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ISLAM IN ASIA: PEOPLE, PRACTICES, TRADITIONS

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WEEK 1

More than one out of every five people today is Muslim. That means that more than 1.5 billion of the 7 billion people on Earth are adherents of Islam, one of the fastest-growing religions in the world. By 2030, its followers will exceed 2 billion, or more than 25 percent of the worldwide population.

Second only to Christianity in size, Islam is, in the popular imagination, indelibly associated with the Middle East because of its origins in Arabia and its continuing predominance in that region. Often overlooked is its considerable prominence in Asia where, by far, more Muslims live than in any other region, a geopolitical reality of increasing importance.

A few facts and figures underline the significance of Islam in Asia. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. More than 200 million of its 246 million inhabitants are believers. Second on this list is Pakistan, with 177 million. India (almost 160 million) and Bangladesh (more than 140 million) are third and fourth.

Islam also has an appreciable presence elsewhere in Asia. China has almost 20 million Muslims — albeit a tiny fraction (about 2 percent) of its enormous population (1.34 billion). Malaysia, with 17 million Muslims, and the Philippines, with about 5 million, are two other countries with substantial numbers. A million or more Muslims reside as well in Myanmar (2 million), Nepal (1 million), Sri Lanka (2 million) and Thailand (4 million).

Islam is also the religion of the majority across Central Asia: Kazakhstan (with 10 million Muslims), Uzbekistan (about 25 million), Kyrgyzstan (4 million), Tajikistan (7 million) and Turkmenistan (4.5 million). Afghanistan is overwhelmingly Muslim: 99 percent of its 29 million people follow Islam.

Muslims worldwide share common beliefs and practices that are based on the Five Pillars of Islam. These include faith in Allah as God and the Prophet Muhammad as his messenger, prayer five times a day, alms-giving to the poor and needy, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca for those financially and physically capable of undertaking it. Muslims also believe in living in accordance with the revelations made to the Prophet by God as recorded

in the all-important religious text known as the Quran, as well as the words and deeds of the Prophet as narrated in the Hadith.

In addition, Muslims see themselves as members of a global community (Ummah) that is envisioned as transcending national, ethnic, class, gender and other identities. This attachment to a transnational Islam has acquired greater currency in recent decades because of the Islamic revival that has been animating communities around the world since the 1970s. There has also been a resurgence growing out of concerns for the well-being of Muslims and Islam around the world.

Though they share common beliefs and practices, Muslims aren't a monolithic community. One long-standing division — resulting from the seventh-century Common Era split over the line of succession to the Prophet and the nature of leadership — is between Sunnis, who constitute the overwhelming majority, and Shiites (or Shi'as), who account for a little over 10 percent. The split is especially pronounced in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, three Asian countries that have sizable Shiite minorities.

Variations abound as well because Islam adapted to the diverse lands where it took root — its growth partly depended on its capacity to make some adjustments. Far greater were the transformations it created in local societies, culture and politics, infusing them in ways to make religion fundamental to the lives of the people. That is not to say that Islamization adhered to only one template.

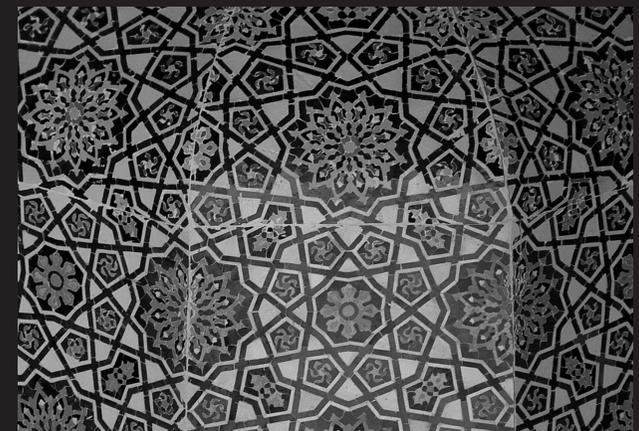
Within a century of the demise of the Prophet (632 CE), Islam spread not only across the Middle East, North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula but also to Central and South Asia. Its extension into South Asia was gradual; it took several centuries and was most successful in the margins of the Indian subcontinent — precisely those areas that later emerged as the Muslim-majority states of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

From India or possibly directly from the Middle East, Islam traveled via the trading circuits of the Indian Ocean to reach Southeast Asia, where it acquired a significant presence by the onset of the 15th century. Over the next century or two,

it expanded across maritime areas in particular, a historical development evidenced by the Muslim-majority states of Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia. Throughout Asia, Islam's rise did not erase earlier beliefs and practices, as upcoming articles will illustrate.

In recent centuries, Muslims in Asia have had to respond to the challenges of modernization and westernization ushered in by Western colonialism and, later, the imperatives of state- and nation-building in the ensuing postcolonial era. Particularly in Muslim-majority countries, this latter dynamic has generated different outcomes: Islamic republics in some areas (for example, Afghanistan and Pakistan) and 'secular' states in others (for instance, Indonesia and Malaysia) in which sharia, or Islamic law, is influential and religion is routinely invoked by political parties to mobilize support.

Across Asia, Islam continues to shape and be shaped by local societies, cultures and politics.



The Registan, Samarkand, in present-day Uzbekistan.
Photo by Marta Mikkelsen

Next week:

Education in Pakistan