

The youngest of the three great monotheistic religions, Islam is the religious faith of Muslims. Its origin goes back to Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar. Abraham is considered to be the first Jewish prophet. To ensure his line of descent, Abraham wed Hagar when his first wife Sarah could not provide offsprings. Later, when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she urged Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. According to the Koran, the sacred text of Islam, Ishmael fled to Mecca, city situated in Saudi Arabia. Ishmael's descendants became Muslim while Isaac's became Jews.

Mohammed is considered the last and ultimate prophet of Allah (God). He was born in Mecca in 570 A.D. It is while meditating in a cavern near Mecca that , according to tradition, was visited by the angel Gabriel who transmitted him God's revelation.

Mohammed's teachings are simple : the God of Heaven demands that all earthly creatures be moral and devote a monotheistic religion to Him.

At first, Mohammed's message was widely rejected, particularly by Mecca's elite who felt threatened by its egalitarian content. His message was eventually imposed and in 632, when the Prophet died, most of Arabia had converted to Islam.

The Koran is a collection of moral precepts that constitutes the basis of Islam, sole source of law, morality, administration and so on. The Koran has 114 chapters or Suras which include 6 236 ayahs. The 114 chapters are divided into four themes : beliefs of the faith, the prescribed cult, human actions towards moral finality and the relation among them. Like the Bible, the Koran announces that God, at the end of time, will judge men and their communities.

The Koran points out that the Old and New Testament were also the fruit of divine revelations and it acknowledges all the prophets identified as being as such in these two sacred books. Included are Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

Islam has two other sources of teachings: the Sunna and the Shari'ah. The Sunna reports the prophets' words, facts and acts. It also contains stories on Mohammed and his first disciples that were passed on from one generation to another. They are often proverbs or pious stories. The Shari'ah is the Law where Islam's recommendations and rules are prescribed. It is in the Shari'ah that all possible actions are divided into different categories : obligatory, reprehensible (consumption of pork or alcohol) and forbidden.

Of all the religions in the world, Islam has the highest growing rate of followers. Today we can count at least one Muslim community per country. Its rapid development has been especially noticed in the African-American culture.

Islam can be divided into two major branches : Sunni and Shiite. 90% of its worshippers are Sunnis . They give political authority more importance than the Shiites. Caliphs played an important role in the past as to the expansion of Islam. This role is now fulfilled by the Islamic heads of state.

The role of the head of state is to ensure that God's authority is respected. This is interpreted by the community's doctors, ulema and spokesmen. The Sunnis' real leader is the political leader and not the doctors who are there to interpret or advise . The Shiites make up 10% of the Islam world. They are mostly Iranians (Shiite is Iran's official religion) but we do find important Shiite communities in Lebanon, India Syria and Pakistan. They consider Imam as the most influential civil and religious leader.

(Recherche : Claude Marcil)