

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

ISLAM

PEOPLE

Muslims today can be found in many countries and many cultures, speaking many languages.

When **Muhammad** was born in the city of **Makka**, in 570 CE, the city was the centre of a prosperous caravan route and as an adult he became a camel-driver and trader working for **Khadijah**, a rich widow whom he later married. On his journeys he met people of many faiths and became an earnest seeker after truth. Muhammad was greatly troubled by the idols in the *Ka'ba* in Makka and also by the oppression of the poor, violence, drunkenness and ill-treatment of women and children. At the age of 40 Muhammad had the first of many visions and was given words to recite by the Angel Gabriel. These recitations eventually became written down as the Qur'an.

He began to preach but encountered persecution and in 622 CE Muhammad moved to Medina. After a long campaign Muhammad re-entered **Makka** in 629 CE and purified the *Ka'ba* from its idols. He died in Medina in 632 CE.

PRAYER

Muslims recite their prayers (**salat**) every day at set times, facing towards Makka (as taught by the Prophet himself), which is south east from Britain and Ireland. The five traditional times of prayer are: *Dawn; Noon; Mid-Afternoon; After Sunset; Night Time*. If the worshipper is not in a mosque a prayer mat is set down to ensure that the place where prayer takes place is clean. The shoes or sandals are also removed.

In order to prepare themselves for prayer Muslims go through a routine of washing or ablutions – **wudu**. This is carried out before prayer according to a strict pattern. Following a declaration to worship with a pure heart the worshipper washes hands, mouth, face, arms and feet three times each.

BELIEFS

The words of the **Shahada** sum up the faith of Islam:

There is no God but God and Muhammed is his Messenger.

(Allah is the only Arabic word for God.) A person who can recite and believe the Shahada is a Muslim.

Shari'a

Muslim conduct is based on a code known as the *Shari'a*, sometimes translated as "law". It is Allah's law based on the Qur'an and the Hadith or teaching of the Prophet. The *Shari'a* provides a common code of behaviour for Muslim societies in many different countries and cultures. However, law in Islam is universal and egalitarian. Muslims regard it as the law for

all humankind.

Shari'a literally means "the road to the watering hole" – it is the clear/right road – the straight path. This is the path which the Muslim must follow as he or she strives to reach the Creator and to do the will of the one God.

Shari'a consists of things which are:

- expressly prohibited
- expressly enjoined
- disliked but not prohibited
- recommended but not enjoined
- simply permitted through silence.

Only a few things are actually prohibited under *shari'a*; most of life comes under the category of those things which are permitted through silence.

Some Shi'a Muslims use a different image to characterise their faith, likening it to a tree – of which the roots are the beliefs and the practices of faith are the branches.

COMMUNITIES

Shi'ah Muslims are found mostly in Iran (Persia), parts of Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan and India, and there are Shi'ah minorities in many other Muslim countries.

An *Imam*, which means 'example', is leader of the prayers in the mosque. In the Sunni tradition he may be any male Muslim of good standing and is not in any sense an ordained minister. In the Shi'a tradition, however, the Imam is a more significant spiritual leader often charismatic in style.

A tradition within Shi'ah Islam looks for a 'Hidden Caliph', the *Mahdi*, who will be the last caliph of all. He will come at the end of time to conquer evil and reward the faithful.

The resident Muslim population of **Northern Ireland** is about 2,000 including many business people, professional and medical personnel, plus others who spend some time as students. Members of the local community have come mainly from India and Pakistan, but there are also many from Arab countries and North Africa, with a growing number of students, especially from Malaysia. Significant growth in the resident Muslim community is evident in recent years. The largest community is based in Belfast, but smaller groups are based in centres such as Antrim, Craigavon, Londonderry, Coleraine, Newtownards, Ballymena, etc., each with their own facilities for Friday Prayers. A Belfast Mosque and Islamic Community Centre was established in the early 1980s. It is a converted house with an upstairs carpeted area serving as a main prayer hall. It has facilities for daily prayers and Friday Prayers and also for children's classes, Arabic classes, a Ladies' Circle and various special events and seminars. A Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association has also been established (www.nimfa.org).

The Muslim population of the UK as a whole is about 1.5 million.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

The Arabic word **Masjid** means "bowed down" or "a place of prostration". It comes to us via Egyptian (*masgid*) and French (*mosquée*) as **mosque**.

The first *masjid* (**Masjid al-Nabi** – the Mosque of the Prophet) was in Medina, where it was bbc.co.uk/ni/learning/ks3citizenship

established by Muhammad in the house where he lived and where his tomb is to be found.

The mosque is the place of assembly (*jum'a*) for salat (*prayer*). A special place is not essential for salat, but it is desirable and should be attended when possible. There is special merit in saying one's prayers in a mosque. According to the Qur'an, *masjids* are "houses which God has allowed to be built, that his name may be spoken in them". (sura 24:36)

The features of a Mosque

- The Minaret (*menara*): from where the call to prayer is made by the *mu'adhdhin* (often spelt *muezzin*)
- Prayer Hall: where people assemble to pray
- *Mihrab* (niche): in the wall of the hall to indicate the *qibla* – direction of *Makka*
- *Minbar* (pulpit): from where the sermon is preached at Friday prayers
- *Dakka* (platform): including a seat for the *mu'adhdhin* and from where further calls to prayer are made (only in some mosques)
- *Kursi* (a traditional chair or stand): on which a copy of the Qur'an is set (while the reader sits on the floor)
- A room for *wudu* – ablutions before prayer

FESTIVALS

During **Eid-ul-Adha** an animal is slaughtered and the meat shared with the poor. Some Muslims just give money to the poor rather than sacrifice an animal. Children may accompany their parents to special Eid prayers in the morning and there are new clothes and gifts from relatives and friends.

Eid-ul-Fitr cards often include a quotation from the Qur'an and display the words **Eid mubarak** – A Happy Eid. In Muslim countries both Eids are a major public holiday.

Mawlid-al-Nabi (the Birthday of the Prophet) is celebrated on the 12th of Rabi al-Awwal (the third month). It is one of a number of smaller festivals which relate to events in the life of the Prophet or other occasions. Some are celebrated differently and with greater or lesser emphasis in various parts of the Muslim world.

All Islamic religious holidays follow the **Hijri** calendar – the lunar calendar. (It is so named because of its origins in Muhammad's *Hijra*, the migration from Mecca to Medina.) As the lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year this means that all festivals move 'backwards' through the year in relation to the dates commonly used around the world. Thus a festival which in one year is in the middle of the summer will be in the winter a decade later. This prevents Muslim festivals from taking on a seasonal character which is often associated with those of other religions.

SCRIPTURES

The Qur'an is divided into 114 suras (chapters) which are placed in decreasing order of length.

The first sura, Al Fatihah (which means 'Opening'), is the most familiar of all as it is recited many times a day during each prayer time and is the first sura learnt by heart by children:

*Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
The beneficent, the merciful,
Owner of the Day of Judgement,
Thee alone we worship;*

*Thee alone we ask for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those whom thou hast favoured;
Not the path of those who earn thine anger*

Fundamentally the Qur'an is in Arabic, although translations are available in most languages. All Muslims learn it in Arabic whatever their native language. A translation of the Qur'an is at best an *interpretation*.

The Hadith is an important collection of sayings and teachings, many of them attributed directly to Muhammad. While the sayings of the Hadith do not carry the same weight as the Qur'an, they nevertheless are regarded as significant and are often quoted by Muslims. They cover many of the questions which a Muslim might have to face in everyday life, such as how to treat other people, the practice of faith and dealing with exemptions from fasting during Ramadan.