

One In Five Is A Muslim

World's Fastest Growing Religion Dominates Many

By BARBARA S. MOFFET
National Geographic News Service

Of the three religions that spring from the Middle East, Islam dominates there today. But Islam is not limited to the Middle East. It is the principal belief in some 40 nations in Asia and Africa. Here is a primer on Islam—the world's fastest growing religion.

WHO THEY ARE—Almost one of every five people on Earth is a Muslim (or Moslem), some 800 million people. Most Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Libya, and Yemen are heavily Muslim, yet the countries with the most Muslims are outside the Mideast: Indonesia (135 million), Bangladesh (80 million), Pakistan (75 million), India (60 million), the Soviet Union (45 million), and China (30 million). There are two million Muslims in the United States.

The Muslims' faith is called Islam, an Arabic word meaning submission—submission to God's will. Islam is considered more than a religion. It is a total way of life. Yet within Islam is rich diversity. Most Muslims are not Arabs; Muslim states vary as much as Sweden and El Salvador in the Christian world. Muslim leaders differ sharply in style: The late Anwar Sadat was a devout Muslim, as is the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran.

TWO BRANCHES—The most conspicuous difference among Muslims is their division into two major branches—the Sunnis and the Shiis (sometimes called Shias or Shiites). More than 85 percent of today's Muslims are Sunnis; some of the leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization, for example, are Sunni Muslims.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, whose people are not Arabs, has the greatest percentage of Shiis, about 93 percent of its population. Its battlefield foe, the Republic of Iraq, is more than half Shia Muslim, yet the Iraqi government is controlled by Sunnis. Shiis also are significant in Lebanon, Bahrain, the Yemen, Pakistan, and India.

The split occurred in the seventh century when Islam's founder, Muhammad, died and a dispute arose over his successor. One branch, the Sunnis (derived from the Arabic word for tradition) preferred to elect or select a successor. Another group maintained that the new leader should be Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali. This group formed the nucleus of the early Shia movement, whose name derives from a word meaning "partisans or followers of Ali."

In A.D. 680 Ali's son Hussein led a band of rebels against the Sunnis; the band was massacred, Hussein beheaded. The debacle left the Muslim community divided into two branches—the Shia and those who later were to be called the Sunnis. Remorse for failing to aid Hussein became central to the Shia movement.

Within each major branch are many minor groups, such as the Wahhabi in Saudi Arabia and the Shia-related Alawite in Syria and Turkey. The Islamic mystics, known as the Sufis, are sprinkled throughout the Muslim world.

Shiis believe that Ali and his descendants were imams, divinely guided leaders and interpreters of God's will. Yet they disagree about the identity of the imam at any certain point and on how many imams there have been. The largest group, sometimes known as Twelvers and concentrated in

Iran, contends there were 12, the last of whom disappeared in A.D. 874, is in hiding, and will return someday to establish a purified Islamic government. Other Shiis, among them some of the Ismailis of Africa and India, believe that imam is still alive, in the form of the Agha Khan, who lives in Pakistan.

How do a Sunni and Shia nation differ? In most Sunni countries religious activities are regulated by the state but treated as an appendage of the political system. In today's Iran, the world's only Shia state, Khomeini's authority as a spokesman of the hidden imam of the Twelver Shiis is supreme. As such, the state exists to serve Islam.

ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION—Muhammad was born in Mecca, in present-day Saudi Arabia, about A.D. 570. While meditating in a cave, Muhammad said, he heard revelations from the Angel Gabriel, words that eventually formed the Koran. Tradition holds that he later was transported from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven for a preview of the afterlife.

Muhammad preached the message he had received, but he was persecuted, and he emigrated to Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia. There he gained more followers, created a Muslim community, and returned victorious to Mecca, where he smashed idols at the pagan shrine of the Kaaba. Today the Kaaba is the most holy place in Islam; Muslims face it when they bow in prayer five times daily. Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem are Islam's holiest cities because of their association with the revelations to Muhammad.

