

CHAPTER

10

Islam

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FIRST ENCOUNTER

You are in Malaysia, on your way south to Singapore. A friend has recommended that you visit the modern national mosque in Kuala Lumpur. Your first try was unsuccessful, since the mosque is closed for midday prayer. After two hours at a nearby museum of Islamic art, you return to the mosque. You leave your shoes at the bottom of the stairs and walk up into the building.

The mosque is extraordinary. You are amazed at how well the traditional Islamic love of geometrical design has been adapted to modern architecture. The marble floors reflect the colors of the stained glass above, as well as of all the visitors walking toward the main prayer area.

As you approach the core of the mosque, you notice a sign on a rope indicating that only Muslims are allowed to enter. You overhear some Chinese visitors explain to a woman at the rope that they are Muslims. She directs them in. You come up behind them, just to get a better look. The large space is carpeted, and people are prostrating themselves in prayer. You and the woman begin to talk.



"My name is Aminah," she says. "I'm an elementary-school teacher. Right now school is not in session, so I volunteer my time here." Aminah is dressed in a floor-length blue robe with a full head covering. Only her face and hands are visible. "Do you have any questions?" she asks.

From what you have seen on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, you know that Aminah is conservatively dressed. So you ask the obvious question: "Why do you dress as you do?"

"I expected that," she says with a smile. "So many westerners want to talk about clothes." You look down, slightly embarrassed to be just another westerner with an obvious question.

"The way I dress makes me feel safe," she says. "For me it's comfortable. It reminds me that within Islam, women are protected."

You look a bit doubtful.

"Yes, I know," she continues. "It is possible to be too protected. Fathers and uncles and brothers sometimes make it their career to watch out for you, and that's not always welcome."

You both laugh. "And sports can be difficult if one is all covered up. But we're working on it."

Aminah has finished her watch and is replaced by a man standing nearby.

"What about arranged marriages, especially of very young women?" you ask her. "And what about women being kept from education in some Muslim countries?" You ask these things just for the sake of argument, as you both begin to walk toward the exit.

"Things like that are cultural," she says. "There are many old traditions that are not a part of true Islam, and they can be changed. A whole new kind of modern Islam is developing, especially here in Malaysia, and the roles of women are widening. You know the saying, 'Do not judge a book by its cover.' What you see of women like me may look traditional, but it's a disguise. Inside, we're modern. Come back again in ten years and you will see it even more clearly."

Together you go down the steps in front of the mosque to a little kiosk. Aminah reaches into a drawer there.

"I want you to have this," she says, as she hands you a blue book with gold writing on the front. "You can find all you need to know here. After you read it, maybe you can give us fresh ideas for a new, modern type of Islam."

You look down at the book. Printed in both Arabic and English, it is a copy of the Qur'an.

As you wait for a taxi, you wonder about the Qur'an. Who wrote it? What does it say about Muhammad? And does it say anything about other religions? What does it say about women? As you climb into your taxi, you decide to start reading your new book that evening.

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF MUHAMMAD

Muhammad¹ (570–632 C.E.) was born in Mecca, in what is today Saudi Arabia (Timeline 10.1). Much of what we know about him comes from his sermons and revelations in the Muslim sacred book, the **Qur'an** (“recitation”), and from the **hadiths** (also spelled *ahadith*; “recollections,” “narratives”), the remembrances of him by his early followers.

In the days before Islam arose, the religions of the Arabian Peninsula were Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism (which we'll discuss later), and traditional local religious practices. These local practices worshiped tree spirits, mountain spirits, tribal gods, and *jinni* (the origin of the English word *genie*)—capricious spirits that were thought to inhabit the desert and even to enter people. The supreme god Allah was an object of faith but not of worship. Allah “was the creator and sustainer of life but remote from everyday concerns and thus not the object of cult or ritual. Associated with Allah were three goddesses, his daughters: al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza,”² goddesses related to nature, the moon, and fertility.

At the time of Muhammad's birth, Mecca was already a center of religious pilgrimage (see the map on page 444). Located in Mecca was a black meteorite that had fallen to earth long before Muhammad's time. It was venerated because it was believed to have been sent from heaven. A squarish shrine had been constructed to contain it, called the **Kabah** (“cube”).³ By Muhammad's day, as many as 360 religious images of tribal gods and goddesses had been placed within the Kabah, and tradition tells that 24 statues, perhaps associated with the zodiac, stood around the central square of Mecca. By Muhammad's time, yearly pilgrimages to Mecca were already common, and a four-month period of regular truce among the many Arabian tribes was kept in order to allow this.

Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, played an important role among the Quraysh (Quraish), the dominant tribe of Mecca, and is even thought to have been custodian of the Kabah. Muhammad's father died not long before Muhammad's birth, and his mother seems to have died when he was just a child. Muhammad then went to live with his grandfather, and after his grandfather's death two years later, he lived with his uncle, Abu Talib.⁴

As an adult, Muhammad worked as a caravan driver for a widow named **Khadijah**,⁵ who had inherited a caravan company from her deceased husband. The friendship between Khadijah and Muhammad grew over time. They married in about 595 C.E., when Muhammad was 25 and she (tradition says) was about 40.⁶ This marriage brought financial, spiritual, and emotional support to Muhammad; Khadijah proved to be his mainstay until her death. Together they had about six children. But sadly no boy—who could be Muhammad's hereditary successor—survived into adulthood. After Khadijah's death, Muhammad remarried a number of times. It is possible he married several of his wives out of compassion, because in his society



Timeline of significant events in the history of Islam.

widows of soldiers often needed a husband for financial support and legal protection.

From his travels as a caravan worker, Muhammad undoubtedly learned a great deal about several religions, including the differences within and among them. Although the monotheistic religions of his region believed in one High

God and emphasized the need for morality, there was much disagreement as well. Jews and Christians disagreed about the role of Jesus and the nature of God. Christians disagreed with each other about the nature of Jesus. Jews and some Christians forbade image making, although most Christians allowed it. And the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism was also a major influence. It so emphasized the moral struggle in human life that many people saw the world as being subject to two cosmic forces—good and evil.

As a religious person, Muhammad spent time pondering and meditating. To do this, he frequently went to caves in the hills surrounding Mecca that had long been used for prayer. When he was 40, during a religious retreat in a cave at Mount Hira, he received his first revelation, as recorded in the Qur'an. A bright presence came to him and held before his eyes a cloth covered with writing. It commanded three times that he recite what was written there:

Recite in the name of the Lord who created—created man from clots of blood.

Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know.

Indeed, man transgresses in thinking himself his own master; for to your Lord all things return. . . .

Prostrate yourself and come nearer.⁷

At first, Muhammad doubted the nature of this revelation. Could it be madness or hallucination or some kind of demonic apparition? He confided in his wife Khadijah, who knew him well and encouraged him to accept his experience as a true communication from God. He became convinced that the bright presence was the angel Gabriel, and when further revelations came to him, Muhammad began to share them with his closest friends and family members—particularly his wife, his cousin Ali (600–661), and his friend, Abu Bakr (573–634). These were the first **Muslims**, meaning “people who submit” to God (Allah).

When Muhammad began to proclaim his revelations more openly, he was not well received. Although much of his message was unthreatening—Muhammad promoted the need for honesty, kindness, support of the poor, and protection of the weak—the revelations insisted that only the One God, Allah, should be worshiped. The revelations forbade the worship of other gods and demanded the destruction of statues and images. Muhammad also denounced usury (lending money at exorbitant rates) and the failure to make and keep fair contracts. These messages threatened businesspeople, particularly those involved in the pilgrimage trade, because the revelations denounced both common business practices and the multiple tribal gods whose images were kept in the Kabah. In 615 c.e., some of Muhammad's followers fled for safety to what is today Ethiopia. In 619 c.e., Khadijah died. When Abu Talib, Muhammad's protective uncle, died soon after, Muhammad became concerned for his safety. He and the rest of his followers considered eventually leaving Mecca.

