

## LESSON 6

# AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

### Introduction

What is Islam? Who is a Muslim? Many people in the Western Hemisphere know little about the religion of Islam. Recently a group of students were asked these two questions: "What is Islam?" and "Who was the prophet Mohammed?" The answers showed a great lack of knowledge of the Islamic religion on the part of the students.

In spite of the lack of knowledge, Islam is considered to be one of the great religions of the world and many people believe that Mohammed was the greatest Arab who ever lived.

Throughout history the Arab has often been a mystery to other people. Because of this he is frequently misunderstood outside of his own culture. One often thinks of his Arabic language, his white flowing robes and head attire as well as the somewhat fanatical religion of Islam. Actually the Arab people have a long history and have made many contributions to mankind. Within his own culture he can be a strong and intensely loyal friend. He is one who is not ashamed to show his emotions and his religious fervour. For the Muslim, one who accepts the religion of Islam, his faith and religious teachings affect every area of his life. The term "Islam" means simply "submission." Briefly, Islam preaches the simple truth that all men must submit to the power and control of God. The Muslim and the Arab name for God is Allah. One who follows this religion and accepts submission to Allah is a Muslim.<sup>1</sup> It is important to know that today there are more than seven hundred million (700,000,000) Muslims in the world. This means that more than one person out of every seven people in the world are followers of Islam - "the way of submission to Allah."

Who was Mohammed? How did he become a powerful religious leader? What does his religion teach and what does it require of its followers? These are some of the questions which will be answered in this study.

### Understanding Islam

#### Mohammed the prophet

The Muslims of today trace their origins back to Abraham "who fathered Ishmael through Haggar, the

Islam is considered to be one of the great \_\_\_\_\_  
of the \_\_\_\_\_.  
(religions, world)

The word "Islam" means \_\_\_\_\_.  
(submission)

There are seven hundred \_\_\_\_\_ Muslims in the  
world today.  
(million)

<sup>1</sup> Some writers use the alternate spelling Moslem, but Muslim has become the preferred and most used form of the word. The reader is reminded that in the past, the term Mohammedan was used to describe those who were followers of Mohammed.

handmaiden of Sarah." Mohammed became the founder and the prophet of Islam.

Mohammed was born in Mecca in A.D. 570. He was born into a prominent tribe known as the Quraysh tribe. However, because he was not born into an influential family, much that is written about his early childhood is based upon legends. There are actually no reliable written records concerning the early days of Mohammed's life. There is even some disagreement as to the exact date of his birth. One tradition tells that he was born in the "elephant year." This refers to an Ethiopian battle in the country of Yemen. This battle was fought about A.D. 560. This difference of legend and tradition illustrates the confusion which continues to surround Mohammed's early life.

Mohammed was born in Mecca, a centre of pagan worship for hundreds of years. Traditionally there were 354 idols in Mecca, one for each day of the lunar year. There was also in Mecca the temple of Kaaba, a place of worship and pilgrimage. Mecca was already a well established religious city. It is not surprising that tradition has claimed many miraculous happenings related to the birth of Mohammed and to his early life.

Mohammed's early life was disturbed and uncertain. His father died before he was born. When he died he left his family with a slave and five camels. His mother died when he was six years of age. After his mother's death Mohammed lived with his grandfather, Abd al Muttamid. Two years after he went to live with his grandfather, he, too, passed away. Mohammed spent the remainder of his youth with his uncle. The details of Mohammed's age cannot be known.

Mohammed's uncle was a trader and ran caravans. From the age of ten or twelve years Mohammed was allowed to travel with these caravans. His responsibility was to take care of the goats and the camels as they travelled. These caravans carried frankincense and silk through Mecca north to Syria. These travels gave Mohammed a chance to learn something about business and also about other people and other countries.

At the age of twenty-five he married a rich widow named Kadija. He had been hired to care for her caravans. Although Kadija was eighteen years older than Mohammed, history records that they had a happy marriage. As he managed her large caravans he continued to travel to many new places and to meet many new friends. Some of these new acquaintances were Christians. These Christians had a strong influence on his own life and on his thoughts. During these years Mohammed had much time to meditate and pray. It became his custom to go to Mt. Hira, near Mecca. Often he would sit alone and meditate. It was while meditating one night that he had a vision. This vision was to change Mohammed's life and also the lives of millions of people since that time.

