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Islamic Site Visit Review

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Introduction

Islam is the second-largest religion, with approximately 1.6 billion followers and the fastest growing religion in the world. Islam is a monotheistic religion established in the 7th Century in the Middle East. The name Islam is a literal translation of 'submission' or 'surrender'. The religion originated from the teachings of the holy Prophet Muhammad. The holy text in Islam is the Qur'an, believed to be the direct words of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Under Islam exists two denominations, Sunni, the majority, and Shia. Islam is a widespread religion, with its presence felt in every part of the world. I will now describe the history and beliefs of Islam using the eight components of every religion.

Islam is founded in the belief of one unsurpassed and inimitable God, who has neither a partner nor a son. Islam does not believe in the worship of anyone else but Allah, the one true God. All other deity is untrue. Muslims believe in the everlasting message of the Qur'an, the Holy Scripture. Muslims believe in the existence of Angels who are creatures honoured by Allah. The Angels worship and obey only Allah, and operate only on His command. Angel Gabriel, who delivered the words of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad, is amongst the Angels in Islam. Muslims believe in Messengers and Prophets of God such as Abraham, Adam and Moses with Prophet Muhammad being the last of the Prophets. Muslims believe in the Judgment Day or the Day of Resurrection. On this day, all the dead will be resurrected to be judged

according to their deeds and beliefs .

Other basic beliefs of the Islamic faith include the strict modesty of women that requires women to cover their bodies and heads when in the presence of men who are not family relatives. The Qur'an states that wine should not be taken. Muslims have interpreted this to include all alcohol and thus prohibiting consumption of alcohol in Islam. Pork is also prohibited as stated in the Qur'an. Lastly, Muslims in the preservation of the Qur'an in its original language and thus translation of the Qur'an is prohibited.

Community

There exists an Arabic term, Ummah, used to denote an imagined universal community of Muslims united in surrender to God . Ummah is meant to rise above tribal, geographical, cultural and ethnic limits. In the Ummah, all believers are equals and as members they are requested to help, support and guard each other.

Central Myths

Islamic mythology is made of mythographical narratives of Islam that are passed on through generations. Muslims consider these narratives to be true and very sacred. Most of these narratives can be found in the Qur'an. Many myths exist in Islam. The creation of the world, the life of Muhammad, the Ka'ba, the creatures of God, and mythical stories in the Quran constitute the central myths of Islam .

Rituals

The religious rituals of Islam are few but of great importance. These religious rituals constitute the five pillars of Islam. The five pillars of Islam are a vital

part of the religion's belief system. The five pillars refer to 5 basic requirements for every Muslim . The first is prayer. All Muslims are required to pray five times a day while facing the holy Ka'ba, built on the land believed to be the first place God created on Earth. The second Pillar is fasting. All able body Muslims are required to fast and abstain from all other pleasures during the Holy Month of Ramadan. Charitable giving is the third pillar of Islam. All Muslims are required to give donations to the needy, not the Mosque, especially emphasized during the Holy Month. Pilgrimage to Hajj is the fourth Pillar. All physically and finically capable Muslims are required to visit the Holy Site at least once in their lifetime. The final Pillar in Islam is Faith. Professing that there is no other God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger is a declaration of faith and trust.

Ethics

Islamic Ethics is guideline to behaviour that calls upon humans to undertake a constant process of self-purification in emotions, feelings and thoughts. The Qur'an is full of messages relating to ethics or akhlaq. It provides the code of conduct for human behaviour in accordance with the expectations of God. These include kindness and honesty, integrity and truthfulness, reliability and sincerity. All Muslims should aim to be mirror images of the Qur'an in their actions.

Characteristic Emotional Experiences

Emotions associated with Islam include bliss, inner peace, joy, devotion, liberation, sanctity, conversion, shame, confusion, and rebirth.

Material Expression

Islam uses different material expressions to convey its message and identity. The religion utilizes three main vehicles to express itself artistically. These three principles are books, architecture and objects. The arts of books includes illustrations of religious pictures, calligraphy, and illumination. Architecture, which is the most evident, is seen through grand Mosques built around the world. Lastly, the arts of objects includes work with ceramics, tiles, glass, metal, ivory and wood, all used expertly to convey the message of Islam.

Sacredness

Islam is shrouded in sacredness, and almost every entity of the religion bears some form of sanctity. There exist sacred texts, sacred places and sacred times in Islam. Sacred texts include the Qur'an and there exists many bans on those who cannot touch it including women who are currently menstruating. Sacred places include the Mosque, where non-believers are prohibited, and believers must remove their shoes before entering. Sacred times include the month of Ramadan where followers must and abstain from all measures for a month.

Personal Experience

I had the wonderful experience of visiting a very important place in the Islamic Religion. Akbar Mosque is believed to be the resting place of the Holy Prophet and thus a sacred site to Muslims. I had the opportunity of visiting this remarkable and historical place during the Holy month of Ramadhan, which only increased the sanctity of the experience. Being a non-Muslim, my journey was more observational rather than spiritual. Therefore, I was able to

take thoroughly in my surroundings and ambience.

