

# ISLAM

## What It Is and Why Attack on Mosque Was So Horrendous

By Religious News Service

The recent seizure by a splinter sect of Muslim fanatics of the Sacred Mosque of Mecca in Saudi Arabia set off a wave of anger and consternation throughout the world of Islam.



It was as horrendous an outrage to devout Muslims as an attack on the Vatican would be to Roman Catholics, or a profanation of the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem would be to Jews.

Mecca is the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammed, the founder of Islam, and is the site of Islam's holiest shrine.

The Sacred Mosque, a gigantic holy place that can hold as many as 300,000 worshippers, enshrines at the center of its huge inner courtyard, the Ka'ba, a cube-shaped structure, covered always with a black cloth embroidered in gold.

Muslims believe that the Ka'ba was erected to God by Abraham and that it was cleansed of pagan idols by the Prophet Mohammed in 630 A.D.

It is the chief focus of prayer and ritual during the "hajj," the annual pilgrimage that this year drew more than two million Muslims to Mecca. It is the spiritual center of the Muslim world.

Irresponsible rumors, fueled by Iran's Shi'ite Muslim leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose followers were holding hostages at the American Embassy in Teheran, that the United States and Israel were behind the Mecca sacrilege, set off a paroxysm of Muslim rage against the U.S. from Turkey to Pakistan, where two U.S. servicemen were killed in the burning of the American Embassy in Islamabad.

An indication of the gravity of the desecration of the Sacred Mosque, which has such a depth of meaning for Muslims the world over, can perhaps be grasped by considering the origin, history and spirit of Islam.

Islam is not only the name of the world's second largest religion; it is a word which describes a special relationship between humanity and God.

The term islam, from the Arabic, means "submission" or "surrender" to the One God of all people, Allah. And the person who has accepted this submission, this obedience to the will of Allah is called a "muslim," or "one submitted to God."

These Arabic words, islam and muslim, loom large in the teaching of the Prophet Mohammed (570-632 A.D.) He and his followers devoted themselves as servants of the One God, against a prevailing polytheism, and called themselves Muslims. Their religion and their way of life came to be called Islam.

The Islamic faith, though born in the Arab world, now has its largest number of adherents in Asia and Africa, with growing communities in both Europe and North America. Over the centuries, various divisions and sects and schools of interpretation have developed, but all committed Muslims, of whatever stripe, are united in the profession of faith that "there is no god but God and Mohammed is the Prophet of God."

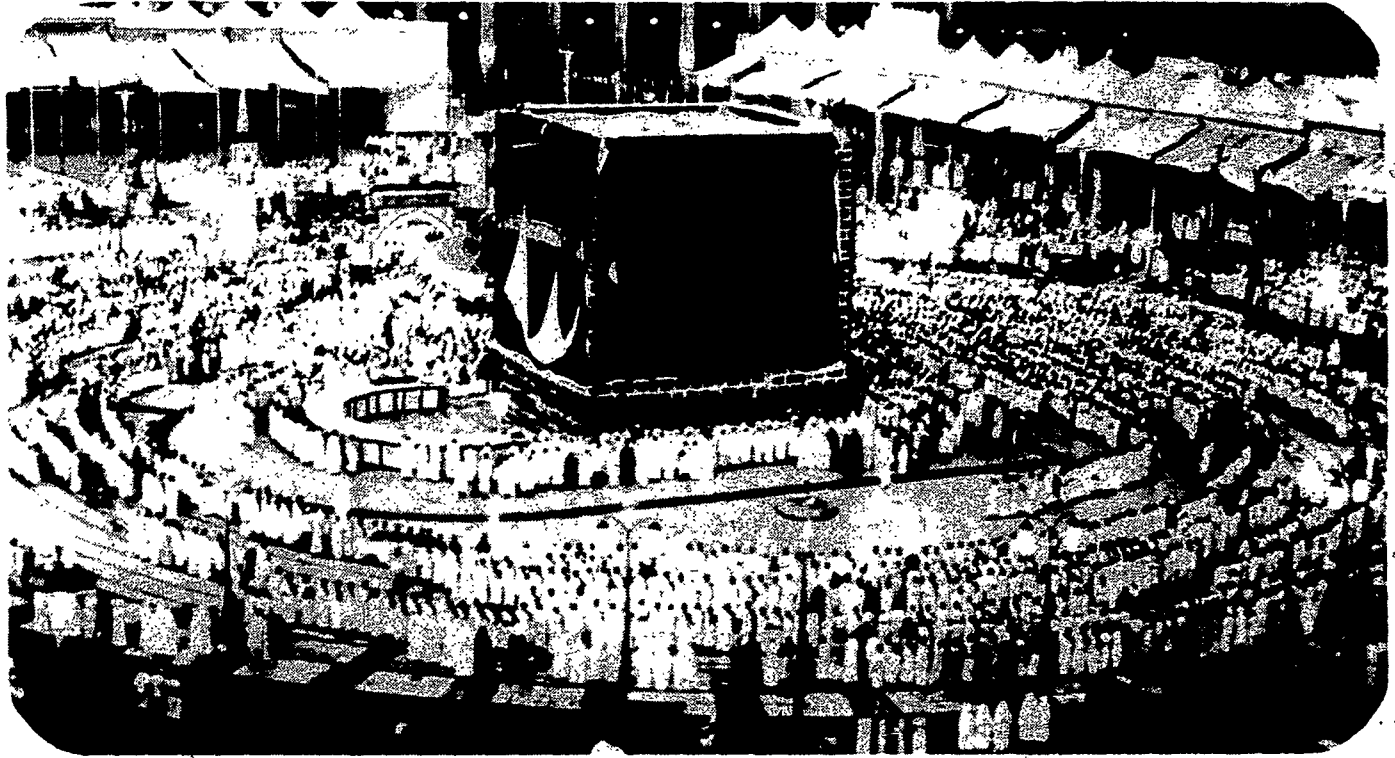
Between 600 and 800 million people, or approximately one-fifth of the world's population, profess that faith today.