It is impossible to date the year of Mohammed's vision. However, Muslim tradition teaches that the vision

**Draw a circle around the best date for Mohammed's birth.**

A.D. 560    A.D. 569    A.D. 570

*(Compare your answer with the text.)*

**Underline the place of Mohammed's birth.**

Medina    Mecca    Kadija

*(Compare your answer with the text.)*

**Is the following statement true or false?**

Travelling with his uncle's caravans helped broaden Mohammed's perspective on life. \_\_\_\_\_

*(true)*

Mohammed married \_\_\_\_\_ . She was a \_\_\_\_\_ widow.

*(Kadija, rich)*

**Mohammed's famous vision came to him at \_\_\_\_\_ .**

*(night)*

came to Mohammed in the year A.D. 610. According to Mohammed's testimony, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him to read a scroll on which the words were written in fire. Mohammed protested, saying he could not read. The angel insisted and Mohammed read the scroll.

Following this blinding vision he returned home and was very troubled. His wife listened to his story, comforted him and tried to convince him that Allah had chosen him to be his messenger. At first Mohammed would not accept this call. It was sometime later that he had another experience with the angel calling him to "arise and warn." From that moment Mohammed submitted to the will of Allah as his messenger. The Muslims called the first experience at Mt. Hira the "night of power and excellence."<sup>2</sup> Mohammed's first converts were his wife and his two adopted sons. Among the first messages received was the declaration that there is only one God and Allah is His name. The revelations continued and would later form the Koran, the Muslim holy book.

As a result of his vision Mohammed had a constant and strong sense of divine calling and purpose. He was convinced that he was a person possessed by a divine power. Because of this he soon began to preach to others about this vision. Slowly he gained converts to his monotheistic faith.

After his wife died, he married twice in the first year. Later he married several different wives. One of these wives was a Jew and another was a Christian. These had an influence on Mohammed and resulted in some Bible stories and Bible characters which were later mentioned in the Koran.

The message that insisted on the idea of one absolute God was a message that created problems in his home town of Mecca. Mecca's economy depended largely on the trade brought to it during the annual religious festivals. These were festivals which required ritual and gifts to many gods. As a result, the merchants of Mecca became disturbed by what Mohammed was saying. Because of this opposition Mohammed and his trusted friends slipped away from Mecca to Medina. Medina was located at the oasis of Yathrib and was nine hundred miles to the north of Mecca and across the desert. The year was A.D. 622. Today Islam's calendar dates from this journey which made Medina the centre of Mohammed's ministry. This flight from Mecca is referred to as the "hijra." Within a hundred years the banner of Islam would spread over three continents, from the realm of China to the Pyrenees.<sup>3</sup>

Mohammed quickly established himself in Medina, acquiring prestige and a small group of followers. Increasingly he preached a warning concerning the Day of Judgement. While at Medina he assumed a new role

It is thought that Mohammed's vision occurred in A.D.

\_\_\_\_\_.

(610)

After a second \_\_\_\_\_, Mohammed submitted to be Allah's \_\_\_\_\_.

(vision, messenger)

Mohammed's first converts were his \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

(wife, sons)

Mohammed fled Mecca because of opposition from \_\_\_\_\_.

(merchants)

The centre of Mohammed ministry now became \_\_\_\_\_.

(Medina)

<sup>2</sup> John B. Noss, *Living Religions* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1967), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie, *The Sword and the Sermon*, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, July 1972), p. 4.

as a military leader. He set up a state of Islam. This was the first attempt in the history of Arabia to combine a social organization with religion. Previously the social structure was held together by blood and kinship ties. In this new state religion there were no plans for a priesthood or a religious hierarchy. The leader in prayer and spiritual matters was Mohammed. He was also the military commanding chief of the army. This army of the faithful was established to protect one another against the entire world.