During this stressful time, Muhammad, in 620 c.e., experienced himself being carried to Jerusalem and ascending from there into paradise. In

this experience, called his Night Journey or Night of Ascent, the angel Gabriel guided him upward. As Muhammad ascended toward the highest heaven, he encountered angels and the great prophets of the past, including Abraham and Jesus, and at last entered into the presence of God. Muslims disagree about whether this event constituted a personal vision or an actual physical ascension from Jerusalem. Regardless, artistic tradition treats Muhammad's experience as a physical and bodily ascent from the city of Jerusalem.⁸ He is pictured being carried on the back of the celestial steed Buraq, surrounded by flames and flying through the sky. This experience confirmed for Muhammad his vocation as a prophet and messenger of God.

Persecution of Muhammad and his followers in Mecca intensified. At the invitation of leaders of Yathrib, a city about three hundred miles to the north, Muhammad and his followers finally left Mecca in 622 C.E. Muhammad's migration, called in Arabic the **Hijra** (or *Hegira*, often translated as "flight" or "migration"), is a central event in Islam. It marks (1) the point at which Muhammad's message was favorably received and (2) the start of the Islamic community (*umma*). For these reasons, the Muslim calendar dates the year of the Hijra as year 1. (In the West, dates according to the Muslim calendar are given as A.H.—*anno Hegirae*, Latin for "in the year of the Hijra.")

Muhammad's initial success in Yathrib was not complete. Jews there allied with his political enemies and rejected his beliefs because he recognized Jesus as a prophet and disputed the completeness and correctness of the Hebrew scriptures. Muhammad eventually banished or executed these enemies, and over time he gained control of the city. He set up the first Islamic **mosque** (*masjid*) in Yathrib, where many early rules about worship and social regulation were worked out. Yathrib is now called Medina (*madinat an-nabi*, "city of the prophet"). Along with Mecca and Jerusalem, Medina has become one of the three most sacred cities of Islam.

In spite of his success in Yathrib, Muhammad's goal was always to return to Mecca, the religious center of Arabia. In a battle in 624 C.E. at Badr between citizens of Mecca and Yathrib, Muslim soldiers triumphed against great odds. There were skirmishes and threats and a tentative treaty over the following few years until, finally, Muhammad returned as the victor in 630 C.E. to Mecca, where he then took control of the city, destroyed all images in the Kabah and marketplace, and began to institutionalize his religious ideals.

Muhammad extended his control over further territory in Arabia; at the time of his death, he was planning to spread his religion into Syria. In his final sermon, he opposed merely tribal loyalties and preached the brotherhood of all believers. Muhammad died in Yathrib in 632 C.E.

Muhammad viewed himself, as did his followers, as the last of the long line of prophets who transmitted God's word to humanity. He did not consider himself to be divine but simply an instrument in the hands of God, a messenger transmitting God's will to the human world. Muslims view Muhammad as a man who showed perfection in his life, and they revere him as an ideal human being, a model for all believers.

Muhammad, accompanied by angels, is portrayed during the Night of Ascent on the back of the steed Buraq. Following Islamic tradition, the face of Muhammad is not depicted. ▶



ESSENTIALS OF ISLAM

Islam literally means “surrender” or “submission,” indicating wholehearted surrender to God, and a Muslim is one who submits to God (Allah). The words *Islam* and *Muslim* are related to several words for peace, such as the Arabic word *salam* and the Hebrew *shalom*. They suggest the inner peace that is gained by surrendering to the divine. The word *Islam* also connotes the community of all believers, suggesting inclusion in a large family. As the Qur’an states, “the believers are a band of brothers.”⁹

At the heart of Islam is a belief in an all-powerful, transcendent God who has created the universe and who controls it down to the smallest detail. Islam is thus a cousin to the other monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, and all three religions worship the same God. It is possible, however, that the notion of God’s power and transcendence receives the greatest emphasis in Islam. Some observers have commented that in Islam, prostration of the entire body during prayer fittingly indicates a belief in divine power and the believer’s submission to it. Prostration is compared to other characteristic prayer postures, such as kneeling (common in Christianity) and standing (common in Judaism). The physical posture of prostration illustrates well the Muslim attitude of total surrender to God.

Muslims refer to God as Allah. The word is a contraction of *al* (“the”) and *ilah* (“God”) and simply means “the God” or “God.” (The Arabic word *Allah* is related to *El*, the general Hebrew word for “God.”) Muslims explain that the word *Allah* is not the name of God—it simply means “God.” It is said that Allah has ninety-nine names, among which are “the Merciful,” “the Just,” and “the Compassionate.” These names demonstrate that Allah is not abstract—not just an impersonal force—but has characteristics of a personal being. In the Qur’an, Allah describes himself as personal and caring, as well as all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful. Allah, because of this personal nature and the attribute of power, is referred to in Islam as being “male,” although, strictly speaking, Allah has no gender.

It is sometimes hard for non-Muslims to understand the Muslim notion that God is omnipresent and controls every detail of life. The name of God is invoked in daily conversation, particularly in the frequently used phrase, “if God wills.” People are called to prayer several times a day by a **muezzin**, a chanter who announces that Allah is great, greater than anything else. The chanted voice suggests that God is as active in the world as sound is active in the air, unseen but present. Some visitors to Muslim countries have remarked that people there live in a shared belief in God as easily as fish live in water or birds fly in air. God’s active, present reality is taken for granted.

In Islamic belief, God has spoken repeatedly through human beings—prophets—revealing his mind and will. Muslims believe that divine revelation began just after the creation of the human race, when God spoke to Adam and Eve. It continued to occur, as when God spoke to patriarchs and prophets such as Abraham (Ibrahim) and Moses (Musa). Islamic belief also thinks of Jesus (Isa) as a prophet of God, although Muslims reject both the

notion of Jesus' divinity and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Muslims believe that both Judaism and Christianity express true revelation from God but that in various ways those religions have contaminated God's word with human misunderstanding. It was Muhammad, Muslims believe, who freed the divine message from human error and offered it, purified, to all people. Because he is considered the last and greatest figure in the long line of prophets, Muhammad is called the "seal of the prophets."

Muslims trace their ancestry back to Abraham, the same patriarchal ancestor of the Jews, and to his son Ishmael (Ismail). Ishmael (as discussed in Chapter 8) was conceived by Abraham and Hagar, who was a maid to Sarah, Abraham's wife. When Sarah, at an advanced age, became pregnant and gave birth to her son Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael were forced to leave Abraham's care, purportedly because of Sarah's jealousy. They survived in the desert only because an angel revealed to them a source of water, which Muslims believe was found near Mecca. Thus Islam and Judaism trace themselves back to a common ancestor, Abraham.

Muhammad learned about Judaism from the Jews who lived in Arabia. He also absorbed and considered religious elements from Christianity and Zoroastrianism—religions that share with Islam a belief in the soul, bodily resurrection, a final judgment (the Day of Doom), and an afterlife of hell for the wicked and paradise for the good.¹⁰ All three religions also share with Islam a belief in angels and devils, who can have influence on human beings. Indeed, there are numerous similarities between Islam and other religions, and non-Muslims might speculate that Muhammad was influenced by these religions. However, Muslims hold that Muhammad's religious ideas came directly from God.

The overall worldview of Islam (as with the other three religions) is highly dramatic. Muslims believe that good and evil forces are in constant battle and that life on earth is filled with choices that lead to the most serious consequences. This conception goes hand in hand with the overall emphasis of all Western prophetic religions on morality. Religion is viewed as a strongly ethical enterprise; one of its most important purposes is to regulate human life. This moral emphasis appears clearly in the essential Five Pillars of Islam, which we will now consider.

The Five Pillars of Islam

All Muslims must accept and practice the following Five Pillars, so called because they support one's faith. The Five Pillars are mentioned in the Qur'an.

Creed (Shahadah) "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger." This single sentence, when recited with belief, makes a person a Muslim. It is the first sentence whispered into the ears of a newborn infant; it is recited daily in prayer; and it is written in Arabic everywhere inside the domes of mosques and over their doors.

432 CHAPTER 10 ISLAM

Muslims are called to prayers five times each day. Midday prayer is sometimes preceded by a sermon, usually given by the mosque's religious leader (imam).