Its founder, Mohammed, spoke of himself as the culmination — "the seal" — of a series of prophets, from Adam through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

He preached a radical monotheism that has many elements in common with the Judeo-Christian tradition, including ethical codes, angels, and a belief in bodily resurrection, and in the existence of heaven and hell.

His preaching ran afoul of Meccan leaders, who regarded his doctrine of a life after death as folly and who feared that the teaching about the One God would undercut their profitable pilgrimage traffic to the shrines of various Meccan goddesses.

So in July 622 A.D., Mohammed led his handful of followers out of Mecca on a 300-mile trek north to what is now Medina. This emigration, called the



The Sacred Ka'ba stands at the center of Muslim devotion.

Hijrah (or Hegira), marks the starting year for the Muslim calendar, which is based on the movements of the moon rather than the sun.

Nov. 21, 1979, marked the beginning of a new century for the Muslim world, the year 1400 A.H. (anno hegira).

In Medina, Mohammed prospered as a political and military as well as a religious leader. In January 630 A.D., the Prophet returned to Mecca with 10,000 troops. The city capitulated without bloodshed and Mohammed declared a general amnesty. He also ordered all idols in the city to be destroyed and purged the Ka'ba of its idol statuary.

At the time of his death in 632 A.D., at the age of 53, Mohammed and his Islamic followers controlled most of Arabia.

During the next hundred years, Islam, as a religious and political force, forged an empire larger than that of ancient Rome. At its zenith in the eighth century of the Christian era, Arab domination extended from the western edges of India and China across Persia, Arabia, Egypt and North Africa to the Atlantic.

In the West, Muslim troops conquered most of Spain ("ole" is simply a corruption of "Allah") and crossed the Pyrenees into France. The Islamic tide swept as far as Tours, in central France, where, in a battle regarded as an important turning point in history, Muslim armies were turned back by Christian forces in 732 A.D.

In the ensuing centuries, Islamic culture reached heights that were achieved only much later in Christian Europe. Arab scholars made pioneering discoveries in mathematics and medicine. In addition to developing algebra, the Arabs, introduced a numerical system that became the basis of modern math.

Arab astronomers accurately plotted the orbits of the planets and measured the earth's circumference with startling accuracy, at a time when most Europeans thought it flat. Arab architects produced such masterpieces as the Alhambra, the Moorish palace in Granada, Spain. And it was through Arabic translations that modern Western culture first gained access to Aristotle and other ancient Greek authors.

After its golden age — the eighth to the eleventh centuries — Islamic culture entered a period of decline from which it has yet to recover fully. By the time of the Crusades in the 11th century, the breakup of the Arab empire was well underway. The Arab fall coincided with the rise of the Ottoman Empire; by 1639, virtually the entire Arabic-speaking empire had been brought under Turkish Ottoman domination.

Thus while Europe was entering upon its most exciting age of discovery and exploration, the Arab world — the world of Islam — was sinking ever deeper into what has been described as "an abyss of misrule, anarchy and stagnation."

The spark of Arab-Islamic nationalism which lay dormant for three centuries began to flare up at the end of World War I, when European powers began to carve up the Ottoman empire for themselves.

That spark, as events of recent years and months have made clear, has become a steady fire throughout the world of Islam, smouldering in Indonesia, smoldering in Northern Africa, flaming up in Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and exploding in Iran.

An inseparable element of that fire is the religious faith that revolves around Islam's sacred scripture, the Holy Qur'an (Koran). The word means recitation.

According to Muslim tradition, the teachings and revelations contained in the Koran were dictated to the Prophet Mohammed (who could neither read nor write) over a 22-year period by the Angel Gabriel. The words Mohammed heard were memorized by him and then dictated to scribes.

To the Muslim the eternal "Truth of God" breaks into history not in the form of a man's life (as Christians believe of Jesus), but in the form of revealed scripture: not Word made flesh, but Word made book.

The text of the Koran includes descriptions of Allah's power, mercy, judgement; stories of Moses, Jesus and other religious figures who lived before Mohammed; and lengthy discussions of morals and manners and of laws affecting all aspects of life.

The teaching of the Koran has been supplemented by collections of the Prophet's practices and sayings (sunna), known as Traditions or Had'ith.

Both the Koran and the Had'ith are reinforced by a "consensus" principle of Islamic jurisprudence which enshrines the belief that "the community will not agree in error."

Muslims often sum up their main duties towards God under the heading of "the Five Pillars of the Faith." These are: confessing that God is One and that Mohammed is his messenger; ritual prayer five times each day, while bowing towards Mecca; almsgiving; fasting from dawn to sunset every day of the month of Ramadan; and, if possible, making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

These essentials of Islamic practice are simple and straightforward. But the Islamic legal and social system is highly complex. It rests on the authority of the "Shariah," a legal code worked out during the first two centuries after Mohammed's death.

Based in the Koran, the Had'ith, and such principles as that of the "consensus," the Shariah (path) is essentially a handbook for living the ideal life both individually and collectively. It contains rules on matters ranging from dress, diet, marriage, and divorce, to commerce and government. It even covers many personal decisions and actions ranging from one's kindness to those in trouble to how to enter a room and how to clean one's teeth.

Commitment to a total Islamic way of life is voiced five times a day by devout Muslims all over the world, as they turn to Mecca to testify to the great truth received by Mohammed and prayerfully intone: La-laha-illa-Allah: There is no god but God!

The attack on Mecca was an attack on the heart of Islam.