At this point both Mohammed and his newly established religious movement took on a new and powerful dimension. By A.D. 630 he had convinced the citizens of Medina to attack Mecca. This attack led to several years of military struggle which resulted in the defeat of Mecca. At this time Mohammed went about the task of "cleansing" and dedicating Mecca as a holy place to Allah. In this manner Mecca ceased to be the centre of worship for the other gods and religions and became the holy city of Islam. Two years later Mohammed died at the estimated age of sixty-two. The date of his death is set by some as A.D. June 8, 632. Although he had influenced many people, Mohammed had one deep regret at the time of his death. His teaching and his life had never influenced or changed the uncle who had raised him.

When Mohammed died he left no successor and this caused concern among his followers. Learning about this concern, one of Mohammed's first converts made a declaration. Abu Bakr declared: "Whosoever worships Mohammed, let him know that he is dead! But to those who worship Allah, let it be known that he does not die!" Abu Bakr was accepted as the new leader and thus became the first Caliph. He was Mohammed's successor.

From Medina and Mecca Islamic theocracy spread over Arabia and to northern Mesopotamia. Moving westward the militant message was carried by force. Islam spread across Asia Minor, Persia, Egypt and North Africa (by A.D. 640), moving westward into Spain. The armies of Islam were turned back at the battle of Tours. In A.D. 732 Charles Martel had led the armies which halted the Muslim advance into Europe.

It must be noted that many so called converts were brought under the control of Islam through force. Others accepted this new religion simply to avoid higher taxes which were placed upon them by a Muslim state. In his book, *The Arab World Today*, Monroe Berger suggests that many of the new adherents to Islam continued to be guided by their Christian background. He further suggests that these people had a definite influence on Islam and its practice.<sup>4</sup>

Mohammed set up a state of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ . He also commanded the \_\_\_\_\_ .

*(Islam, Medina, army)*

The citizens of Medina attacked \_\_\_\_\_ in A.D. \_\_\_\_\_ .

*(Mecca, 630)*

Mecca became the \_\_\_\_\_ of Islam.

*(holy, city)*

Identify: Abu Bakr.

*(Compare your answer with the text.)*

<sup>4</sup> Monroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1962).

During the first one hundred years of its existence the Muslim faith had spread with great speed. This was possible because of the combination of religious fervour which was combined with military force and power. It was the spread of Islam which led to the Christian crusades which recaptured Jerusalem. By the thirteenth century much of northern India had become Muslim and from there the religion of Mohammed spread to the East Indies. Since the fifteenth century most of Africa has been invaded by Islam or influenced by it.

Today, Islam is a world-wide religion. Its followers can be found on every continent. The areas where Islam is most dominant are North Africa, the Middle East, Northern India and the East Indies. It is also to be found in the area of the Caribbean —especially among the Indian population in Guyana, Surinam, and Trinidad. Christians should understand that Islam today continues to be militant and missionary.

### Islam's Four Basic Teachings

There are four basic beliefs or doctrines which provide the foundation for this religion. These basic doctrines are concerned with Allah, angels, final judgement and sacred writings—with special attention upon the Koran.

#### Allah

As you study the Koran you soon discover that the primary teaching of Islam is that Allah (God) is the supreme sovereign of the universe. The following excerpt from the Koran has been described as the very essence of the faith:

Say: He is Allah, the one!  
Allah, the eternally Besought of all!  
He begetteth not nor was begotten.  
And there is none comparable to him.<sup>5</sup>

Allah is unique, all powerful and merciful to all Muslims. He has ninety-nine beautiful names which are represented by ninety-nine beads on a rosary. His power and transcendence over all creation is so emphasized that a Muslim would never think of calling him father or the God of love. The very essence of the Muslim doctrine of Allah focuses on the oneness of God. The Muslims have great difficulty with the doctrine of the Trinity. They feel that this is an impossibility and actually is regarded as polytheism —that is, teaching that there are three Gods and not just one. This naturally makes it impossible for a devout Muslim to accept what the Bible teaches about incarnation. "The Originator of the heavens and earth; how can he have a child, when there is for him no consort?"<sup>6</sup> Allah is the one God — without a partner, omnipotent and omnipresent. An intrical part of Muslim doctrine is that God must be obeyed. His creatures owe

<sup>5</sup> A quotation from the Koran as translated by Sir William Muir, *The Life of Mohammed* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1932), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Noss, p. 81.

