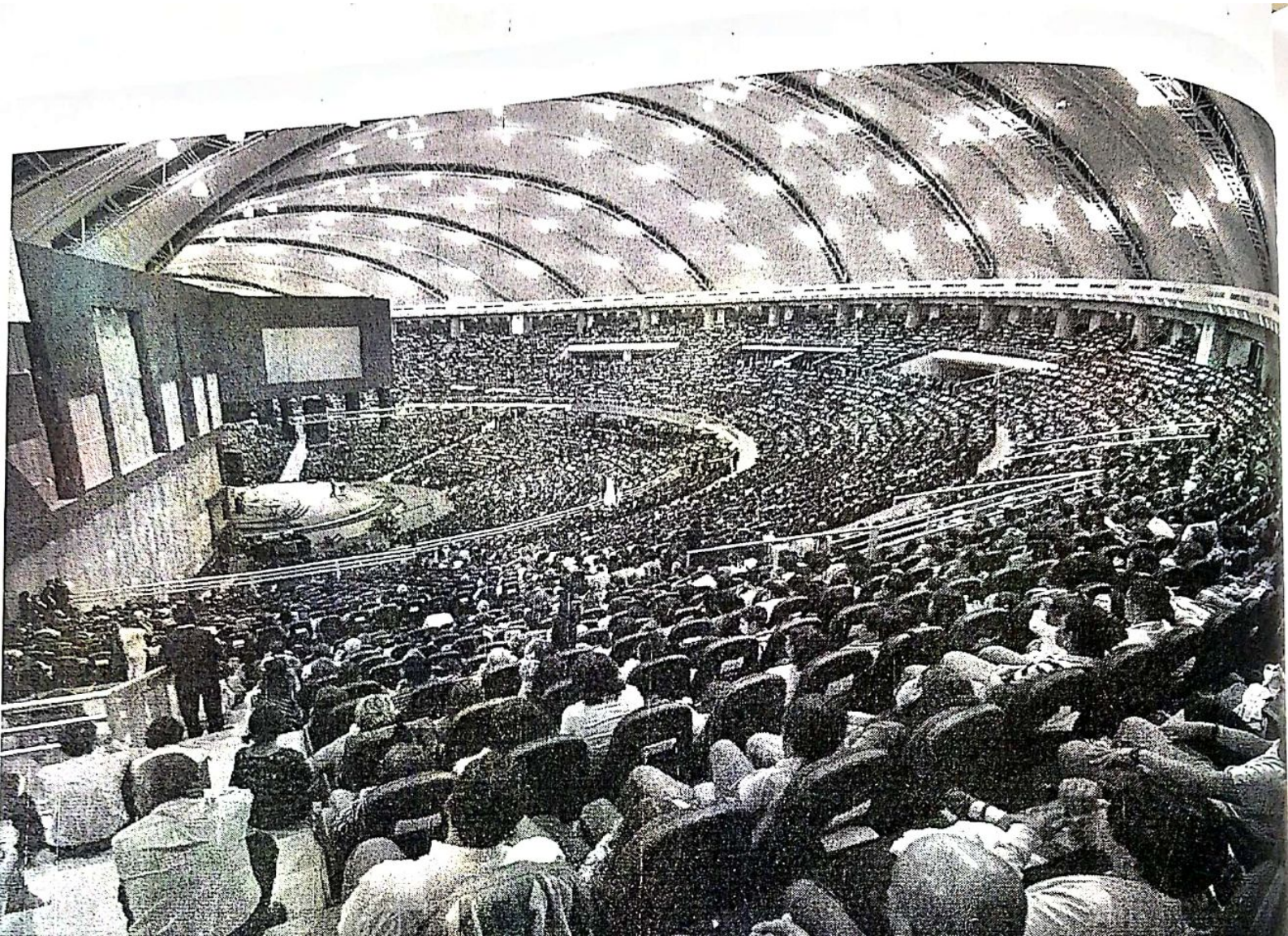


WORLD RELIGIONS 101

An Overview
for Teens

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times a day—at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and evening—faithful Muslims bow to Allah, facing the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Mecca is the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad, the founder of the religion of Islam. The muezzin announces in Arabic:

God is most great.