The Akbar is a grand Mosque and the first sight of it is truly breathtaking and unforgettable. Gold in colour and full of beautiful religious mosaic motifs the beauty of it is inconceivable and is a memory that lasts forever. Since i am a non-believer i was unable to enter the Holy Mosque but fortunately for me this majestic structure lies in between two hills so i was able to get an aerial view of the luxurious courtyard where large religious ceremonies take place. The crowd was mostly males, but there were women present. This is unusual in a mosque as women and men are not allowed to mingle in a religious place but due to significance of the Mosque exceptions were made so that women to could bask in the glory of Muhammad's everlasting presence, even for a day. All ages and ethnicities were represented; all united in submission to Allah and praise for his Holy Prophet.

This was a special day, the anniversary of The Prophets death many years ago. Everyone left their shoes outside as is customary when entering a sacred place. Believers were also required to wash their hands and feet in huge swimming pools at each entrance of the Mosque. The time was evening, just in time for prayer. When the hour arrived, the whole Mosque fell silent in anticipation for this holy experience. Only the cleric's voice could be heard as he began the prayers . The crowd, facing the Ka'ba, prayed in unison after him. The view of almost 2000 people praying in tune was truly a magnificent sight to behold. As the crowd went down to pray, i got an opportunity to observe the sacred objects that filled the Holy Mosque. The Mosque is decorated luxuriously, with intricate marble and gold to be found everywhere. The level of details and craftsmanship in the mosque was truly

impressive and indescribable. The holiest part of the Mosque is the grave of the Holy Prophet and is separated from the Mosque by a gorgeous garden known as the Garden of Paradise. It is believed that a prayer said in this garden is worth 100, 000 prayers . After prayers, I watched as the pilgrims swarmed out of the doors of the mosque and headed to the Garden. Praying here is an important part of this journey and no pilgrim can leave without stepping foot in the garden and saying a prayer to Allah. At the end of the garden can be found a small, but intricately painted gate that leads to the living quarters of the Prophet. Only men are allowed here and thus only men are allowed to visit the grave of the Holy Prophet. From my vantage point, I was able to observe the male pilgrims as they recited a verse from the Qur'an before entering the gate. Once at the grave they all kneeled down chanting and praying to Allah . Back in the courtyard of the Mosque women were throwing stones collected from the garden at a representation of the Devil. This is also an important part of the journey and symbolizes casting the devil out of your life . After throwing stones, the faithful undergo a prayer ritual symbolizing their religious passing is over. They were many emotions exhibited here including self-restraint, respect, inner peace, kindness, anticipation, excitement, awe and gratitude. The Islamic leaders were easily identifiable through the garments they wore. While the faithful wore plain white cotton garments, the leaders were clothed in lavish robes made of the finest materials. They also were accompanying head gear.

I was in awe during my visit and was taken aback by the magnificent sights to behold. The sight of all those people congregated to worship Allah was truly overwhelming, but all I felt was gratitude for the opportunity to

experience such a remarkable event. I was anxious to be witnessing such a sacred ritual and felt like a spectator watching a football game. It was all a little surreal, and I had to pinch myself to ensure I wasn't dreaming. I keenly watched as the faithful moved up and down the Mosque, a beautiful sea of white. Watching the prayer was uncomfortable, and I felt that I was crossing a boundary. However, I had to remind myself that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity not to be missed. The religious rituals were a little strange to me due to my lack of knowledge on Islamic rituals. I was confused at first but luckily for me every step in the journey was being replicated on a large scale. Therefore, I was able to watch the same religious ritual being performed over and over again by the faithful and as it went along my confusion decreased. Regardless of my confusion and lack of knowledge on the happenings, it was an eye-opening experience to observe people's dedication and passion for their religion. I could not take my eyes off the proceedings, and I was very captivated from beginning to end. I had not expected the number of people that I witnessed there. The large crowd is what made the experience so spectacular and unique. I had assumed a large number of people would be there but not to that extreme. I was also expected it to be chaotic, but somehow everyone knew what they were doing and exhibited disciplined order. Thankfully my presence was not felt by the pilgrims as I was a safe distance away. However, I can guess that my presence in the vicinity of the holy site would have made many uneasy due to its importance and sanctity of the Mosque. The whole experience was enlightening and taught me very much about Islam. I now have a different perspective of the religion and a newfound respect for the dedicated

followers of this unique religion. Being able to see a religion from that point of view when the faithful are most vulnerable changes everything you thought about it previously.

Conclusion

Islam is a complex and fascinating religion that is very misunderstood. A deeper look into Islam reveals its profound teachings and beliefs. It is a religion that is deeply rooted in Tradition and has avoided the modern influences that have plagued other religions. Though misunderstood at times Islam is beautiful and peaceful religion that urges humankind to perform the duty they were created for, and that is to live a holy life. The Qur'an acts a guide of behaviour for Muslims, and it encourages believers to visit the sacred sites Islam. These sites are many, and most are located in the Middle East. At each site is the origin of a myth repeated to members of the religion through the ages. Whether true or not, this has not deterred the faithful from flocking to these sites every day as they attempt to get as close to God as humanly possible.

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