The followers of Islam can be found on every \_\_\_\_\_.

(continent)

There are four basic doctrines in \_\_\_\_\_.

(Islam)

That \_\_\_\_\_ is the supreme \_\_\_\_\_ of the universe is the \_\_\_\_\_ teaching of Islam.

(Allah, sovereign, primary)

A Muslim would never call Allah \_\_\_\_\_ or the God of \_\_\_\_\_.

(father, love)

Him absolute adoration and obedience. This fact is illustrated by the word "Muslim" which in Arabic means "one who has submitted himself to Allah's will." For the Muslim nothing is more important than obeying God.

### Angels

Angels have great importance in the Koran and in all Muslim teachings. Angels are Allah's servants and messengers. They are described as guardians of heaven and earth. It is believed that they will come to man's assistance and that they also record the deeds of mankind. The chief angels are Gabriel and Michael. Many Muslim traditions record the visions and revelations which these angels gave to Mohammed. There is belief in a hierarchy of angels who are reasoning beings and who were created from light. Each person has two recording angels to write down good and evil deeds. More will be said later about the many evil spirits which are also a vital part of Muslim teachings.

### The day of judgement

This doctrine holds a prominent place in the Koran as it did in Mohammed's early preaching. It is also called the Last Judgement, or the Day of Reckoning. Sometimes it is referred to simply as the Last Day or as the Day of Separation.<sup>7</sup>

This basic teaching is both clear and simple. At the end of the world all men will go before Allah to be judged. They will be judged on the basis of their actions. Judgement will be pronounced and a person will go to either hell or to paradise. Hell is a place of fire and great pain. Paradise is a place of extravagant and rather sensual pleasure. The Koran gives vivid descriptions of what will take place on this last day as all deeds are weighed on a balance. The evil will topple into the fires of hell as they cross a long thin bridge. The saved will cross swiftly into paradise with delicious fruit, wine and women.

Today there is some indication that there is less fear of judgement and punishment experienced by Muslims. There seems to be a growing belief that Mohammed will save all believers—that is, all Muslims. Salvation for the Muslim comes through good works. The requirements and basis for the good works are described in the five pillars of Islam. These pillars or requirements will be discussed later in our study.

### The Koran and other sacred books

The Koran is regarded as the infallible and final word of God to man. It should be noted that Muslims accept four books as holy writings. These include the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels, and the Koran. Many stories of the Koran are Bible stories. Muslims believe that the Bible was once sacred but has been tampered with by Christians. They believe that the Koran is the word of God, that it was written in Arabic and that it cannot be translated properly. Any translation is consid-

Muslims owe God \_\_\_\_\_ adoration and \_\_\_\_\_.

(absolute, obedience)

Allah's servants and messengers are called \_\_\_\_\_.

(angels)

According to Muslim belief, people will be sent to \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ on the day of judgement. This judgement is based on their \_\_\_\_\_.

(hell, paradise, actions)

Salvation comes to the Muslim through \_\_\_\_\_.

(good, works)

The infallible and final word of God to man is the \_\_\_\_\_.

(Koran)

<sup>7</sup> Christy Wilson, *Introducing Islam* (New York: Friendship Press, 1958), p. 26.

ered to be wrong. The Koran is the latest and therefore the most complete and true revelation of Allah. It stands above and replaces all other scriptures.

The various writings in the Koran were compiled into a canon nineteen years after the death of Mohammed. In the early days portions of the Koran were written on the ribs of palm leaves and on tablets of white stones and bones. The Koran is almost worshipped by the Muslims who count its six thousand, two hundred and thirty-nine verses, its seventy-seven thousand, nine hundred and thirty-four words, and even its three hundred and twenty-three thousand and six hundred and twenty-one letters. It is the Muslim belief that every bit of grammar and every mark of punctuation is perfect and fully inspired. The Koran contains a code of laws for Allah's earthly kingdom.

There are many parallels between the Koran and the Old Testament.