God is most great.

I testify that there is no god but God.

I testify that Muhammad is the Prophet of God.

Arise and pray.

God is most great.

God is most great.

There is no god but God.

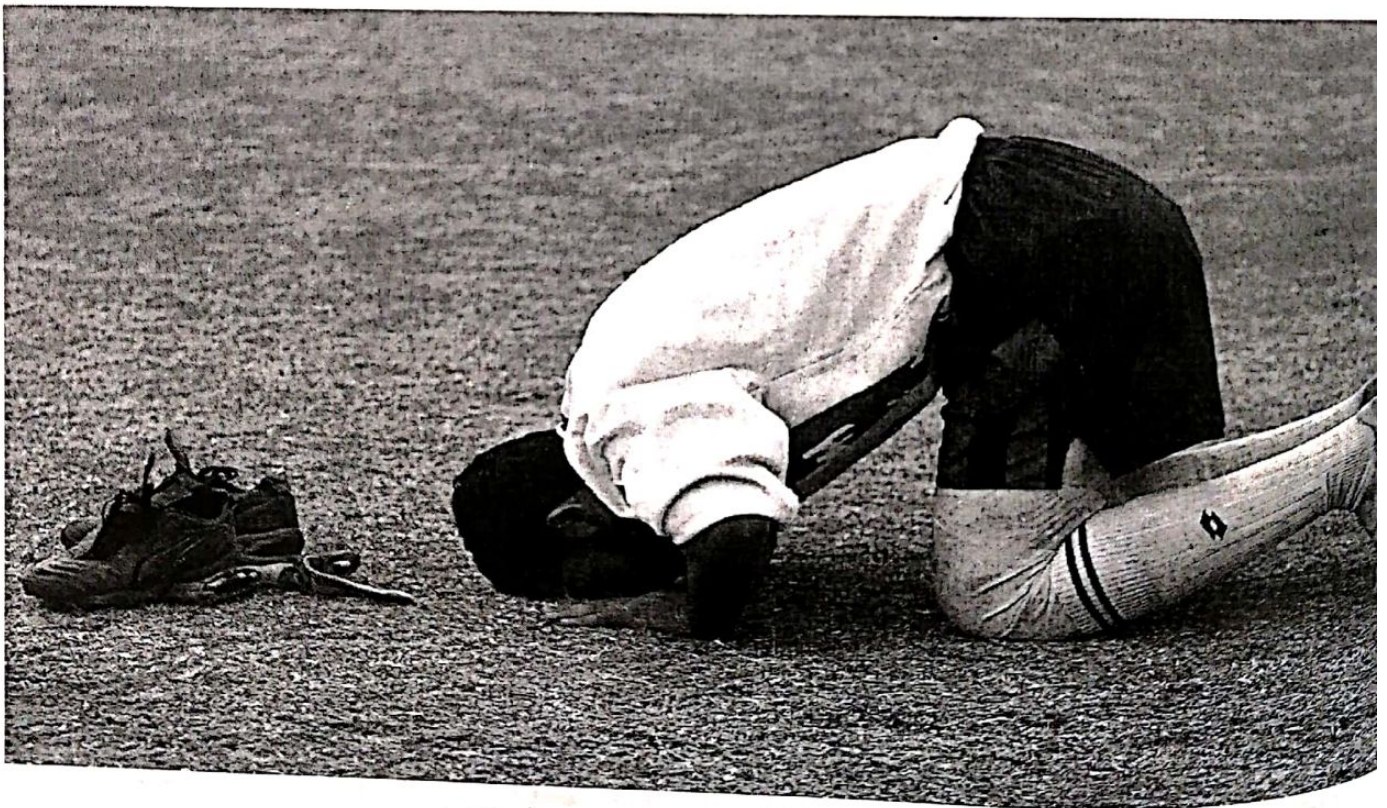
During a soccer game, a team from a Muslim school calls time-out at prayer time. They go to the side of the field, unroll their prayer mats, and remove their shoes. They clear their minds of the soccer game, cleanse their minds and hearts of all worldly thoughts, and concentrate on God and the blessings he has given them. They wash their hands, feet, and arms up to the elbows with water from a bucket that has been left at the side of the field. They are ready to enter the presence of God with a clean mind and clean body.

