



CHAPTER 1

ISLAMIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

In this chapter as well as considering basic Islamic beliefs and practices we also want to take a brief look at how Islam developed.



1) The Rise of Islam

The pre-Islamic age in Arabia is known as the 'Times of Ignorance' with the population composed of scattered nomadic tribes and the majority being pagans. One of Arabia's pagan shrines, the Ka'aba at Mecca, was the scene of an annual pilgrimage. The pagans were polytheists believing in one Supreme God and many lesser deities. Also on the Arabian peninsula were scattered groups of Jews and Christians.





Muhammad was born in Mecca in AD570. Little is known of his early life, except that he was orphaned when very young and brought up by his grandfather and then an uncle. He was very religious, took to fasting and meditation, and often had vivid dreams. As a result of his marriage at the age of 25 to a wealthy 40-year-old widow named Khadijah for whom he was working as a caravan manager, he became a person of importance. Because of his wife's wealth he no longer had to work and had more time for meditation. Dissatisfied with the polytheism and crude superstitions in Mecca, he became convinced of the supremacy of the one God. He was almost certainly influenced in his beliefs by contact with Jews and Christians. At the age of 40 he received his first revelation and thereafter claimed to be a prophet of God.

He encountered opposition and was forced to flee Mecca in AD622 and went to Medina. The flight to Medina, called the 'Hijra', is considered to be 'year one' in the Islamic calendar. At Medina he became a religious and political leader,





believing that he was called of God to re-establish the true principles of a religion which had become corrupt. Later the new religion spread throughout the Arabian peninsula. At the time of his death, in AD632, he had succeeded in creating a religious force which encompassed the economic, cultural and political structure of everyday life. Within ten years of his death, Islam had spread throughout the Middle East, and within a century it reached across North Africa, into Europe, across Asia to China and down into India.



2) The Nature of Islam

It is essential to understand two important concepts concerning the nature of Islam. Firstly, Muhammad taught, and his followers believe today, that Islam is not only the true religion but a religion that was not new when Muhammad proclaimed it. Rather, it represents the message which had been given to all the prophets from Adam onwards, i.e. the religion of 'submission' (the meaning of the Arabic word 'Islam') - submission not