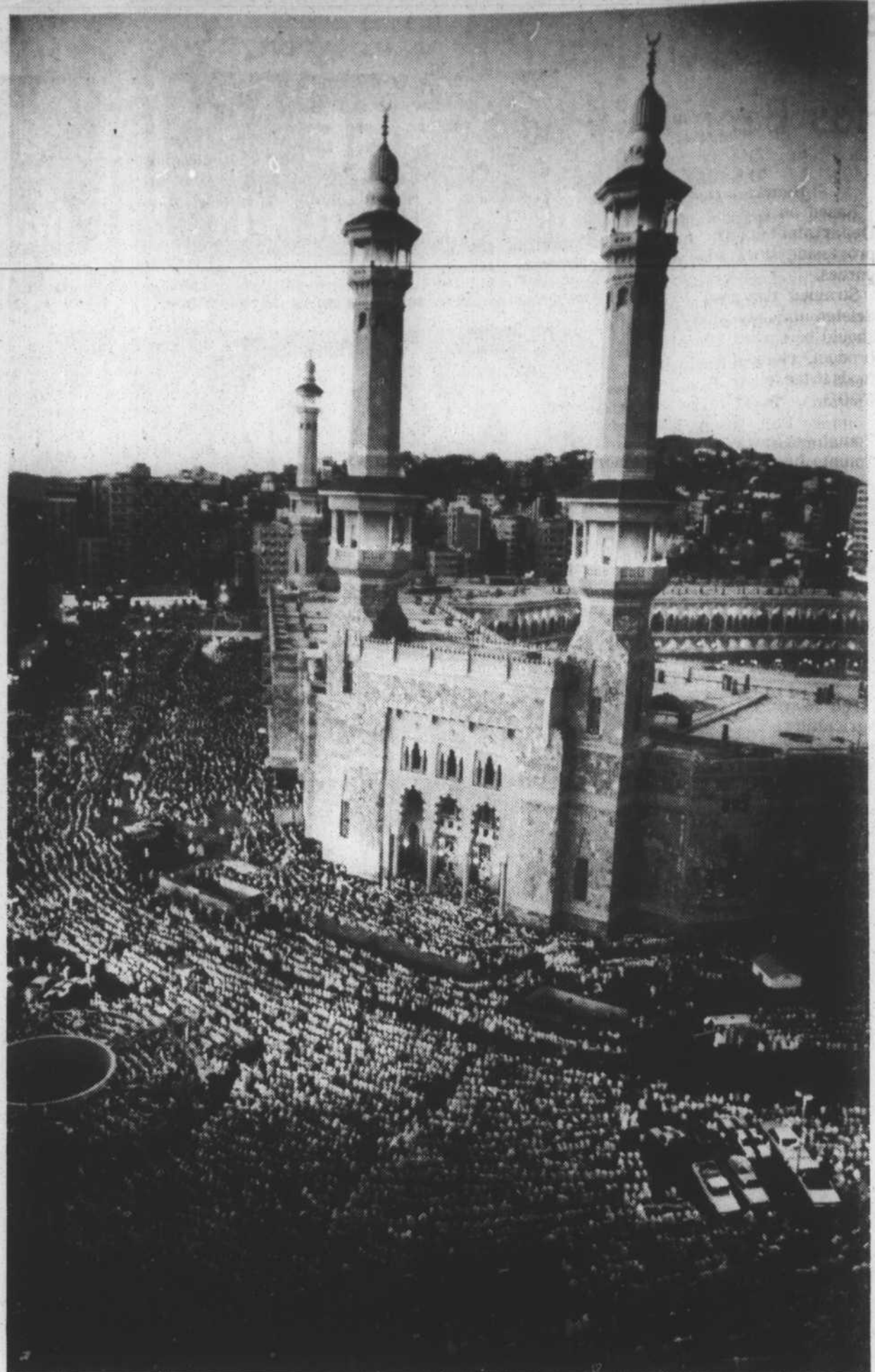
Muhammad died in A.D. 632, and the message of Islam inspired an extraordinary expansion of Arabs out of the Arabian peninsula into North Africa, Spain, Central Asia, and the Indus River valley. The expansion, aided by the weakness of empires that opposed it, laid the groundwork for the remarkable synthesis of Islamic civilization.

From the ninth to the 13th centuries, Islamic civilization was at its peak in such centers as Baghdad, Cordoba, and Bukhara. Here in a complex process of synthesis, the artistic and scientific legacies of the Greek, Indian, Persian, and Aramaean worlds were Islamicized and carried to new levels of sophistication. In a different vein, the luxury of the Abbasid court became the basis of "The Arabian Nights" legends.

Muhammad, who preached restraint and discipline, would hardly have recognized the Islamic civilization of this period and would surely have condemned the lifestyle of the courtiers. The vast extent of the Abbasid empire, the virulent political rivalries, and the strain of extravagance on limited resources fragmented and weakened Islam's domain.

In such a condition, the Islamic world was slow to respond to the Crusades of the 11th century and unable to stem the Mongol invasion that swept out of the Asian steppes in the 13th century. The Mongols put an end to Baghdad's glory. But the faith survived conquest by these non-Muslims; within a half century the Mongols were absorbed by Islam.

In succeeding centuries Islamic civilization assumed a variety of forms as it blended with diverse cultures: Indonesian, Indian, Turkish, Moroccan, and Sub-Saharan African. Then all confronted Western civilization in its mercantile, colonial, im-



By Mehmet Biber
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Pilgrims kneel before the Sacred Mosque at Mecca, goal of all Muslims at least once in their lives. The mosque, in an arid Saudi Arabian valley near the birthplace of Muhammad, has seven minarets.

perial, and technological phases. Yet through all its diversity and different responses to challenge from the West, Islam has preserved a central core of beliefs.