Among the Old Testament characters, Adam, Noah, Abraham (mentioned about seventy times), Ishmael, Lot, Joseph, Moses (whose name occurs in thirty-four chapters), Saul, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jacob and Jonah figure prominently. The story of the creation and fall of Adam is cited five times, the flood eight and Sodom eight. Of the New Testament characters Zechariah, John the Baptist, Jesus and Mary are the only ones emphasized.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these four basic doctrines or teachings, there are five pillars (or obligations).

### The Five Pillars (Obligations)

It has already been stated that future reward and future salvation is completely dependent upon acts of obedience and acts of good works. We will now study the five pillars or the five obligations which must be observed faithfully by every true Muslim.

#### Recitation of the creed

"There is no God but Allah. Mohammed is the true messenger of God." This creed is repeated daily by Muslims and can also be a profession of faith in Islam. A repetition of these words is all that is needed in order to become a Muslim. Because this is true, it has been said that this first obligation (or pillar) is the only essential obligation for the Muslim. At least once before death the Muslim must state this creed. When one recites this creed it is understood that he rejects all other faiths.

#### Prayer

A Muslim is required to pray five times each day. He is called to prayer at dawn, mid-day, mid-afternoon, sunset, and at darkness. The Muslim is called to prayer by the Muesszin from the top of a minaret. The minaret is a tall tower located on each mosque. The people are

Any translation is considered to be \_\_\_\_\_

(wrong)

List the four major doctrines of Islam.

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(Compare your answers with the text.)

State the creed of Islam.

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(Compare your answer with the text.)

Underline the number of times a Muslim is required to pray each day.

three four five seven

(five)

<sup>8</sup> Sania Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1960), p. 69.

called to prayer with the following cry.

Allah is most great, I testify that there is no God but Allah,  
I testify that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah,  
Come to prayer;  
Come to prosperity,  
Allah is the most great,  
There is no God but Allah.

Prayer is regarded as a debt owed to God. Prayer is also seen as an act of worship. When a Muslim prays he must always face towards Mecca. Prayers are always given in Arabic. The Muslim practises ceremonial cleansing before each act of prayer. Water is used to symbolically cleanse the feet, hands, mouth, eyes and ears. If no water is available, sand may be used for this symbolic act of cleansing.

The prayer time is usually begun by reciting the first chapter of the Koran. The Koran does not require five times for daily prayer. Mohammed set an example by praying three times each day. In the Koran the fourth prayer time is stated, but tradition gives the requirement for five prayer times. Today only the more devout Muslim is faithful regarding the five daily prayers. The one who prays begins in a standing position and ends his prayer with his toes, knees, palms and forehead on the ground. This form of bowing symbolizes the act of submission. Prayers can be made from any clean place and many Muslims carry a prayer mat with them. This assures them of a clean and appropriate place for them to bow facing Mecca.

### Alms giving

Every Muslim is obligated to give certain offerings or alms to the poor. The required amount is two and one-half per cent of his income. This may be given either to the mosque or directly to a poor person in need. There are other rather complicated guidelines for the giving of alms. For example, the Muslims should give one-tenth of produce raised from irrigated fields but only half this amount from fields which are not irrigated. This obligation has changed somewhat through the years. In the early days of Islam alms were collected like taxes. Today, however, the time and how of giving is determined more by the individual. Muslim parables show clearly the importance of good works.

A man served God for seventy years and then committed a sin which cancelled the merit of his service. Later, he gave a poor man a loaf of bread and God pardoned his sin and gave him back the merit of his seventy years service.<sup>9</sup>

### Fasting

Fasting is considered to be spiritually helpful at all times. But it is an absolute duty during the month of Ramadan. This is the ninth month of the Muslim lunar year. Fasting is done during daylight hours but not

Draw a circle around the best answers.

Prayer is considered to be:

- a debt owed to God
- useless
- an act of worship

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Each Muslim is obligated to give \_\_\_\_\_ to the

\_\_\_\_\_.

(alms, poor)

<sup>9</sup> A.S. Tritton, *Islam* (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1951), p. 26.

during the night. During the time of fasting, smoking is prohibited and one is not permitted even to swallow his saliva. During this month of fasting exceptions are made for the young, the sick, the aged or for women who are pregnant. This fast was intended to be done as an act of worship and piety.

