

THE FACTS ON ISLAM

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Contents

Encouraging Communication and Critique	5
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Section One

The Religion of Islam—Introduction

1. What is Islam?	11
2. Why is Islam important?	11
3. How did Islam begin?	13
4. What are the basic Muslim beliefs?	15
5. What religious duties are required of all Muslims?	17

Section Two

The Theology of Islam—Is It Compatible with Christian Belief?

6. What does Islam teach about Allah? Is Allah just another name for the God of the Bible?	23
7. What does Islam teach about Jesus Christ?	27
8. What does Islam teach about salvation?	35

Section Three

The Bible of Islam—Is the Qur'an the Word of God?

9. What does Islam claim about the Qur'an?	51
10. Does the Qur'an deny the Bible?	52
11. Does the Qur'an contain historical errors and biblical distortions?	53
12. Does the Qur'an contain contradictory teachings? . . .	56

Section Four

Islam—A General Critique

- 13. How convincing are Muslim apologetics? 61
- 14. What basic problem does the Qur'an present to Muslims? 62
- 15. Is the Muslim claim that the Bible has been corrupted based on facts or bias? 64
- 16. Is the Qur'an uncorrupted? 65
- 17. Can the Qur'an be objectively interpreted? 70

Section Five

The Accuracy of the New Testament Text

- 18. Can it be proved that the New Testament text is historically reliable and accurate? 75
- 19. What can Muslims do who desire to *know* that they have eternal life? 84
- Recommended Resources 87
- Notes 89

The Religion of Islam: Introduction

1

What is Islam?

Islam is the world religion founded by an Arabian visionary named Muhammad (about AD 570–632; also spelled *Muhammed* or *Mohammed*), who was born in the city of Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. Muhammad claimed he received supernatural revelations from God through the angel Gabriel. These revelations were written down by others and compiled into a book called the Qur'an, the Muslim Bible (also spelled Koran).

Today, Islam is comprised of two principal schools—the majority Sunni school (90 percent) and the minority Shi'ite school (10 percent). In addition, there are millions of Muslim mystics called Sufis. In America, Muslim influence is seen in traditional Islam as well as the Black Muslim movement.¹ It is commonly believed there are now as many as five to eight million Muslims in America. A number of authorities place the number more accurately at around two million; whatever the exact number, it will apparently continue to expand for the foreseeable future.²

2

Why is Islam important?

Islam is important for the following reasons. First, there are over one billion followers of Islam in the

world. Second, the collective power of Islam is able to dramatically influence the world economy through OPEC, especially with oil at over \$100 a barrel at present and expected to remain at high levels. Or, its minority radical side, through major terror attacks such as 9/11, in addition to the loss of life and the resulting worldwide war on terror, has wreaked destruction that will soon exceed a trillion dollars in direct and indirect costs. Third, the growing religious influence of Islam outside traditionally Islamic nations such as in Europe and Africa is unmistakable. Fourth, Islam has the ability to play a key role in the social stability or instability of dozens of governments around the world. Fifth, minority radical Islamism constitutes the leading anti-democratic force in the world, and a principal goal of much if not all of Islam is to bring Islamic law (Shari'a law) to every nation.³

Islam is vitally important because it has the power to change the destinies of hundreds of millions of people—including those in the United States. Further, Arab nationalism and the Muslim religion have become the single most crucial issue in the volatile Middle East, an ongoing focal point for the attention of the entire world. No one can know how a major crisis in that region may ultimately affect the rest of the globe. But the possibilities are sobering.⁴

The influence of Islam in the modern world is increasing daily in other ways. As noted, it is the first or second fastest-growing religion in the world, and in that role it now dominates more than 40 countries on three continents. It is the driving force behind numerous nations in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Indeed, over 30 countries now have populations that are at least 87 percent Muslim. It has also become the

second-largest religion in Europe and the third or fourth largest in the United States. Islam is now the second largest religion in Britain also. In 1974, France had one mosque—today there are more than 1,700. There are now more Muslims than Methodists in Chicago, over 150 Muslim Student Organizations on U.S. college campuses, and over 2,000 mosques or similar places of worship in the United States.⁵

Finally, the ideological influence of Islam expands to other nations on an ongoing basis, and Islamic fundamentalism is increasingly aggressive. Muslim radicals (that is, those who are sympathetic to or wish to see Shari'a law ruling their nations) are estimated at 10 to 15 percent, or 100 to 150 million Muslims globally. Religiously, socially, politically, economically, and militarily, Islam will continue to powerfully impact our world. Nor should Christian readers of this book think Islam is of little concern to the church. The 2007 World Watch Persecution Index, published by Open Doors, revealed that six of the top ten worst countries in terms of persecution of Christians were Muslim nations, a statistic that more or less seems to hold true every year. We will discover some of the reasons for this unfortunate situation as we continue.