Then they stand facing Mecca. They begin the prayers with hands raised to the level of their ears while they silently proclaim the greatness of God. With hands folded over their stomachs or chests, they remain standing while they recite passages that they have memorized from the Quran (the holy book of Islam). Then they bow to show respect and love for God and proclaim three times: "Glory to God in the

Highest.” They return to the upright position and then prostrate themselves, lowering their heads to the ground with foreheads touching the prayer mat, to show submission. They recite “Glory to the Lord Most High,” as they sit back on their heels three times to show acceptance.

They prostrate themselves again before standing. Prayers also include reciting, “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” At the end when they stand, they say, “May the peace, mercy and blessings of God be upon you.” When their prayers are finished, the team members roll up their prayer mats, put them back on the side of the field, and continue playing soccer.

This observation of prayer is called Salat. It is one of the five pillars of faith, or holy duties, in Islam. The



A Muslim man prays during a break in his soccer match in Afghanistan.

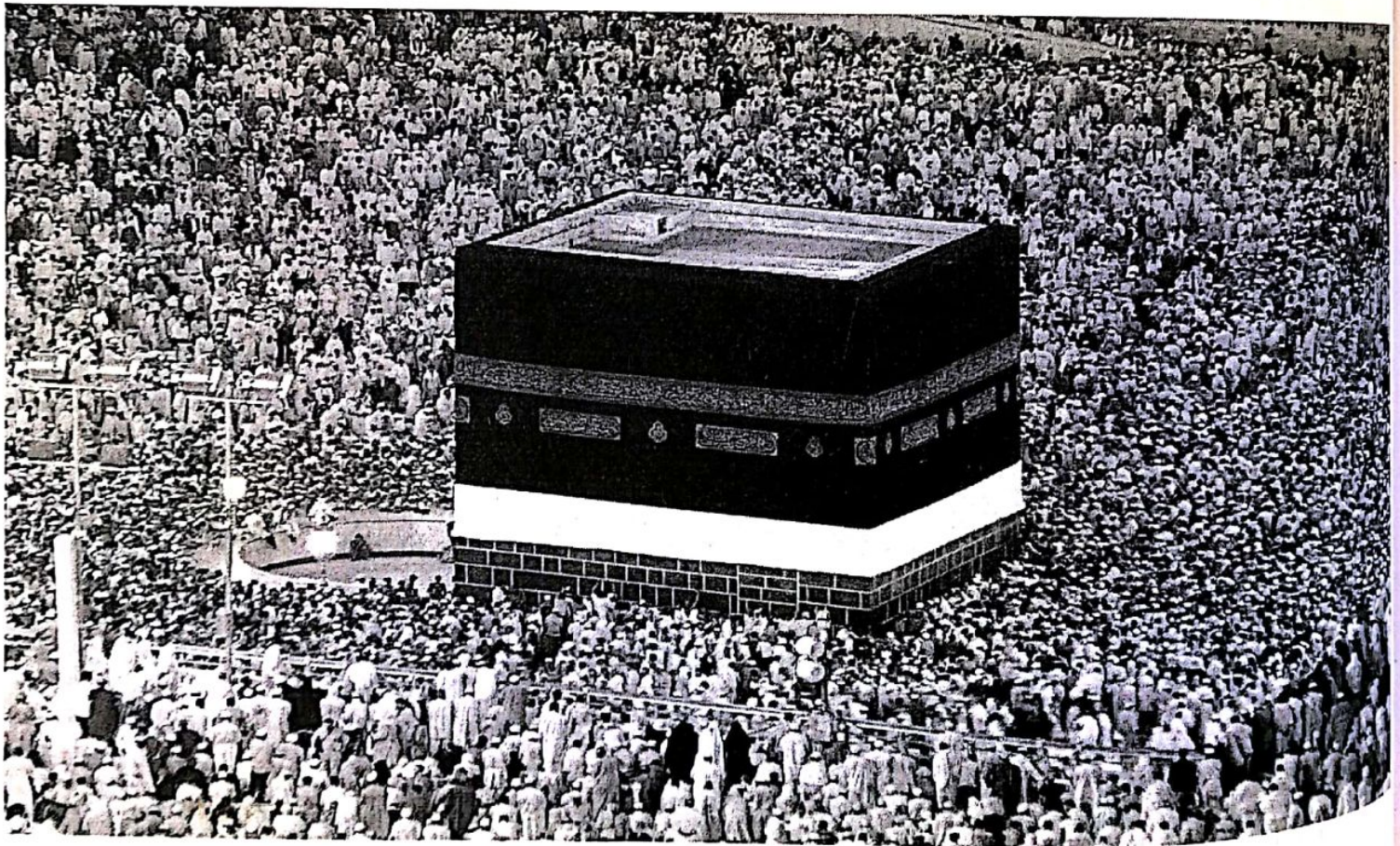
other four pillars are to declare that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that the prophet Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; to pay *zakat* (alms—give money to the poor); to make a pilgrimage (holy journey) to Mecca to the Great Mosque at least once, if possible; and to observe fasting from food and drink from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan.

The pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, known as the hajj, is required at least once in the lifetime of Muslims who are well enough and can afford the journey. The pilgrimage—a supreme form of worship—is a journey of spiritual healing that may involve many days of travel. The trips are spent in almost constant prayer. About 2.5 million Muslims from more than 160 countries go to Mecca each year, where they make the ascent to Mount Arafat to pray for salvation. Although women may participate in the hajj, most pilgrims are men.

Before entering Mecca, the pilgrims purify themselves. They bathe, set aside their everyday clothes, and wear a simple white garment to show their equality with others and their humility before God. Men wear two unstitched, white, seamless cloths, one draped over the left shoulder and one around the waist, falling to their ankles. Women wear a modified version of the two white cloths, or modest dresses, that cover everything except their feet, face, and hands. The pilgrims walk over a prescribed path and refrain from food, drink, and sex during the daylight hours until the tenth day of the hajj.

The pilgrimage celebrates particular events in the history of Islam and involves several key rituals.

One of these is to circle the Kaaba seven times. The Kaaba is a cube-shaped building inside the al-Masjid al-Haram mosque in Mecca. Muslims consider this the most sacred place on Earth. The Kaaba is the shrine that holds the sacred Black Stone, the al-Hajar-ul-Aswad, that God is said to have given to Adam, the world's first man. Muslims believe that the stone was originally white and that it turned black by absorbing the sins of all the pilgrims who touched it. Another important ritual of the pilgrimage involves throwing pebbles at three walls called *jamarat* in the city of Mina just east of Mecca. These walls symbolize the devil. After ten days, many pilgrims celebrate for the next three days.



Muslim worshippers gather around the Kaaba in Mecca. During the hajj pilgrimage, even more worshippers surround the Kaaba.

The Story of Muhammad

Muslim spirituality is rooted in the Quran. The Quran contains many legends and traditions that parallel the Bible. Muslims believe that only the Quran contains the complete expression of God's actual words, as dictated by the prophet Muhammad in Arabic.

Muhammad was born in A.D. 570 in Mecca. As he was growing up, he was known for his honesty and trustworthiness. A wealthy widow named Khadija, who was fifteen years older, employed him. Gradually their relationship grew into love. They married and had children.

Muhammad was concerned about the relaxed moral standards of his neighbors and about their belief in many gods. He often spent long periods of time meditating. About fifteen years after he was married, on one of the many nights he spent meditating in a cave, Muhammad was visited by the angel Gabriel in the form of a man. He had a vision in which the angel ordered him "to recite." According to tradition, Gabriel brought the following message:

Recite: In the name of the Lord who created,
created Man of a blood clot,

Recite: And thy lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught man what he knew not.

Muhammad was frightened, but he accepted the call to proclaim the word of God. His wife was the first convert to the religion of Islam. At frequent intervals during the rest of his life, Muhammad received further revelations from God through Gabriel, which he committed to

memory and taught to his friends. Sometimes, floods of rhythmic praise came from his lips. Because Muhammad was uneducated and illiterate, his companions wrote down these words on leaves, stones, bones, and parchment. They became the Quran, the most beautiful and poetic work in the Arabic language. Muslims consider the Quran to be the word of God—eternal, absolute, and irrevocable. *Quran* means “recitation” in Arabic.

