



Islam

SESSION 1

Where did Islam originate? What do Muslims believe? What similarities and differences are there between Christianity and Islam? How can Christians and Muslims best relate to one another?

Introduction

No argument is needed for the importance of understanding Islam. That great religion occupies the attention of the world as never before in modern times. The thoughtful Christian seeks to get behind the sensational headlines, the biased stereotypes, and the polemics that so often characterize the treatment of Islam in the media. A Christian perspective on the subject will take into account what the people of Islam say about their faith and will seek humbly to understand how believers in Christianity and believers in Islam can best relate to one another. As a beginning, we ask five simple questions and thus make our way into the heart of the subject: (1) When did Islam begin? (2) Where did it begin? (3) Who was its founding figure? (4) How did Islam begin? (5) Why did it come into existence? The other units of this series have to do with Islam's beliefs and practices, the extent of its spread in the world, and the possibilities for fruitful relationships between the people of Islam and those of Christianity.

When?

When did Islam begin? We note two significant facts that help in understanding Islam from a Christian perspective. First, Islam began in the seventh century after Christ. By that time, the Christian church had spread to much of the ancient civilized world and had developed in many ways, organizationally and theologically. Its impact upon the surrounding culture took many forms. But of course, Christians knew nothing of Islam. By contrast, the first followers of Islam were fully aware of Christianity, its institutions, and its leadership. This difference in the "When" of each faith affects relationships between them even today.

CENTERS OF CHRISTIANITY

Centers of Christianity, called patriarchates, in the seventh-century Middle East were Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Ctesiphon (in Persia), and Armenia.

The second fact about the "When" question is that Islam is firmly rooted in history. Like Christianity, it depends upon datable events for its authentication. This sets it apart from other world religions such as Hinduism that conceive of the world and life as being part of a timeless cycle, without beginning or ending.

Where?

Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula, an immense, largely desert area, nearly four times the size of the state of Texas. Its people were Arabs, closely akin ethnically to the Hebrews, and they made their living mostly by raising livestock and farming. The Arabs' vast homeland, with its few cities and dispersed population, played only a minor role on the world scene of the Middle East in the seventh century. There were two superpowers in that age and area: the Byzantine Christian Empire and the Persian Empire. At the time of Islam's beginning, these two empires had long been fighting each other for military and political power, but they had largely bypassed the land of the Arabs.

Looking at a map, it is easy to see why the ancient name for the Arabian Peninsula was *Jazirat al-'Arab*, or "The Island of the Arabs," set off as it is by water on three sides. The people were organized socially as tribes and lived in scattered small groupings. The most important city was Mecca in the western part of Arabia. It was a