The most noticeable quality of the Muslim creed is its simplicity, for it emphasizes that there is only one God and that God is a unity. As the Qur'an says, "Your God is one God. There is no God but him."¹¹ The simplicity of the creed is in deliberate contrast to the rather long and complicated creeds of Christianity, and within it is a rejection of several Christian notions. It rejects the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which Muslims see as a belief in three gods. It also rejects the idea that Jesus was divine or that any human being can be divine. It emphatically does not see Muhammad as a divine or supernatural figure but specifies his role as God's prophet and messenger.¹²

Prayer (Salat) Much like the traditional Jewish practice of prayer at dawn, noon, and dusk, devout Muslims are called on to pray five times a day: before dawn and at midday, midafternoon, sunset, and nighttime.¹³ Times for prayer are announced by a muezzin, who calls out from the top of a tower called a **minaret**. (Nowadays, recordings of the call to prayer are often played over loudspeakers.) The muezzin's call to prayer begins with *Allahu akbar* ("God is supreme"),¹⁴ and it continues, "I witness that there is no God but Allah; I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah; hasten to prayer." In towns and cities with many mosques, the call to prayer comes from the most prestigious mosque first and is then followed up by other mosques.



Minarets that call Muslims to prayer stand alongside Egyptian and Roman obelisks in Istanbul, previously the Roman city of Constantinople.

Before prayer, the individual is normally expected to perform a ritual purification with water, washing the hands, arms, face, neck, and feet. If water is unavailable, purification may be done with sand.

Those who pray face toward Mecca—inside a mosque the direction (**qiblah**) is indicated by a special arched niche (**mihrab**). In the earliest days of Islam, Muslims faced Jerusalem for prayer, but later revelations received by Muhammad in Yathrib changed this direction to Mecca. The Qur'an directs: "Turn your face toward the holy mosque; wherever you be, turn your faces toward it."¹⁵ When several people are praying together, one person acts as the leader, standing at the head of the group in front of the mihrab. Passages from the Qur'an and other prayer formulas are recited from memory in Arabic, accompanied by several basic bodily postures: standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting. Each time of prayer demands a certain number of sets (*rakas*) of prayers: two at morning prayer, three at dusk, and four at the other times of prayer.

Friday is the day of public prayer. On other days, people may pray privately, at home or at work, as well as in a mosque. Originally, the day of prayer was Saturday, following the Jewish practice; but Muhammad received a revelation that public prayer on Friday was God's will. In most Muslim countries, public prayer is performed at midday on Friday. Usually only men perform public prayer at a mosque, while women ordinarily pray at home; but where women are allowed to pray with men at a mosque, they are assigned their own area, separated by a curtain or screen or located in an upstairs gallery. The Friday service usually includes a sermon by a religious leader. Although Friday is a day of public prayer, it is not necessarily a public day of rest. In many Muslim countries, offices are open on Fridays,

and because of European colonial influence, the public day of rest is Sunday. Some Muslim countries, however, recognize Friday as the weekly day of public rest.

Charity to the Poor (Zakat) Muhammad was troubled by injustice, inequality, and poverty, and the demand that people give to the poor was a part of his overall vision of a more just society. Islamic practice demands that believers donate certain percentages of their total income, herds, and produce from fields and orchards each year to the poor. This is not a tax on yearly income, but rather a tax on all that one owns. The percentages vary, depending on what is taxed, but are commonly about 2.5 percent. Nowadays, government involvement in this taxation varies among Muslim countries. (In industrialized countries, government taxes commonly pay for systems of welfare, disability, social security, and other forms of assistance. This is a fairly recent phenomenon, however, that is practical only in money-based economies. Nonindustrial societies, which often use barter instead of money, depend much more on voluntary care for the poor.) In addition to established yearly donations, a good Muslim is expected to perform isolated acts of generosity and charity for the poor when such acts are called for in everyday life.

Fasting during Ramadan (Sawm) To fast means to abstain from food for a specified period of time. The purpose of fasting is to discipline oneself, to develop sympathy for the poor and hungry, and to give to others what one would have eaten. Fasting is thought to be good for individual spiritual growth, and it is also an important bond that unites Muslims during the period of shared fasting known as **Ramadan**.

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, is the time during which Muhammad first received his revelations. Fasting during this month, followed by a feast of celebration at the month's end, is considered a fitting way to remember this special event. During the month of Ramadan, devout Muslims avoid all food, liquid, tobacco, and sex from dawn until dusk. Exceptions are made with regard to food and drink for travelers, pregnant women, and the sick, but these people are expected to make up the days of fasting at a later time.

Because Islam follows a strictly lunar calendar, Ramadan occurs at a slightly different time each year, as measured by a solar calendar of 365 days. Twelve lunar months equal only 354 days; thus, Ramadan begins 11 days earlier each year than in the previous year. As a result, Ramadan can fall in any season. When Ramadan falls in winter, when the days are cool and short, it involves the least discomfort. But when the month of Ramadan falls in the summer, fasting can be a great hardship; when evening finally comes and the day's fast is ended, water and food seem miraculous.

We should note that periods of abstinence are common in many religions. The Christian observance of Lent, for about a month before Easter, is a well-known example, as is the Jewish practice of fasting on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in autumn.



Worshippers pray facing the Kabah in the Great Mosque of Mecca.

Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) Pilgrimage—a religious journey by a believer to a sacred city or site—is a common practice in many religions. Besides fulfilling religious demands, pilgrimage offers other, less obvious rewards. It allows people to travel and experience new sights, brings people of different backgrounds together, and engenders a sense of unity. Best of all, it becomes a powerful symbol of an interior journey to the spiritual goals of new understanding and personal transformation. All Muslims, both men and women, unless prevented by poverty or sickness, are expected to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Because Islam is central to the nature of Mecca, only Muslims may visit the city.

Pilgrimage to Mecca, or **Hajj**, was already a practice before Muhammad was born, possibly because worshipers wanted to visit the mysterious black meteorite that had fallen in the area. Muhammad, following divine revelation, continued the practice of pilgrimage to Mecca. He also continued many earlier aspects of that pilgrimage—including veneration of the black meteorite. Although this veneration might seem to contradict Muhammad's call for pure, nonidolrous worship of the One God, the meteorite was thought of as a special gift from God. It was also connected with Abraham and even with Adam, who are said to have venerated it, and with the angel Gabriel, who was thought to have carried it to earth.

Because the present-day form of pilgrimage offers many deeply emotional experiences for believers, it deserves special description.¹⁶ Contemporary pilgrims generally arrive by plane at Jiddah, the port city on the west coast of Saudi Arabia. In earlier times, people came by more romantic (and dangerous) methods—by boat or camel caravan. Air travel, however, has enabled people to come in great numbers. In the past, about 30,000 people visited Mecca each year; now 2,000,000 make the journey. In earlier days, the pilgrimage took months or even years. Some pilgrims died along the way, particularly when the special month of pilgrimage fell in the summer. Often it was the only long trip a person might ever take from a home village. Despite the numbers of pilgrims, to return home as a *hajji* (male pilgrim) or *hajjiyah* (female pilgrim) still confers much prestige.

Muslims distinguish between the “greater pilgrimage,” which is made only during the special month of pilgrimage (*dhu’l-Hijjah*), and the “lesser pilgrimage,” which can be made at other times of year as well. The lesser pilgrimage consists simply of a visit to Mecca and nearby holy sites. The greater pilgrimage, which is described in the following paragraphs, adds several days of arduous travel and ritual in the plains beyond Mecca; a trip to the city of Medina is often included.

Pilgrims first come to Mecca and are expected to arrive by the seventh of the month for the Hajj. For men there is special clothing, called the robe of Abraham, consisting of two pieces of white, seamless cloth. One piece is worn around the waist and lower body; the other covers the upper body and the left arm. (Women have no special clothing, but many dress in white. They do not veil their faces when they are participating in the pilgrimage.) The uniformity of clothing for males emphasizes their basic equality before God. In addition to the robe of Abraham and special prayers, all pilgrims are expected to refrain from sex, violence, and hunting. (It is easy to see how these pilgrimages and the associated practices drastically reduced intertribal warfare on the Arabian Peninsula.)

