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## A Comparative Study of Religions

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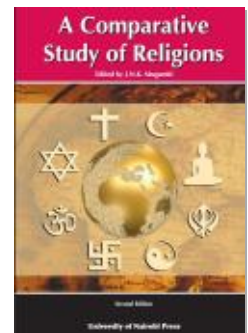
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## Muhammad as the Founder of Islam

*J. N. K. Mugambi*

### **The Life of Muhammad**

Muhammad was born about 570 CE (Christian Era) in Mecca, among the Quraysh people. His father Abdallah died before he was born, and until he was two years old he was brought up in his grandfather's home. Then his grandfather also died. His mother died when Muhammad was six years old. As an orphan, his uncle, Abu Talib, son of Abdul – Muttalib, brought him up and took care of him.

At the home of his uncle, Muhammad worked very hard, and his uncle loved him very much. He mended the clothes and shoes of his uncle. He also looked after sheep, goats and camels. In his youth Muhammad traveled to Syria two times, he was twelve years old on the first trip.

Muhammad did not receive any formal schooling. He could neither read nor write. However, he distinguished himself as a respectable and trustworthy person. His uncle enabled him find employment as a manager of a caravan of camels belonging to a wealthy widow, Khadija, who later became his wife. The lady had two previous husbands; she was fifteen years older than Muhammad. When they married, Muhammad was twenty-five and Khadija was forty years old.

Muhammad used to lead the caravan as far as Damascus from Mecca. During these trade journeys, he must have come into contact and possibly debated with Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. It was after his marriage that Muhammad began to

take religion seriously. He used to go for meditation and prayer to the hills and caves near Mecca. During one of those nights, he heard a call commanding him to recite in the name of Allah, the message that was later recorded in Quran.<sup>1</sup>

Muhammad began proclaiming the message, first to his wife, then to his cousins and close friends. In three years he had won only a small number of converts:

1. Khadija (his wife)
2. Ali (his younger cousin)
3. Abu Bakr (his friend)
4. Uthman (his friend)
5. Talha (his friend)

With these converts Muhammad began to preach publicly, denouncing Meccan polytheism and corruption, and warning of eternal punishment to all those who would not purify their religion and submit to strict monotheism in the name of Allah.

## **Muhammad's Teaching**

### **God and Angels**

Initially, Muhammad's emphasis was on the power and uniqueness of Allah as creator of all things. This teaching was a radical departure from Meccan religion, which recognized more than 360 deities, all represented in the Kabah.

Muhammad also taught about angels, who were creatures above human beings but below Allah. Amongst the angels was Gabriel (Gabriel) through whom the first revelation was sent by Allah to Muhammad. Thus one of the roles of angels was to serve as the direct messengers of Allah to the prophets. One of the angels disobeyed God, and has been responsible for causing evil and suffering since creation. This is Iblis, or Satan. Iblis is the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> Kateregga, Badru and Shenk, David. *Islam and Christianity*, Chapter 7.

enemy of humanity, because of laying temptations and misleading men and women into sin. Muhammad taught that evil only overcomes those who yield to temptations. The duty of every Muslim, therefore, is to submit to the will of Allah, and reject all distractions.

### **Prophets**

Muhammad taught that Allah had made his will known through individual prophets, of whom Muhammad was the last. The following are the prophets mentioned in the Quran:

<b>Quran</b>	<b>Biblical Equivalent</b>
Adam	Adam
Saleh	—
Lut	Lot
Hud	—
Y’acub	Jacob
Ibrahim	Abraham
Yunus	Jonah
Musa	Moses
Daud	David
Al-Ya’sa	Elisha
Zakara	Zachariah
Dhul-Kifl	Ezekiel
Isa	Jesus
Nuhu	Noah
Shu’aib	—
Ismail	Ishmael
Yusuf	Joseph

Ishaq	Isaac
Harun	Aaron
Sulaiman	Solomon
Yahya	John the Baptist
Ayub	Job
Ilyas	Elijah
Idrees	–
Muhammad	–

Muhammad is the last prophet according to the teaching of Islam. Note that Jesus is recognized as one of the prophets superseded by Muhammad. The prophets receive Allah's instructions through the angels, especially through the archangel Jibril (Gabriel). According to Islamic tradition, there are as many as 124,000 prophets. Allah

### **Last Judgment**

The consequence of disobedience, according to Muhammad's teaching, will be eternal punishment while the reward will be eternal joy in paradise. Both Islam and Christianity lay heavy emphasis on a last judgment at the end of history. This is a doctrine which is aligned to traditional African religious thought and belief. In Islamic teaching both hell and paradise are explained in detail, such that one would prefer paradise rather than hell. In the book of revelation such descriptions of heaven are presented, but Christian theology takes these symbolically rather than literally.

### **The Five Pillars of Islam**

Islam as a religion is founded on obligatory rituals, beliefs and practices which every Muslim must abide by. These obligations are in five categories:

## **Submission to Allah**

Every Muslim must declare that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is his special messenger. This declaration carries with it the requirement that every Muslim prostrates before Allah and avoids the worship of any idol or representation of Allah. This pillar portrays Islam as a strictly monotheism religion.