MAIN BELIEFS—Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam arose in the Middle East. The three faiths share concepts of good and evil, and their codes of law are rooted in the Ten Commandments.

Islam teaches that God revealed his message to a series of prophets through the ages—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. God's final and complete revelation, Muslims believe, was made to Muhammad.

The Muslim believes that man, as the special creation of God born free of sin, should show his gratitude by obedience to God's will, by fear of his fate on the Last Day, and by a pious, modest, and restrained comportment in his daily life. There is no priesthood in Islam; no rite elevates a man into special relationship with God, so Islam has no Vatican. Because of this, divergence of opinion is almost guaranteed.

What is agreed is that a Muslim has five duties: Oral declaration that there is no deity but God, and Muhammad is his messenger; prayer five times a day (missed prayers must be made up); fasting during the 30 days of Ramadan from daybreak to sunset; paying alms (2.5 percent of one's yearly savings); and a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in the life of every physically and financially able Muslim. All Muslims come together on the annual pilgrimage—Turks, Berbers, Arabs, Indians, peasants, generals, Iranian Shiis, and Iraqi Sunnis.

Shiis also trek to Najaf, a venerable Iraqi city that holds the tomb of Ali, as well as Karbala, where Ali's son Hussein is buried. And Shiis mark the first 10 days of the Muslim month of Muharram with guilt-ridden self-punishment for their abandonment of Hussein. Although it is outlawed in most places, men in some countries, such as Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, still strip to the waist and march through the streets slashing themselves with knives and beating themselves with chains.

Muslims are forbidden to consume intoxicants, pork, blood, and anything harmful. An animal must be ritually slaughtered and drained of blood before it can be eaten.

The Koran and the laws derived from it consider men and women equal but not alike. Both men and women, it teaches, must dress modestly. The strict veiling practiced by some Muslim women today is not enforced everywhere, however.

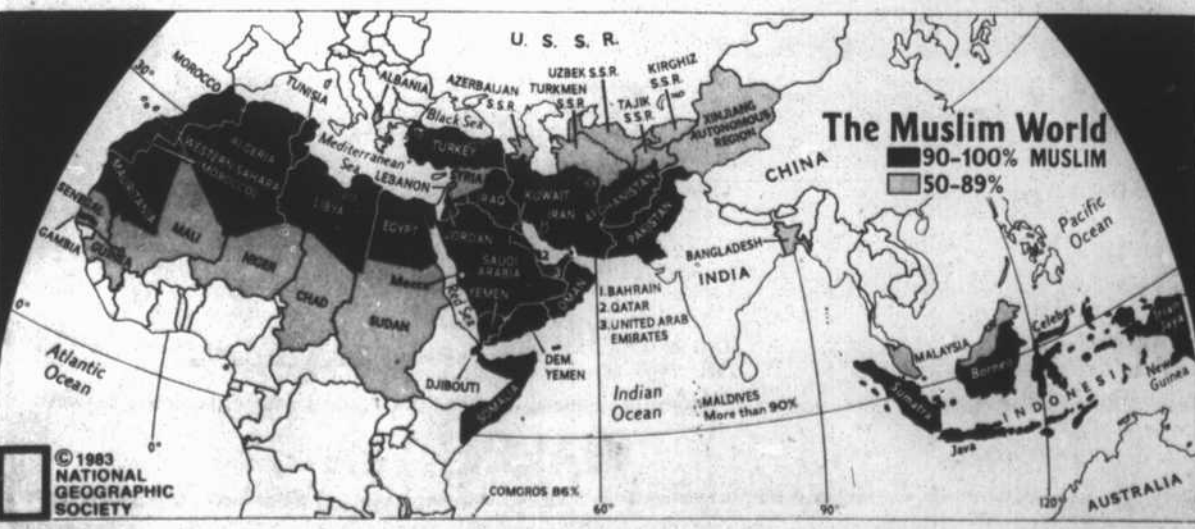
The Koran prescribes punishments for crimes, petty and serious. After three warnings, a thief is to lose four fingers (not the whole hand, which is needed for prayer). Thus he becomes an example for society. Anyone threatening the security of the state can be deported or executed. Executions that have taken place in Iran, for example, may or may not be justified by events but certainly have Islamic

precedent. But the Islamic rules of evidence are very precise and make criminal convictions rather difficult, if fully applied.

Islam has resurged in several countries in recent years, especially those struggling against foreign domination and what is viewed as the evils of Western ideologies. In the absence or disrepute of such means of expression as political parties and balloting, a religious movement may be the only vehicle for change. To these Muslims, a return to the ways set forth in the Koran is the true path to self-determination, the way of life that has been the Islamic ideal for 14 centuries.



Afghan refugees in Pakistan bow for afternoon prayers, one of five said daily by Muslims. Most Mideastern nations are heavily Muslim, but there also are large numbers in Indonesia, India, China, and the Soviet Union.



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