After settling into their hotels or hostels, pilgrims proceed to the Great Mosque. Inside the huge rectangle of the mosque area is a large courtyard, open to the sky. The four sides of the courtyard consist of pillared colonnades, which open out onto the central area and offer shade. At the center of the courtyard is the Kabah shrine. It is a building approximately 50 feet high and 40 feet wide and deep. It is covered with a black cloth, remade every year, whose edges are embroidered in gold with words from the Qur’an. The interior of the Kabah is empty and is entered only by caretakers and dignitaries, who ritually cleanse the interior with rosewater. The black meteorite, known as the Black Stone, is embedded in one external wall of the building and is visible on the outside from the courtyard.

After ceremonially purifying themselves with water, pilgrims immediately walk counterclockwise around the Kabah seven times. As they pass the eastern corner, they kiss or salute the Black Stone, which extends from the shrine about 5 feet above the ground. Today the Black Stone is surrounded

by silver and has become concave from being touched and kissed over the years by so many millions of people.

Pilgrims reenact important events in the life of Abraham, their forefather. Islam holds that Hagar and Abraham's son, Ishmael, lived in the region of Mecca and that Abraham visited them here. Muslims believe that Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his son Ishmael—not Isaac, as Judaism and Christianity teach—and that the near-sacrifice took place in Mecca. In their actions, they relive Abraham's spiritual submission as a means of emulating his close relationship to God.

After walking around the Kabah, pilgrims ritually recall Hagar. A long covered corridor nearby connects the two sacred hills of Safa and Marwah, which the Qur'an calls "signs appointed by Allah."¹⁷ Between these two hills Hagar is believed to have searched desperately for water for her son Ishmael. Pilgrims walk speedily seven times along the corridor (the *Masa*), reenacting Hagar's thirsty search. They drink from the well of Zamzam in the mosque area, which is believed to be the well shown to Hagar by an angel.

On the eighth day of the month, after another visit to the Kabah, pilgrims go to Mina, a few miles outside Mecca, where they pray through the night. The next morning, the ninth day, they travel to the plain of Arafat, about twelve miles from Mecca, where Muhammad preached his final sermon. At noon they hear a sermon and stand all afternoon in prayer, exposed to the sun; the day of prayer at Arafat is often crucial to the experience of exaltation that the pilgrimage experience can bestow. That night is spent outdoors at Muzdalifa, halfway between Arafat and Mina.

The following day, the tenth of the month, is called the Day of Sacrifice (**Id al-Adha**). Pilgrims return to Mina, where they throw seven small stones at three square pillars, a ritual that recalls how Abraham responded to a temptation: when a demon tempted him to disobey God's command to sacrifice his son, Abraham threw stones at the demon and drove it away.

Pilgrims then select for themselves and their families one animal (sheep, goat, cow, or camel) to be sacrificed to reenact another important incident in Abraham's life: after showing his willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael to God, Abraham was divinely directed to substitute a ram for his son. The slaughtered animal is then cooked and eaten. Any meat that is left over is processed and given to charity. (This act of animal sacrifice is carried out throughout the Muslim world at the same time during the month of pilgrimage.) After the sacrifice, the men's heads are shaven, the women's hair is cut, and all fingernails and toenails are trimmed to signify a new, purified life and a return to ordinary activities. Pilgrims then return to Mecca to again walk around the Kabah. Although this concludes the essential ritual of the Hajj, many pilgrims go on to visit Medina to honor the memory of Muhammad, who is buried there.

Additional Islamic Religious Practices

Islam aims at providing patterns for ideal living. Controls and prohibitions are imposed not to signify a love of suffering but to increase social order

RITUALS AND CELEBRATIONS



The Islamic Religious Calendar: Festivals and Holy Days

Like other religions, Islam has developed a sequence of religious festivals and holy days. The main observances follow.

- The Day of Sacrifice, or *Id al-Adha*, is celebrated during the month of the Hajj (the twelfth lunar month). The head of every Muslim household is expected to sacrifice (or to pay someone to sacrifice) a sheep, goat, cow, or camel to recall Abraham's sacrifice of a ram in place of his son. The meat is cooked, eaten by the family, and shared with the poor.
- The Day of Breaking the Fast, or *Id al-Fitr*, is observed just after the month of Ramadan (the ninth lunar month) has ended. People have parties and often visit the graves of ancestors. Sometimes the festival goes on for up to three days.
- During Muharram (the first month of the Muslim year), believers remember the migration of Muhammad and his followers to Yathrib (Medina). For the Shiite branch of Islam, found primarily in

Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, the month has additional significance because it is associated with the death of Hussein, the son of Muhammad's son-in-law Ali. The first nine days of the month are solemn, and on the tenth day the devout reenact publicly the assassination of Hussein. Plays and processions vividly recall his death, sometimes with devotees cutting themselves and crying aloud during processions in the street.

- Muhammad's birthday occurs on the twelfth day of the third month of the year. In some countries it is a public holiday, and in some regions the whole month is given to celebrating and reading religious texts.
- Birthdays of other holy men and women are variously marked by devotees in different regions and groups. Shiites observe the birthday of Ali; religious communities honor the birthdays of their founders; and the birthdays of regional saints are celebrated locally.

and happiness. Where outsiders might see only limitations, Muslims see instead the benefits that sensible regulations bring to individuals and societies. People who visit Muslim cultures often comment on the rarity of crime and the sense of security that people regularly feel on city streets.

Although it is strict, Islamic practice also values pleasure and happiness in this world. Believers must fast during the daylight hours of Ramadan; but when night comes, families gather to enjoy a good meal together. The same general attitude applies toward sexuality. Although sex is regulated, Muslims do not value celibacy. Muhammad was not a celibate and opposed celibacy as being unnatural. In this regard, Muslims are puzzled by Jesus' never having married and by the religious ideal of monasticism. It is within this framework of an ideal society that we should view some of the prohibitions of Islam.

Dietary Restrictions The Qur'an forbids the consumption of pork and wine. Both Judaism and Islam view the pig as a scavenger animal, whose meat can transmit disease. Wine is forbidden because of its association with violence and addiction. Although only wine is forbidden in the Qur'an, Islam has interpreted that prohibition to include all alcohol.¹⁸

Prohibition against Usury and Gambling Charging interest on loans is not allowed. We might recall that in Muhammad's day money was lent at very

high rates of interest, which impoverished and exploited the borrower. (Some Muslims today get around this prohibition by charging a “commission” for making a loan, although the loan itself is officially without interest.) Gambling is forbidden because it is considered a dangerous waste of time and money, as well as a potential financial risk for gamblers and their families.

Circumcision Male circumcision is a religious requirement in Islam, although it is not actually demanded by the Qur’an. Circumcision at about age 7 or 8 is common. In circumcision, a small amount of loose skin (called the foreskin) is cut off from the end of a boy’s penis. (We might recall that Jews circumcise boys on the eighth day after birth. Circumcision is also common among many Christians, although for them it is not a religious commandment; and it occurs frequently in native religions.) Explanations for the practice of circumcision vary. One is that the practice shows submission to the role of God in human procreation. Another relates to reasons of hygiene; in a hot climate, where daily bathing is not always possible, circumcision might have served as a preventive measure against infection. Perhaps both are true. In Islam, however, it is also done in imitation of Muhammad, who was circumcised.

In some primarily Muslim countries, particularly those in eastern Africa, Muslim girls are also circumcised at puberty. The act involves the removal of part or all of a girl’s external sexual organs. A common explanation is that it decreases sexual desire in the circumcised young woman, helping her to remain a virgin before her marriage and to be faithful to her husband afterward. Non-Muslims in the West commonly criticize the practice as being repressive and dangerous; but some traditionalists see it as a valuable initiation rite and a preparation for marriage. In any case, we should recognize that it is not a Qur’anic command, nor does it have the same religious authority as does male circumcision.¹⁹

Marriage In Islam, marriage is basically a civil contract, although a certain amount of ritual has grown up around it. In traditional Muslim societies, marriage is arranged by the parents and formalized by a written contract. Usually the bridegroom’s family makes an offer of money or property to the family of the bride as a part of the contract. The marriage ceremony, which is held at home, is essentially the witnessing and signing of the contract. A passage from the Qur’an might be read, and there is usually a feast following the signing of the contract. Marriages can be annulled for serious reasons, and divorce is possible and can be initiated by a wife as well as by a husband. Neither annulment nor divorce, however, is frequent. After marriage, a woman takes on a new, more responsible role. As a wife she has left the protection of her father and is now the legal responsibility of her husband.