## **Prayer**

Every Muslim is required to pray five times a day facing Mecca. This is a ritual which unites all Muslims universally. Even mosques are constructed facing Mecca, to facilitate the correct practice of this obligation.

The times for prayer are:

- (i) Dawn;
- (ii) Noon;
- (iii) Mid – afternoon;
- (iv) Sunset;
- (v) Dusk (onset of darkness).

Friday is a day set aside for weekly prayers in Islam. The prayers are centered in the Mosque, and led by the Imam whose role is to recite the words from the Quran while the faithful prostrate themselves rhythmically and in unison. The prayer leader also expounds Islamic doctrine.

## **Alms Giving**

It is an obligation for every Muslim to give alms to the poor. These alms should be at least one – fortieth of the believer's income. In the earlier days of Islam the alms used to be collected for redistribution in the community, but today they are given according to the wish of individual believers.

### **Fasting during the Month of Ramadhan**

For twenty-eight days every year Muslims are required to fast during the month of Ramathan. This practise is intended to encourage self – discipline among the faithful. Nothing should be eaten or drunk from sunrise to sunset. Eating is permitted at night. A great deal of effort and determination is needed to ensure full adhesion to this practice.

Since the month of Ramadhan is declared universally, this ritual portrays the universality of Islam as a living world religion.

### **Pilgrimage to Mecca**

This is the ritual which most dramatically portrays the unity of all Muslims in worship. It is expected that every Muslim should go on pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. In the past this used to be a very perilous undertaking. Today it is very expensive, relative to the distance between the believer’s country and Mecca.

The rituals performed in Mecca date from pre-Islamic times. It is interesting and curious that Muhammad chose this as the means to maintain continuity between the Arabian religious heritage and Islam. The center of the rituals is the Kabah, which houses the sacred black stone. The pilgrims walk around the Kabah seven times, kissing the black stone every time. Then they run seven times between two nearby hills. On the eighth day they move to Mount Arafat, twelve miles east of Mecca where they spend one day meditating on the plain. On their way back to Mecca they stop at Mina, where they participate in the ceremony of “stoning the Devil”. This is followed by sacrifices, and meat is distributed among the brethren.

Pilgrimage is characterized by both seriousness and festivity. Before the ritual is concluded the pilgrims go around the Kabah once more. Throughout the pilgrimage fasting is practiced from dawn to dusk, and sexual abstinence is observed. The pilgrims are expected not to cut hair or trim their nails.

## **The Islamic Way of Life**

Islam is much more than a religion. It is a total way of life. The Quran prescribes how the faithful should conduct themselves in all circumstances. It also regulates how society should be organized.

The effect of this is that in countries where Muslims have become a majority, there is a tendency to declare an Islamic state. This is the case in most countries of the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. The regulations of Islamic life are based on the following sources of authority:

1. Quran This is the major source of authority, since it is the revealed word of Allah.
2. Sharia The word Shari means “the Trodden Path” which leads to submission under Allah. Through Shari Muslims are instructed on how to regulate every aspect of life. The Shari binds Muslims into one community (Umma). Shari may lead to socio-political problems as was the case in Southern Sudan in the 1970s.
3. Hadith These are the writings which record all the sayings, instructions and activities of Muhammad. They were collected, edited and preserved by Muslim scholars to provide a source of reference for the Islamic way of life.

## **The Launching of Islam as a Movement**

Muhammad started proclaiming his message around 610 CE in Mecca, when he was 40 years old. Within twelve years, Muhammad disturbed the Meccans so much that they organized themselves to eliminate him and his follower. In September, 622 CE he fled to Medina, where the people were willing to receive him. From Medina he organized his followers to reconquer Mecca. Several battles were fought between Meccans and Muhammad’s followers based in Medina. Mecca finally



submitted in 630 CE. On February 23<sup>rd</sup> 632, Muhammad with 14,000 followers went on his final pilgrimage to Mecca and three months later he died on Monday June 8<sup>th</sup> 632 CE.

His followers carried on his work, and within a short time the movement spread across the Red Sea to North Africa, to become one of the most influential movements in history. This expansion will be discussed in the next chapter.

It is important to note that the majority of Muslim today are not Arabs. The nations which have the largest Muslim populations are not in the Arabian Peninsula. For example, there are twice as many Muslims in India as there are in Egypt. Although Arabic is the language of Islam and Arabia is the birth-place of the religion, it is now present in every continent. In terms of numbers the countries with the largest Islamic populations are:

1. Indonesia
2. Bangladesh
3. India
4. Pakistan

Some non-Arabic countries in Africa have large Islamic communities—such as Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, Chad, Upper Volta, and so on.

### **Activity**

Write notes on the differences and similarities between Christianity and Islam. If you can, read the explanations provided by Badru Kateregga and David in *Islam and Christianity*.