3

How did Islam begin?

Islam began with the supernatural visions and revelations Muhammad claimed he received from God through the angel Gabriel beginning in AD 610. Because Muhammad was illiterate and could neither read nor write, these revelations were first memorized and then later written down by his followers. The authoritative

Cambridge History of Islam discusses these revelations by noting,

Either in the course of the visions or shortly afterwards, Muhammad began to receive “messages” or “revelations” from God...He believed that he could easily distinguish between his own thinking and these revelations...Muhammad continued to receive the messages at intervals until his death.⁶

In addition to these revelations, the personality of Muhammad played an important role in the success of Islam. His character was both complex and contradictory. In *The World's Religions*, J.N.D. Anderson, an authority on both comparative religion and Islamic law, describes the leader's temperament:

The adult Muhammad soon showed signs of a markedly religious disposition. He would retire to caves for seclusion and meditation; he frequently practiced fasting; and he was prone to [revelatory] dreams...He was generous, resolute, genial, and astute: a shrewd judge and a born leader of men. He could, however, be cruel and vindictive to his enemies: he could stoop to assassination; and he was undeniably sensual.⁷

One of the leading biographers of our modern era, Robert Payne, observes that “violence and gentleness were at war within him.”⁸

In conclusion, Islam began as a consequence of visions received by Muhammad. Whatever Islam has accomplished historically, whatever it is today, it results largely from these visions received by Muhammad some 1,400 years ago.

However, at the end of his life, Muhammad failed to name a successor. This failure resulted in the major

division of Islam—into the majority Sunni and minority Shi'ite branches, each claiming to be true Islam. These divisions disagree as to the legitimate successor of Muhammad and over who offers the most accurate representation of Islamic faith.⁹

Who rightly succeeded Muhammad?

Sunnis believe that the leader of Islam does not need to be related to Muhammad. Shi'ites believe the leader must be a direct descendent. Therefore, after Muhammad's death, Sunnis followed Abu Bakr (a rich merchant among the first converts to Islam and the first Muslim caliph) and Umar (the second caliph), and Uthman (the third Muslim caliph, who burned all variations of the Qur'an) as successors of Muhammad. Shi'ites believe Ali was the true successor of Muhammad.

4

What are the basic Muslim beliefs?

Every Muslim must hold to six basic beliefs, or articles, of Islamic faith. They are as follows:

Faith in Allah. Muslims believe there is only one true God and that his name is Allah. His will is supreme.

Angels. Muslims believe in angels—such as Gabriel (called Jibril), who allegedly transmitted to Muhammad different portions of the text later collected together to form the Qur'an.

The holy books. Muslims believe that Allah has given a long series of revelations, including the Old and New Testaments, or at least parts of them. But these revelations end with the Qur'an, which supersedes all others.

For all practical purposes, Muslims accept only the Qur'an as the Word of God. For example, they believe Allah's earlier revelations in the Bible have been corrupted or are falsely interpreted by Jesus and Christians, so the authority of the Qur'an is needed for proper understanding.*

The prophets. Muslims believe Allah has sent 124,000 prophets to mankind, although only about 25 are mentioned in the Qur'an. Six of the principal prophets are Adam, the chosen of Allah; Noah, the preacher of Allah; Abraham, the friend of Allah; Moses, the speaker of Allah; Jesus, the word of Allah; and Muhammad, the apostle of Allah.

Because Muhammad's revelation is considered the greatest of all, he is called the "Seal of the Prophets" and "Peace of the World," in addition to more than 200 other appellations.

Predestination. In a form of fatalism, Muslims believe everything that happens, both good and evil, is predestined by Allah's will, his unchangeable decree.

The Day of Judgment. Muslims believe that on this day the good and evil deeds of men will be placed on a "scale." Muslims who have sufficient personal merit and righteousness (and the favor of Allah) will go to eternal heaven; all others will go to eternal hell.

These required articles of faith are also related to specific Muslim practices.

* Because Muslims rely on this idea so heavily in their interaction with Christians, we have provided documentation showing why the New Testament documents are accurate and truthful. If they choose to deal fairly with the historical evidence, Muslims must logically accept the reliability of the New Testament text (see question 18).