Female Roles Islamic practice sees male and female social roles as different but complementary. Girls are prepared for traditional female roles, such as

WOMEN AND RELIGION



Women in Islam: Contrasting Notions of Liberation

Islam grew up within a culture that restricted many rights of women. The exact details of pre-Islamic Arabian culture are sketchy, but we know that female infants, if unwanted, were routinely killed by being smothered or buried alive soon after birth. Wives were often treated as property, to be bought and sold, and a husband took as many wives as he pleased. Divorce meant that an ex-wife could be sent away with nothing for her financial support.

This background is important in understanding the new climate that Muhammad established for the rights of women:

- He forbade infanticide, thus saving many baby girls from death.
- He limited to four the number of wives a man could have and demanded that all wives be treated equally. Although this number of wives may seem excessive to non-Muslims, we should recall that in the past, marriage offered a woman economic and legal protection and was often entered into for these reasons. Today, most Muslim men have only one wife.
- He considered women and men equal in basic rights. Muhammad legislated that wives as well as husbands could institute divorce, and he demanded that a wife receive financial support in the event of a divorce. He also allowed remarriage for divorcées and widows. He affirmed property rights for women as well as men.

- Finally, he prescribed the basic religious duties, such as prayer, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, for both women and men.

Despite Muhammad's efforts on women's behalf, traditional Islam reinforces major social distinctions between women and men. While men may still have up to four wives, women may have only one husband. The Qur'an demands that both men and women dress modestly in public, but social custom dictates that women alone must cover their hair, because it is considered to be especially seductive; and although the Qur'an does not demand the veiling of a woman's face, it has become customary in some areas as an extension of the demand for public modesty. While men must wear the robe of Abraham during the pilgrimage, women have no special clothing for the pilgrimage. Women usually do not pray in the mosque with men at the Friday prayer, and if they do, it is in a separate section. In the past, women did not receive formal education; some countries even today have separate schooling for men and women. Women in general are still expected—even pressured—to play a role that is primarily domestic, centering on marriage and children. Public life has largely been reserved for men—although this is now slowly changing.

Some proponents of women's rights find certain passages in the Qur'an distressing. For example, in

wife and mother, although in many Muslim societies today women also work as nurses, doctors, and teachers. Nevertheless, a woman is expected to be circumspect in public, particularly after marriage. In some societies, a woman must be veiled when she goes out of the house, and she allows only her husband and relatives to see her face. Quite conservative societies keep women from jobs outside the home, and women are expected to socialize only with female friends and relatives.

Death Rituals The same general simplicity of marriage ceremonies is also characteristic of death and funerals. Prayers from the Qur'an are recited for the dying person, and after death the body is buried in a plain white shroud. Ideally, for a male who has made the pilgrimage, the shroud is the white robe of Abraham that he wore in Mecca. The face of the deceased is turned toward Mecca at the burial, and the headstone is usually an undecorated stone marker, which signifies equality of all people in death.²⁰



Muslim women in headscarves look out from a bus in Malaysia's bustling Kuala Lumpur.

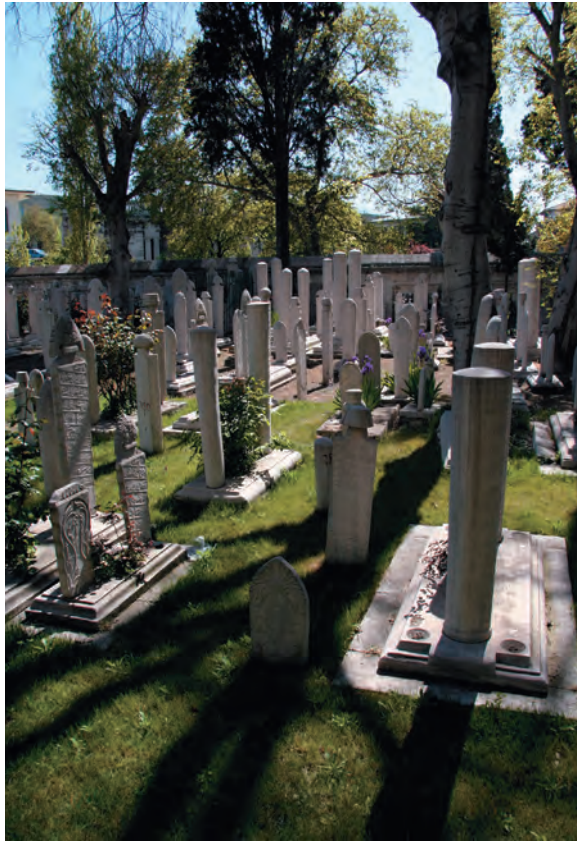
Sura 4 (“Women”) we find the statement, “Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other”; and the Qur’an states that although “good women are obedient,” those women who could become disobedient are to be beaten.²¹ Critics also point out that before Islam emerged, women derived some security from their clan or tribe, and they already had independent property rights and the right to initiate divorce. Islamic reform replaced that with the patriarchal nuclear family and female legal dependence on a male. As an example of this change in the status of women, critics point to the difference between Muhammad’s first wife, Khadijah, who was a property owner and strong figure in her own right, and Muhammad’s later wife, A’isha, who was married at a young age and was expected to be secluded and submissive.

Positions on the role of women are moving in two directions. Under traditionalist pressure, the practice of covering the hair with a scarf is spreading in some countries, such as Malaysia and Indonesia. At the same time, contemporary thinking in predominantly Muslim countries now makes it possible for women to receive public education, and growing numbers of women have careers and roles in public life. In certain locales, women are even seeking the right to act as leaders of Friday prayers in mosques where both men and women gather together.

Scripture: The Qur’an

The name *Qur’an* (*Koran*) means “recitation” and recalls the origins of these sacred writings in the sermons of Muhammad. The name also suggests the way in which the Qur’an is best communicated—by being recited. Although the Qur’an has been translated into many languages, only the Arabic version is considered to be fully authoritative. The beautiful sounds of the original are considered a part of its nature and are essential to its spiritual power.

The Qur’an is believed to be of divine origin, for it is God’s Word, which was revealed to Muhammad during the approximately twenty years from his first revelation in 610 C.E. until the end of his life. Disciples wrote down the words of Muhammad’s revelations, but after his death, when people became concerned that variations would arise and spread, it was thought necessary to establish a single authorized version. Tradition holds that this work was begun by Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s first successor, or **caliph** (*khalifa*, “successor”), and that the work was finished in the caliphate of



Islamic graves vary from country to country. In some places, one finds simple markers in the desert sand; in others, carved individualized tombstones in city-center cemeteries. This graveyard is in Turkey.

These names are evocative: “The Elephant,” “Light,” “Dawn,” “Thunder,” “The Cave,” “Smoke,” “The Mountain,” “The Moon,” “The High One.” The order of the suras does not reflect the exact order in which they were revealed. Except for the first sura, which is a brief invocation, the suras are arranged so that the longest is given first. This means that the last chapters are extremely short (and the easiest for beginners). The placement is generally, in fact, in reverse chronological order, with some intermixture of periods. The short suras are probably the earliest teachings of Muhammad, while the long ones are the products of his final years, when the details of Islamic life were being revealed to him. The suras of the Qur’an have been compared to leaves that have fallen from a tree: the first-fallen leaves are on the bottom.

Islamic art has been profoundly affected by the Qur’an. Indeed, some handwritten copies of the Qur’an are great artworks in themselves, often filled with gold letters and colorful geometrical designs. Because Islam generally prohibits the making of images, artists have developed the most wonderful calligraphy to record the sacred words of the Qur’an.

Frequently the words of a phrase from the Qur’an are also cunningly interlaced to make integrated designs, which are used to beautify mosques

Uthman, which ended in 656 c.e. However, recent scholars question this tradition, and the emergence of the authorized edition is now seen as more complex than was formerly thought. The authorized edition that did emerge became the basis for all later copies.²²

There is a repetitive quality about the Qur’an, common to memorized material, due largely to the fact that the Qur’an is not a carefully constructed argument divided into segments, nor is it a series of stories. Rather, it is a body of sermons and utterances that repeats images and themes in a natural way.