In 622, Muhammad left Mecca, where he was persecuted because of his radical new religious philosophy. At that time, Arabs were polytheists (believed in many gods). Yet Islam, like Christianity before it, is a monotheistic religion. Muhammad traveled to Medina, also in Arabia, where he was honored. This year is considered the beginning of the Muslim era and is the first year of the Islamic calendar. From Medina, Islam spread quickly, and by the time Muhammad died in 632, it had reached many thousands of people. It continued to spread rapidly and eventually became the principal religion of the Middle East and of parts of Asia and North Africa. In modern times, Islam is a vital religion and continues to attract people to the faith.

Muslims consider Muhammad the greatest prophet who ever lived, and they acknowledge other prophets such as Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, and Jesus. Muslims believe that Muhammad is God’s last prophet, and therefore, his message is the most complete message to the world.

Islamic Spirituality

Islam has a strong spiritual quality, teaching honesty, generosity, love, and justice. Some people who have

studied the religion have converted to it from other religions and find a wonderful sense of peace. They are strong advocates.

The Arabic word *Islam* means "surrender" (to the will of Allah, the all-powerful God who determines the fate of humanity). The word shares its roots with *salaam*, the Arabic word for "peace." Muslims believe that Allah is everywhere. Spiritual life is based on both the love and fear of God, obedience to his will, and a search for the knowledge of God.

SUFISM

One of the most fascinating, colorful, and uplifting spiritual experiences is found in Sufism, a mystical form of Islam followed by both women and men. Sufis reject materialism and follow a spiritual path emphasizing personal harmony with divine love. Sufi orders are centers of spiritual, social, and political life. While traditional Muslims frown upon any use of music in religious rituals, Sufi orders throughout the Islamic world have developed a wide variety of ritual observances involving music.

In the thirteenth century, Sufi mystic and poet Jalal al-Din al-Rumi founded the Mevlani order. Mevlani members, who engage in a musical whirling ceremony, are known as the whirling dervishes. Rumi believed that the natural state of all things is to revolve, and each stage of the dance of the dervishes represents ascent toward union with the divine. By deserting ego and turning toward truth and perfection with loving intent, the dancers are conveying God's spiritual gift and embracing all of humankind with affection and love.

Religious Muslims live a life in which religion and spirituality play a major role. Muslims strive to implement God's will in both their private and public lives. A famous verse from the Quran illustrates how Muslims view their God:

Allah! There is no God but He, the Living, Who needs no other but Whom all others need. He is never drowsy nor does He rest. Space and the Earth belong to Him; who can intercede without His consent? He knows everything people have done and will do, and no one can grasp the least of His knowledge, without his review. His throne extends over the heavens and the Earth and He doesn't tire in the safekeeping. He alone is the Most High, the Lord Sovereign Supreme.

As part of their prayer practice and in times of personal struggle, many Muslims recite the ninety-nine names of Allah as they handle their prayer beads. The names for God consist of God's qualities, such as the Mighty, the Strong, the Merciful, the Everlasting, the Beginning, the Last, the Avenger of Evil, and the Bringer of Peace. Using prayer beads is believed to purify the heart.

Muslims adhere to the Islamic code during their lifetime and expect to face reckoning after they die. When they die, they believe that the soul lives on in a state of sleep but will be rejoined with the body. The body will return to Earth and the person will be judged by Allah. For this reason, Muslims do not cremate dead bodies. Muslims are promised a paradise after death where there is nearness to God. For those who keep from evil, paradise offers gardens underneath

which rivers flow, pure *azwaj* (the perfect mate), and contentment from Allah.

