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Islam: The sleeping giant awakes

The new crescent moon has been sighted. As dusk falls over Cairo, a black thread held against the darkening sky is no longer visible. With that, cannon atop Saladin's citadel begin to boom out the message to all Islam: Ramadan, the great and holy month, has begun.

From Dakar on the coast of West Africa to the Philippine Islands, from Java to Tomsk in Soviet Central Asia, from Los Angeles to Capetown, 600 million Moslems have just begun 30 days of daytime fasting, prayer and sexual abstinence. From sunrise to dusk, each devout Moslem will go without food, drink or cigarettes. At nightfall will begin long hours of feasting, exchanging of gifts and visits to family and friends.

Ramadan is also the time appointed for the Great Haj, the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca that every Moslem is required to make. During the coming month, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims will pour through the steaming Saudi port of Jeddah on their way to pray at Mecca. Garbed only in white gowns and sandals, rich mix with poor; blacks with whites and Asians; Senagalese with Malaysians, Afghans with Yugoslavs, all races and nations united in the worship of the one god — Allah.

Islam is the world's second largest religion after Christianity. Some estimates suggest that it may by now have reached 1.2 billion, actually surpassing the numbers of Christians. Whatever the statistics, one thing is certain: While Christianity and the world's other major faiths continue to lose adherents, a vital and robust Islam is gaining new converts by the millions.

spare, lean faith, Islam reflects its desert origins. Like most other faiths, however, Islam has also suffered schisms and cults, the largest of which, Shi'ism, is centred in revolutionary Iran.

The angry mullahs of Iran have come to symbolize resurgent Islam. Indeed, across the entire Moslem world are coursing great electric charges of revivalism and modernization as Islam shakes off the sleep of centuries of European, Soviet and Chinese colonial rule. The world's youngest religion is now undergoing a violent dialectic as traditional faith vies with modernity. There is little doubt that a stronger, more vital faith will emerge.

At a time when Christian churches have become the haunt of elderly ladies and left-wing clerics, Islam calls out with a clarion voice to the young who are spearheading the new Moslem revolution. What makes this event so interesting is the fact that Moslem youth is tending to reject Western materialism and return to the purer faith of their ancestors.

Fundamental Islam is spreading like wildfire because many Moslems have painfully realized that four decades of Western consumerism have brought their societies little benefit and an unwelcome overlay of moral corruption and decadence. Equally, these people know that in a Western-style world, they will always be second-class citizens.

A vibrant, dynamic Islam offers the much-needed alternative: Pride, and a moral, social and political framework. The technology-rich but spiritually-poor West can only look with awe upon the rising tide of Islamic religious and political fervor now sweeping across Africa and Asia.



ERIC MARGOLIS

Most people would be surprised to learn that there are 1.3 million Moslems in North America or 20 million in eastern Europe. We may associate Islam with the Arabs, yet the largest Moslem nations are, in order, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China and India.

In fact, no one really knows how many Moslems there are in China's remote northern and western provinces. Some estimates say 40 million but others run as high as 90 million. The Soviet Union's Moslem population is also something of a mystery: Figures range from 40 to 60 million and growing rapidly.

Across black Africa, people are converting to Islam over Christianity at a rate of 10-1. The reason is simple: Islam is the most tolerant, easy-going and uncomplicated of all the world's faiths. It is devoid of racism or identification with one group or region. To become a Moslem one has merely to adopt the "Five Pillars" of faith: Acceptance of Islam, prayer, alms giving, fasting and the haj and, of course, following moral behavior.

Islam, in its pure form, has no formal church, no clergy, no saints, no religious statues or icons. A