The Qur’an covers a wide variety of topics and discusses figures who are also found in the Jewish and Christian Bibles: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, Mary, and others. It also gives practical admonitions about everyday life—about property rights, money, inheritance, marriage, and divorce. It refers to events in the life of Muhammad and to specifically religious beliefs and regulations—angels, divine judgment, fasting, and the pilgrimage. The topics and types of material are often blended together.

The Qur’an has 114 chapters, or **suras**. Each sura has a traditional name, derived from an image or topic mentioned in it, and many of

and religious schools (*madrasas, medersas*). On buildings, passages from the Qur'an are carved in stone or wood or set in mosaic. Of the many writing systems in the world, cursive Arabic, with its wondrous curves, is possibly the most visually beautiful of all. The fluid form of this writing is suggested nicely by the French word *arabesque*, which has entered the English language to describe a pattern of interlacing lines that are curving and graceful.

The repetition of phrases and images from the Qur'an is comforting to Muslims, who have heard them recited aloud in daily prayers and in sermons since childhood. Passages are recited regularly on the radio, particularly during Ramadan, and in some countries they are part of the sign-off of television broadcasts. Present everywhere, every day, such phrases have a hypnotic resonance. Because Arabic is an especially beautiful language, chanting the Qur'an in Arabic is an art form, and some chanters have even become famous for the beauty of their voices and their interpretation of Qur'anic material.



Children memorize verses from the Qur'an through group recitation in a Qur'anic school.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM

Because his sons had died in infancy, Muhammad died without a clear hereditary male successor.²³ He apparently had not appointed anyone to succeed him,²⁴ and the result was confusion and an unclear line of succession—a fact that ultimately created significant divisions in Islam, whose effects remain today.

Muhammad had asked Abu Bakr, his friend and the father of his youngest wife, to be the principal leader of prayer. Because of this position, Abu Bakr was recognized as the first caliph. When Abu Bakr died two years later, he was succeeded by Umar, the second caliph, and followed by Uthman, both of whom were assassinated. The fourth caliph was Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, the husband of his daughter Fatima. Ali was also assassinated, and control of Islam was taken over in 661 C.E. by his opponents, who ruled from Damascus. This period marks the first and most significant division of Islam, which broke into two factions, Shiite and Sunni (which we will discuss shortly).

The earliest stage of growth of Islam came during the time of the first four rulers, called the orthodox caliphs. These men had been close to Muhammad, and their home was Arabia. A major change occurred, however,

In the name of God
The Compassionate
The Merciful.
Praise be to God, Lord
of the Universe,
The Compassionate,
the Merciful,
Sovereign of the Day of
Judgment!
You alone we worship,
and to You alone we
turn for help.

—Opening (Al-Fatihah)
of the Qur'an²⁵

as Islam spread outside Arabia. From an early, deliberate simplicity, Islam would now become more urbane and complex.

Expansion and Consolidation

Islam arose at a time (seventh century C.E.) that was congenial to the growth of a new political and religious power. The Byzantine Empire, ruling from Constantinople, had fought repeatedly with the Persian Empire, and both were weakened by the effort. Areas theoretically controlled by the Byzantine emperor, such as regions of northern Africa, were far away from the capital.

The weakness of the Byzantine and Persian Empires—and what Muslims believe was divine purpose—helped Islam quickly expand into their territories. Islamic armies took Syria in 635 C.E. and Persia in 636 C.E. They began to move westward, taking control of Egypt in about 640 C.E. The success was intoxicating. Islam spread across most of northern Africa over the next seventy years, and it spread across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean from Arabia to eastern Africa (Figure 10.1).

FIGURE 10.1
Map of the Islamic world today.



Islamic forces entered Spain in 711 c.e., when a Muslim general named Tariq landed in the south—the name of Gibraltar (“mountain of Tariq”) recalls this event. In fact, Muslim forces might have spread Islam through much of western Europe if they had not been stopped in southern France by the Christian forces of Charles Martel, the grandfather of Charlemagne, in 732 c.e. at the Battle of Tours.²⁶ This battle—just a hundred years after the death of Muhammad—was one of the defining battles of world history.

Although Islam was stopped from expanding northward, Islamic rulers remained in Spain for nearly eight hundred years, with capitals in Córdoba and Granada. The Islamic period in Spain is remembered with nostalgia and longing by many, for it is universally thought to have been a paradise-like time, when the arts flourished and Muslims, Jews, and Christians generally lived together in harmony. The only other significant incursion into the West in these early centuries was into Sicily, where Islam was a force for about two hundred years.

From 661 c.e. to 750 c.e., Islam was controlled by the Umayyad dynasty—a period called the Damascus caliphate (the caliphate was now hereditary). During this period Islam adopted elements—from architecture to cuisine—that were introduced to Syria by the Roman Empire. It also adopted and refined the administrative and military apparatus of a political state. This fruitful contact with Roman-influenced Syria is just one example of the

The Afghani-style Amin Mosque of Turfan was built in 1778 by the Uighur people of western China.



genius that Islam has shown in absorbing elements from other cultures and giving them new life.

Control of Islam shifted to Baghdad in 750 C.E. under the Abbasid dynasty—a hereditary line that claimed connection to Muhammad. It is often thought that this period, also known as the Baghdad caliphate, which did not end until 1258, was the golden age of Islam—its cultural peak. Just as the Umayyads had adopted Roman-inspired elements from Syria, so the Abbasids adopted much that was Persian—music, poetry, architecture, and garden design. Classical Greek texts on philosophy, science, and the arts were translated into Arabic. Under the influence of Indian artists, the prohibition of images was relaxed in court art, and miniature paintings and drawings of dazzling images were created. Baghdad became a world center of civilization and taste.

Islam continued to spread eastward into non-Arab cultures, and Arab domination of Islam waned as Islam spread to present-day Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, northern India, and Bangladesh. Islam also spread into western China, where millions of Muslims still live today.

After Baghdad was invaded and sacked by the Mongols in 1258, the political center of Islam shifted to Egypt. Then in 1453 Muslims captured the ancient Christian capital of Constantinople, making it the center of the Ottoman Empire as well as of the Muslim world until 1921, when the Ottoman Empire ended. During this long period Islam spread, primarily through trade, to southeastern Asia—to what is today Malaysia, southern Thailand, and Indonesia, which presently has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world. Islam also spread to Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines.

Because of the great size of Islamic territory—a span from Morocco and Spain to Indonesia and the Philippines—completely centralized control was impossible. Thus, secondary centers, which were sometimes totally independent caliphates, were established. In Spain, the cities of Córdoba and, later, Granada became local political capitals, until Muslims were expelled from Spain in 1492. In India, Delhi became the center of the Muslim Mughal (Mogul) Empire until the British took control of the subcontinent. The fiction of a single caliph ruling all of Islam, however, was kept alive until the Ottoman caliphate in Turkey was dissolved in 1924. (Some contemporary Muslims would like to see the caliphate revived.)

The Shiite and Sunni Division within Islam

Over the centuries of its growth, Islam has experienced several divisions. The most significant division is between the Shiites and Sunnis. Today about 10 to 15 percent of Islam is Shiite, and the remaining majority is Sunni (Figure 10.2). The division began as a political argument over who should succeed Muhammad, but it has widened over the centuries into a division over belief, practice, and general religious approach.

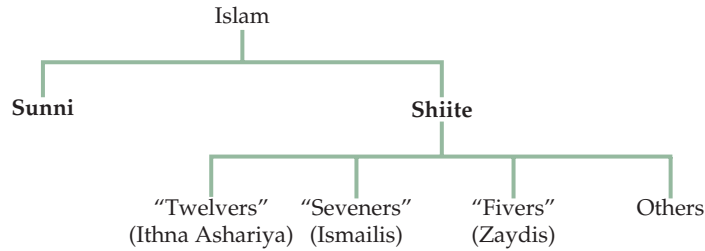


FIGURE 10.2
Branches of Islam.

The real argument over succession centered on different conceptions of the caliphate. Some thought that it should be held by a man of Muhammad's tribe (the Quraysh), someone chosen by his peers as being the person who was strongest and most capable of governing. This was a fairly practical notion of leadership. Others, however, saw the caliph as a spiritual leader, and they believed that God gave the spiritual power of the caliph to only those males who were descended directly from Muhammad's immediate family.