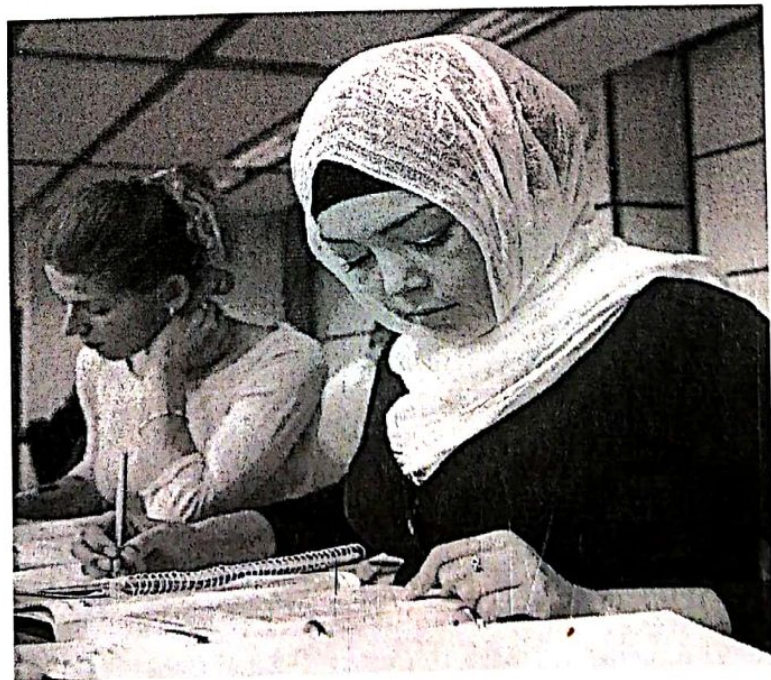
Muslims believe that God resembles nothing else in creation. He has no gender and no form that people can comprehend. Therefore, Islam forbids making pictures or statues of God.

Muslim Life

Islam is a total way of life. Muslims believe in a divine law that guides their daily lives. The Quran dictates what they should wear, eat, and drink. Alcohol is forbidden.

The dress code of Muslims varies from place to place, depending on the country. The Quran instructs men and women to dress modestly. By tradition, many Muslim women wear a hijab, a head scarf, in the presence of men to whom they are not married or related. They wear loose-fitting clothes, and they cover their legs to the ankles and their arms to the wrists. Some cover most of their faces.

A Muslim woman in Germany wears a hijab, a symbol of modesty in the Muslim community.



RELIGION IN AFRICA

While there are local variations, North Africa is predominantly Islamic. Islam is also common in the countries along the east and west coasts of the African continent. In the countries of sub-Saharan Africa to the south of the Sahara—the desert that covers much of North Africa—the majority of people are Christian. In some places, Islam or Christianity is practiced along with a traditional tribal religion, but in many areas, especially rural, traditional African religions dominate. New prophets, who lead their own groups and establish their own churches, are reported in almost all parts of the continent.

Practitioners of many of the traditional religions in Africa believe in a God who creates all things. Numerous spirits are thought to exist, such as spirits of the air, earth, sea, lakes and rivers, lightning, and the sun. Indigenous (local) religions tell stories of tribal origins and early human migrations. Social values are expressed in myths, legends, folktales, and riddles. Magic and sorcery are also part of many traditional, indigenous religions, although in modern times, some of these practices are observed well outside of public view. Most indigenous religions explain how the world was made, how civilization came about, and what happens after a person dies. Practitioners follow rituals for rites of passage, such as birth, name giving, engagement, marriage, and death. In this way, African religion affirms and celebrates life.

The role of Muslim women and their place in society varies, depending upon how strictly Islam is interpreted and observed. In some Islamic countries, such as Turkey and Malaysia, Muslim women hold high government offices, while in others, such as Saudi Arabia, women have little or no access to the public life of their communities.

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world. Muslims are in the majority in fifty-six countries. About 20 percent of Muslims are Arabs. (Not all Arabs are Muslims.) The largest Muslim populations, however, are in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

Serious problems and misunderstandings among religions intensified after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C. Al-Qaeda, an international terrorist organization, was responsible for this and many other attacks.

Al-Qaeda is the name of an international Islamist network that consists of radical Muslims advocating, among other things, the imposition of Islamic law, by violent means, if necessary. Yet, the Quran says that whoever takes a life kills all humanity, unless in response to murder or for stopping the spread of disorder on Earth. And whoever saves a life saves all humanity. Although radical Islamists consider their work to be virtuous, most Muslims do not interpret the Quran in the same way and condemn terrorism.

The Baha'i Faith

Hagit is a teen who lives in Saint Lucia, an island in the Caribbean. After school he goes to a Baha'i garden,