the bonds of the community are reinforced with a sermon (Khutba) and congregational prayer. All prayers are directed towards the Ka’ba, a cube shaped sanctuary located in Mecca. The Ka’ba was a pre-Islamic holy site that Muslims believe was first built by the Prophet Adam, and later renovated by the Prophet Abraham.

c. Almsgiving or Zakat is incumbent upon all of those Muslims who have reached a certain level of prosperity. Classically defined as 2.5% of one’s individual wealth, this money would go to the poorer elements in Muslim society.
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d. Fasting (or in the Arabic Saum) generally occurs during the Muslim lunar month of Ramadan. During this month, Muslims who participate in the fast may not eat or drink anything, nor may they engage in marital relations during the period from dawn to dusk. The fasting month ends by the sighting of the moon, which is cause for a great celebration in Muslim countries, known as Id al-Fitr (Festival of the Fast Breaking).

e. The final pillar of Islam is the yearly pilgrimage (or Hajj) to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, located in what is now Saudi Arabia, during the lunar month of the Hajj. Of all the pillars of the faith, this is the only one that is not universally binding upon Muslims. It is only incumbent upon those who are physically and financially able to undertake the difficult journey. The goal of all pilgrims is the Ka’ba, the cube shaped sanctuary that is central to the religious observation of the pilgrimage.

It is also important to note that some include Jihad (often translated as Holy War) among the pillars of the faith. The notion of Holy War is a component of Jihad, but this activity is referred to as the Lesser Jihad. The Greater Jihad is the struggle within oneself for betterment; including the defeat of one’s baser attributes, the perfection of one’s religious duties, and the attainment of knowledge. The Lesser Jihad occurs as a method to protect the religion, and most scholars conclude that it is solely for defensive purposes.

III. Major Groupings

Within Islam, there exists a series of sects or groups that define themselves as Muslim, but follow slightly different interpretations of the Qur’an and Hadith. These differences have been the essence of much internal strife within the Islamic world. The basic division of Muslims is that between the Sunni and the Shi’i (also spelled as Shiites). Additionally, other groups that look to the Islamic tradition, and see themselves as Muslims have come into being. These include the Ahmadiyyah Movement and the American Muslim Mission (which includes the Nation of Islam).

a. The term Sunni denotes those that describe themselves as the followers of the “custom” (or Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad. This segment is by far the largest of the Muslim population, with roughly 85-90% of all followers falling into this group. Among the Sunni, there are four major “schools of thought” that are based on slight differences of interpretation of Islamic law and can also reflect regional differences. These are:
   1. The Hanafi School
   2. The Maliki School
   3. The Shafi’i School
   4. The Hanbali School

The Hanafi School is the oldest “school of thought” (founded in the early 8th century) and is also considered by many to be the most liberal and flexible of all the various Islamic schools, as it stressed personal opinion and analogical reasoning. However, in its strictest interpretation, the Hanafi School forms the theological underpinnings of the
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Taliban (Arabic for Seekers of Truth) regime in Afghanistan. Adherents of the Hanafi School are found primarily in Central and Western Asia (Turkey to Afghanistan), Lower Egypt (Cairo and the Nile Delta), and the Indian sub-continent.

The Maliki School is the second oldest Islamic school. It was founded in the middle of the middle of the 8th century in the city of Medina, which was then known for its study of the Hadith of the Prophet. Indeed, the actions of the Prophet would define the practice and form of this school. This school is found mostly in North Africa and Upper Egypt.

The Shafi'i school is the third of the Islamic juridical schools. The great legal jurist Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi founded the Shafi School at the beginning of the 9th century. Originally trained in the Maliki School, he would help to develop the main points of Islamic Fiqh (jurisprudence) and elevate the Hadith of the Prophet to a level second only to the Qur'an in theory and perhaps higher in practical terms. Today, this school enjoys great popularity in the Indian Ocean Islands, Malaysian – Indonesian archipelago, Southern Arabia, East Africa, and Lower Egypt.

The Hanbali School is last of the classical Sunni schools. Founded near the middle of the 9th century, this is perhaps the most conservative of the Islamic juridical schools. It is at the core of many reform movements within the Islamic world, such as the 18th century Wahhabi movement. This fundamentalist movement, which was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and helped to sweep the Sa'ud family into power in Saudi Arabia, held at its core a return to the ideals of the early Islamic community, and rejected as Bid'a (innovation) many practices that were not expressly mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith.

It is important to note that while these four schools have different histories and different interpretations of correct religious practice, they view each other as orthodox and correct in practice. However, these schools, while nominally accepting the status of Shi'is as Muslims, do not agree with some of the Shi'i practices, and therefore do not view them as orthodox.

b. The term Shi'i denotes those that describe themselves as the followers of the “party” of Ali, who was the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, the first convert to the religion, and a Caliph (or successor to Community leadership in the Islamic World). This segment is by far the minority of the worldwide Muslim population, with roughly 10-15% of all followers claiming adherence to this group. However, this group does form a huge majority of the country of Iran, and sizable minorities in Iraq and the countries of the Levant. One of the earliest divisions in the Islamic community, the split between the Sunnis and Shi'is centered around the question of succession to community leadership after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. While the Sunnis recognize three community leaders prior to the accession of Ali, the Shi'i believe that Ali is the only legitimate ruler in Islam after the Prophet, and diverged from the larger community due to the belief that religious and political authority alone resided in the family of Ali. Among the Shi'i, there are three major groups that are based on different interpretations on the issue of the
succession of Imams (or divinely inspired successors from the family of Ali). These groups are:

1. The Zaydis
2. The Isma'ilis (Seveners)
3. The Ithna-asharis (Twelvers)

The Zaydis are a branch of Shi’is that follow the line descending from Zayd ibn Ali. After the death of the 4th Shi’i Imam, Ali Zayn al-Abidin, most Shi’is believed that the spiritual and temporal authority passed to his son Muhammad al-Baqir. However, the Zaydis believe that this authority passed instead to another of his sons, Zayd ibn Ali. This group is perhaps closest to the Sunnis in their conception of religion, as they assign no divine attributes to the figure of the Imam. The Zaydis are primarily located in Yemen, where they provided spiritual leadership to the region for centuries, and ruled temporally from the Ottoman dissolution that occurred in 1917 to 1962.

The Isma’ilis follow a line of Imams that flow from Isma’il, son of the 6th generally acknowledged Imam, Ja’far al-Sadiq. The majority of Shi’is believed that Musa al-Kazim, also a son of Ja’far al-Sadiq, was the seventh Imam. However, the Isma’ilis contend that spiritual and temporal authority passed through the eldest son Isma’il, even though he pre-deceased his father. Internally, the Isma’ilis are divided on the issue of succession, with a small group believing that the spiritual and political authority ended with Isma’il, while a larger number saw the continuation of the line. Isma’ili doctrine is difficult to penetrate, as the group tends to be secretive of its inner beliefs. There are however, strong elements of mysticism and numerology within the group. In the 10th century, an Isma’ili dynasty known as the Fatimids was founded and for a time established a claim to the title of caliph from their capital in Cairo. After the break-up of the Fatimids, two groups emerged and remain important today. The Nizaris (also known as Khojas), who follow the spiritual authority of a descendent of Isma’il known by the title of Aga Khan, believe Prince Karim to be the current Imam, in unbroken succession from Ja’far al-Sadiq, who died in AD 765. A radical arm of this sect operated from mountain strongholds in Northern Iran and is reported to have used the drug Hashish to create believers that were so loyal as to carry out political murders. Known as the Assassins, they were attacked and irreparably weakened during the Mongol invasions of the 13th century. The Nizari Isma’ilis are currently prominent in parts of East Africa and India. The Musta’lis (also known as Bohras) believe that the line of the Imam is “hidden” and will emerge in the end time, near to the Day of Judgment. This group is led by a chief Da’i (promoter) and is currently concentrated in India.

The Ithna-asharis or “twelvers” are by far the most numerous Shi’i group. Unlike the Sunnis, which tend to view the idea of saints and the visitation to their tombs as a dangerous form of Bid’a, the Shi’is tend to pay great reverence to their saints and Imams, and their memory of these figures is a central part of their conception of Islam. The Ithna-ashari believe that the line of Imams ends at twelve, with the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mutazir, in a state of “occultation” and awaiting the time just prior to the Day of Judgment to emerge and lead the community away from error. These Imams gained their authority through their relationship to the first Imam, Ali and his marriage to
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the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps the single most important event in creating the idea of the Shi‘is as a separate group from the Sunnis is the attack and subsequent death of al-Husayn (the third Imam) at Karbala in AD 680. The remembrance of this event is played out by Shi‘is around the world, from the Muharram reenactments (named after the month of the attack) in Iran, to the Hosein Festivals in the Islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

c. The Ahmadiyyah Movement began in the nineteenth century in the Indian sub-continent. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the movement, claimed that he was a prophet and made assertions that some orthodox beliefs held by other Muslims were in fact in error. The movement seems to have been an attempt by Ahmad to embrace other religious sentiments in the sub-continent, as he claimed not only the status of successor to the Prophet Muhammad, but also that he was Krishna (a Hindu god) and the Second Advent of Jesus. The Movement also advocated the end of overt religious wars with other faiths (which is an aspect of Jihad) and instead emphasized the use of the pen in defense of the religion. Thus, the Ahmadiyyah Movement began to publish many pamphlets and magazines on their concept of Islam, some of which still influence outsiders who view the religion today. It is important to note that mainstream Islam (Sunnis and Shi‘is) do not recognize the followers of this movement as Muslims.

d. The American Muslim Mission (of which the Nation of Islam is one) is, in fact, a series of groups that look to Africa and attempt to replicate the heritage of African-Americans here in the West. These movements place great emphasis on the historical penetration of Islam into Africa, and look to the fact that up to one-third of all slaves transported to the New World may have been originally Muslim. As a result, some of these groups hold ideas of exclusivity among its members, some going as far as to bar non-African-Americans from joining. The early progenitors of these groups such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Temple of Islam held separatist notions. Although not the largest of these groups, the Nation of Islam receives much press in America. They hold many ideas that are similar to mainstream Islam. However, one novel interpretation includes the idea of “resurrection”. It does not refer to a bodily resurrection (as in Islamic theology) but instead looks at the “mental resurrection” of oppressed peoples. Due to the exclusivity of some of these groups, most are not recognized by mainstream Islam as belonging to the religion.