Shiite Islam Shiites derive their name from the word *shia*, which means "faction"—namely, the group who followed Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad. We might recall that the legitimacy of the first four successors of Muhammad (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) was accepted by most early Muslims. Some early Muslims, however, held that Muhammad had assigned Ali to be his first successor, but that a series of political and religious intrigues had initially kept Ali from the caliphate. These disagreements led to further arguments during the period of Uthman and continued even into Ali's eventual caliphate. Muawiya, leader of the Umayyad clan, rejected Ali's leadership, but when arbitration declared Ali to be the legitimate leader, Ali was assassinated. Following Ali's death, some believers held that succession rightfully belonged to his two sons, Hassan and Hussein. Ali's first son, Hassan (625–669), renounced his rights to succession; he was poisoned nonetheless by enemies. Ali's second son, Hussein (626–680), fought against Umayyad control but was killed and beheaded after being defeated in 680 C.E. at the battle of Karbala, in Iraq. Hussein's death allowed the Umayyad dynasty to maintain control for a hundred years, but it also created strong opposition, which became the Shiite movement. Shiites, who trace Muhammad's line of succession from Ali to Hussein, see Hussein as a martyr whose heroic death is a redeeming sacrifice that invites imitation. His burial site at the main mosque of Karbala in Iraq is considered a major holy place and, for Shiites, a center of pilgrimage.

Shiite Islam believes that the legitimate succession was hereditary, descending from the immediate family of Muhammad. A God-given, hereditary spiritual power, called the Light of Muhammad, is thought by most Shiites to have passed to a total of twelve successors, or **Imams**. For them, the first legitimate Imam was Ali. The line ended with the disappearance of



the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, about 900 C.E. According to tradition, he did not die but entered a hidden realm from which he works by guiding Shiite scholars and leaders. Some Shiites believe that he will emerge from this state in the future to help restore Shiite Islam and that his reappearance in the world will usher in a messianic age, heralding the end of the world. There is much speculation about this figure, and he is thought to be sinless. The Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–1989) was considered by some in Iran to be the reappearance of this figure. Because Shiites believe that religious leaders are guided by the last Imam, their leading clerics possess great authority. (The term *imam* is also used in both branches of Islam to refer to major religious leaders, but the term *ayatollah* is used exclusively in Shiite Islam to refer only to the most important imams.)

There are several divisions within Shiite Islam that differ on how many Imams there were and on the exact line of succession. Most Shiites believe in twelve Imams, as previously mentioned, and thus are sometimes called Twelvers—Ithna Ashariya. But members of one group, the Ismailis, are often called the Seveners because they disagree with the Twelvers about the identity of the seventh Imam; they trace descent from Ismail, whom they consider to be the seventh Imam. Disagreement over the fifth Imam produced a division called the Zaydis (named after Hussein's grandson, Zayd ibn Alia). They are commonly known as the Fivers and live predominantly in Yemen. An unusual group is the Alawites in Syria, whose practice has apparently been influenced by other religions. They believe in reincarnation and, in addition to Muslim holidays, they celebrate Christmas and Epiphany. Smaller groups also exist, some of which (such as the Druze of Lebanon) are not considered orthodox Muslims.

Shiite Islam has been attractive to non-Arab Muslims, who have sometimes felt that they were relegated to an inferior role in a religion whose origins were in Arabia. Iran is the center of Shiite Islam because of its large Shiite population. But Iraq is the spiritual home because of the connection with Hussein. Slightly more than half of the Muslims of Iraq are Shiite; they are located primarily in the south of the country. Smaller populations exist in Pakistan, India, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Sunni Islam **Sunni** (or Sunnite) Islam, the other great division of Islam, takes its name from the word *sunna* ("tradition," "example"). It refers to the entire body of traditional teachings that are based on the life and teachings of Muhammad, as given in the Qur'an and the authoritative hadiths. Such a great majority of Muslims belong to this branch of Islam that the history of Islam is predominantly Sunni.

Sunni Islam developed to some degree in response to the claims of Shiite Islam. Because Sunnis accepted the legitimacy of the orthodox caliphates, they were compelled to develop a religious, political, legal, and cultural system that was consistent with their beliefs. The system included the caliphs, who were thought to rule in God's name; the Qur'an and hadiths, seen as expressing God's will; the schools and scholarly debate that interpreted the Qur'an and hadiths to apply to everyday life; and the scholars who carried

Shiite pilgrims gather in Karbala, Iraq, on the fortieth day after the anniversary of the killing of Imam Hussein, grandson of Muhammad. His death occurred in 680 C.E. ◀



The precincts of a mosque are used not only for prayer, but for relaxation, especially during the heat of midday. In addition, men visiting from out of town are permitted to sleep in a mosque between prayers.

on this debate. Traditional Islam does not separate political life from religious life; it aims to create a public life that is shaped by the Qur'an. Although scholarly debate has been a tradition of Shiite Islam, it is central to the ideology of Sunni Islam, which has often been distinctive in its openness to reason and practicality.

Sunni Islam does not have the clear divisions that we see in Shiite Islam. However, it does have its own divisions. Like any large-scale human development, Sunni Islam has generated interpretations of Islam that run the spectrum from ultraconservative to very liberal. Here we will speak briefly of the most important, and then will return to them at the end of the chapter, when we discuss Islam in the modern world.

One division that is frequently spoken of today involves the Wahhabi sect, a conservative movement. It is named after its founder, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (c. 1703–1791), who was born in Medina. The movement

began in Arabia in the eighteenth century, experienced several declines, and underwent a revival in the past century. Its influence is now spreading throughout the Sunni world.

The Wahhabi movement was begun in order to return to an ideal purity that was thought to have existed in early Islam. The Wahhabi movement emphasizes doctrinal orthodoxy, and the name that Wahhabis themselves use for their movement may be translated as “monotheism.” Muhammad, as we know, opposed polytheism and emphasized that worship be reserved for God alone. A continual struggle, therefore, goes on in Islam over the veneration of deceased teachers, leaders, and holy men. Should they have shrines or special tombs? Should memorial days be celebrated for them? Should they be prayed to or referred to in prayer? The Wahhabis have opposed veneration of deceased people, no matter how saintly, saying that such veneration takes away from the unique worship of the One God. Thus Wahhabis do not even celebrate the birthday of Muhammad, and some oppose visiting his tomb in Medina. (Wahhabis earlier destroyed the shrines of Muhammad and his companions.) The Wahhabi movement also has a strongly moral dimension. Among its goals are simplicity, modesty, separation in public of males and females, and strict prohibition of alcohol.

Another reform movement began in India in 1867. The Deobandi movement is named after the town of Deoband, about ninety miles north of Delhi, where the first school was established. This sect resembles the Wahhabis in its emphasis on a simplified Islam: veneration given solely to God, rejection of devotion to saints, and strong differences between male and female social roles. But it gives great attention to the importance of Muhammad and his early companions, who are thought of as role models for Muslims. It argues that education should be entirely religious—it should be based only on the Qur’an and hadiths. Thus it opposes education in business and modern science.

These fairly stern movements have come into existence because Sunni Islam encompasses so many countries and individuals, with varied degrees of commitment. Within the immense numbers of Sunnis—who make up almost 90 percent of all Muslims—many are simply “cultural Muslims.” They have been born into the faith but pick and choose the customs that they wish to follow. The most devout visit a mosque daily and follow all requirements about prayer, charity, and fasting. Others would call themselves moderate Muslims, attending the Friday prayer and doing some daily prayer, but not being otherwise involved. Some limit their practice to prayer at a mosque only on major festivals. Most observe the fast of Ramadan strictly, but some do not. Hence, the appeal of reformers. (We see something similar among Christians who attend church only at Christmas and Easter, or among Buddhists whose religious practice is confined to attending funerals.)