In actual practice, the fast of Ramadan is not a true fast. The days and nights are almost reversed during this period of time. Sleeping is allowed during the day. More social gatherings and night parties are scheduled during this time. Often a family will save money all year in order to have plenty to eat and drink during Ramadan. But they must do this after sunset. In many cities the observance is only a pretense. The act of fasting is another work required to atone for sins. The month of Ramadan is the month in which Mohammed received the Koran from Allah.

### **Pilgrimage to Mecca**

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is the "Hajk." The Hajk is a journey to Mecca which all Muslims try to make at least once in a lifetime. This pilgrimage comprises one of the most fascinating expressions of religious life in the modern world. This obligation originates from the trip that Mohammed made when he fled from Mecca to Medina.

Although the Hajk includes the journey to Mecca itself, it does not end there. Once the Muslim has reached the sacred city, he is obliged to participate in several days of religious ritual. During this time he joins tens of thousands of believers as he denounces the forces of evil and confirms the majesty of Allah and of Islam. During these ceremonies a Muslim also visits the grand mosque and kisses the famous black stone. The black stone was the only object which Mohammed allowed to remain when he returned to conquer Mecca. At the time of this pilgrimage special prayers are said and the worshipper drinks from the sacred well. He also visits the place of Abraham and runs between two hills seven times. On the last day of the visit to Mecca a great feast is given and an animal sacrifice is offered. Then the grave of Mohammed is visited in Medina. After making this pilgrimage a Muslim then has earned a special title which he keeps for the rest of his life. So the trip to Mecca makes one a rather special kind of Muslim.

When Muslims are too poor to make the pilgrimage themselves they may earn merit by combining their offerings in order to send one person from a family or village.

Muslim fasting is done in the \_\_\_\_\_ and not at \_\_\_\_\_.

*(day, night)*

Is the following statement true or false?

Mohammed received the Koran during the month of Ramadan. \_\_\_\_\_

*(true)*

The final pillar of Islam is the \_\_\_\_\_.

*(Hajk)*

List the five pillars of Islam.

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*(Compare your answers with the text.)*

## Home Study Exercise

**Basic activity** (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). After reading the study guide, answer the following questions.

1. Write a brief report of Mohammed's early life. What contribution did Mohammed's uncle make upon his life? (Use additional paper if needed.)

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2. How did Mohammed receive his "call"? What influence did his wife have upon him?

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3. What role did these places play in Mohammed's life: Mecca, Medina?

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4. What unique contribution did Mohammed make with his religion in Arabia?

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5. How was Mohammed's successor chosen?

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6. State the extent of Islam in the modern world.

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7. Give the Muslim view of Allah. What does the name "Muslim" indicate of the followers of Islam?

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8. Record the Muslim belief about angels.

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9. What place does a “Day of Judgement” have in Islam? Explain.

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10. What do Muslims believe about the Koran?

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11. According to Islam, what is salvation and future reward based upon?

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12. What is the creed of Islam?

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13. Why does a Muslim consider prayer to be so important?

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14. How do Muslims practise the giving of alms?

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15. How do Muslims practise fasting? What is Ramadan?

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16. What is a “Hajk”?

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17. List the five pillars of Islam.

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**Supplementary activity** (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 19,20; 37-40; 66-70; 103-10; 133-36; 156-59; 198-201 in *Understanding World Religions* and do the following things.

1. Write the story of the birth and spread of Islam.
2. What do Muslims believe about the Old Testament prophets?
3. List the major beliefs of Islam.
4. Describe the Koran.
5. Distinguish between the three Muslim groups.

**Advanced activity** (*Level 3*). Review the reading assignment given above and do the following things.

1. Write a paper entitled: "Islam's Sense of History."
2. Describe the architectural style of the Mosque, relate this to the theology and the religious practice of Muslims, and give its role in the daily life of Muslim people.

### **Seminar Discussion**

1. Discuss the origin and growth of Islam.
2. Discuss the major beliefs of Islam.
3. Discuss the six pillars of Muslim religious life.
4. Discuss the place of the Koran in Muslim life.
5. Discuss salvation, future reward, and prayer in the Muslim faith.