Another common pattern in some Sunni regions is the blending of Islam with older, local elements. One striking example is the traditional form of Islam in Indonesia, which is blended with Indonesian Hinduism and includes ceremonies to honor spirits of nature. A news article described one typical service on the island of Java. “In the name of God, the compassionate, the

merciful,' the turbaned priest begins in the orthodox Muslim style. As the annual labuhan ceremony unfolds, he blesses the various offerings the Sultan of Yogyakarta has prepared for Loro Kidul, the goddess of the surrounding seas: silk, curry, bananas, hair and toenail clippings. The goddess, apparently, will be pleased with these items when they are carried in procession to the sea and thrown in, as will another local deity, who receives similar gifts tossed into a nearby volcano.²⁷ Clearly, this service—which resembles ceremonies that one might also see in Hindu Bali—owes much to the nature worship and Hinduism that preceded the coming of Islam.

Similar blendings can be found in many countries—particularly those that are away from the centers of orthodoxy, such as in western Africa and Southeast Asia. For many people, Islam is a veneer over much older practices. All mixed forms of Islam, however, can be—and often are—the object of reformers' criticism.

Liberal movements have also regularly emerged, although they have not yet coalesced into a clearly defined sect. Perhaps this is because they have spread largely from books espousing their ideas. These movements argue that Muhammad was a humanitarian reformer and that he himself would reinterpret his insights in light of modern needs. The liberal movements urge, in addition to religious studies, the study of science and business. They point out the early achievements of Islam in medicine, astronomy, and other sciences, and they encourage the continuation of this type of achievement. Perhaps the most influential of these liberal developments has been the Aligarh movement. Its founder, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), began a college at Aligarh, in India, which he devoted to principles of modern education. His ideas, promoted widely by his books and disciples, remain influential. Such ideas inspire like-minded groups in many countries.

Because Mecca is located in Saudi Arabia, it is one center of power in modern Sunni Islam. This (and the influence of a reformist movement) has meant that the government of Saudi Arabia expects its country to be a model of proper Muslim belief and behavior—as tourists and foreign workers who have been forbidden from importing alcohol have sometimes been shocked to discover. This has also led to occasional friction, particularly with Iran, which reflects the long-standing differences between Sunni and Shiite points of view.

Another center of power in the Sunni world is Egypt. Its universities, particularly Al-Azhar in Cairo, give it prestige as an interpreter of Islam; and its large Muslim population makes it politically important in the Muslim world.

SUFISM: ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

Islam began as a rather austere religion. But as it moved beyond Arabia, Islam came into contact with the luxurious lifestyle of the settled old cities in the Near East and northern Africa. The Umayyad dynasty, we recall, ruled Islam for one hundred years from Damascus, which even then was an

ancient city. Damascus had become one of the most important cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and it had retained its prominent role under the Byzantine Empire. The caliphate of Damascus simply carried on the aristocratic lifestyle already present.

Islam had contact not only with sophisticated city dwellers there, but also with the Christian monks and hermits who lived in Israel, Syria, and Egypt. Their simple lives made a great impression on Muslims, who seemed to desire something similar for Islam. Because Islam rejected celibacy as a religious ideal, the Christian model of monasticism could not be imitated exactly. What emerged, however, were lay individuals who cultivated the spiritual life on their own and groups of devotees, loosely organized around charismatic spiritual leaders.

Sufism is the name of an old and widespread devotional movement—or group of movements—in Islam. The name *Sufism* is thought to derive from the Arabic word *suf* (“wool”), because early Sufis wore a simple robe made of common wool. It is possible that this type of ordinary cloth was not only practical but also a visual statement opposing needless luxury. Sufism has been a religious movement that values deliberate simplicity.

But Sufism was not only a reaction against superficial luxury. The movement also grew out of a natural desire to do more than the merely formalistic. As Islam defined itself further, establishing religious practice in even the smallest areas of life, it was possible for some people to think that “keeping the rules” was all there was to being a good Muslim. Sufism, however, recognized that it is possible to “go through the motions” but to leave the heart uninvolved. As a result, Sufism sought the involvement of emotions. Because of this it has been called “the heart of Islam.”

Sufi Beliefs

The core of the Sufi movement is its mysticism, its belief that the highest experience a person can have is a direct experience of God. Sufism holds that an individual can, on earth, experience God “face to face.” Moreover, it teaches that experiencing God is the whole purpose of life, not something that has to wait until after death.

Sufi mysticism was encouraged by several religious movements that had been active in Egypt and Syria long before Sufism arose in the seventh and eighth centuries C.E. One was Neoplatonism, a mystical philosophical school that began in Alexandria in Egypt with Plotinus (c. 205–270 C.E.). Plotinus’s work *The Enneads* spoke of the emergence of the entire cosmos from the One and the journey of the soul as it returns to its divine origin. Another movement that influenced Sufism was Gnosticism, which similarly saw life as a spiritual journey. Gnosticism produced its own literature and interpreted other religious literature symbolically. Christian forms of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism flourished in Syria not long before the Umayyad period and produced such books as *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* by Pseudo-Dionysius, who is thought to have been a Syrian Christian monk of the sixth

DEEPER INSIGHTS



Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion that was once widespread in the Near East and Middle East. Although today it is a small religion (found mostly in India), it was once a religion of millions, and its influence spread far beyond its home in Persia. Because other religions that originated in the same region share many distinctive elements with Zoroastrianism, there is lively debate about its role in their development and spread. Some see possible influence on the worldview of the Essenes (a semimonastic faction of Judaism), early Christianity, and Islam. New Year's customs, still practiced today in Iran, certainly reflect Zoroastrian origins.

The prophet Zarathustra (or Zoroaster), the founder of the religion, was born about 650 B.C.E in what is now Iran. Zarathustra was surrounded by the worship of nature gods, common to the Aryan religion, which was also practiced in India. As in Indian Vedic religion, the religion of Zarathustra's culture involved the worship of gods at fire altars, the use of a ritual drink (*haoma*, like the Vedic *soma*), and a hereditary priesthood. Like the Buddha after him, Zarathustra was distressed by the sacrifice of animals at the fire altars and by the power of the priests.

At about the age of 30, Zarathustra experienced a vision that changed his life. He felt himself transported heavenward by a spirit he called Vohu Manah ("good mind"), into the presence of the High God Ahura Mazda ("wise lord"), a god associated in Zarathustra's mind with cosmic justice. Like the calls of Isaiah and Muhammad, this revelation led Zarathustra to preach his new message. At first, Zarathustra was met with strong rejection, which he blamed on demons (*daevas*) and the satanic head of evil forces, Angra Mainyu ("wicked spirit"). Zarathustra's bitter experiences deepened his sense that evil forces constantly oppose the forces of goodness. He was undaunted, however, and his preaching eventually converted an Iranian king, Vishtaspa, who used his power to spread Zarathustra's new religion. Zarathustra condemned animal sacrifices, but he maintained the ceremonial use of the Aryan fire altar. Although fire was not to be worshiped, Zarathustra considered it to be symbolic of divine goodness. Tradition relates that Zarathustra died in his 70s, killed by invaders while praying at his fire altar.

What we know of Zarathustra comes from the most ancient part of the Avesta, the Zoroastrian scriptures. They teach of a High God, Ahura Mazda,

who expresses himself through good spirits whose names are virtues. Whether these spirits are simply aspects of Ahura Mazda or independent beings is unclear. The most important is called Spenta Mainyu ("holy spirit"). Others, for example, have names that mean "power," "devotion," "immortality," and "obedience." (We find some tantalizing similarities in the Jewish mystical literature of the Kabbalah, in Gnosticism, and in some New Testament letters. See Chapters 8 and 9).

Although Zoroastrianism is ultimately monotheistic, it sees the universe in morally dualistic terms. Forces of good are in perpetual conflict with forces of evil—a conflict that mysteriously began at the start of time. Each person is involved in this cosmic struggle and thus must make moral choices between good and evil. Good actions include telling the truth and dealing honestly with others—in the Avesta, good actions include cultivating farmland and treating animals kindly. There is a belief in divine judgment and in an afterlife of reward or punishment, which begins at death, when each individual's soul must cross a bridge that can lead to paradise. If the individual has been good, the bridge is wide and the journey to paradise is easy; but if the individual has been evil, the bridge becomes so narrow that the soul falls into the depths of hell.

Zoroastrianism also presents an apocalyptic vision of the end of time: when the world comes to an end, there will be a resurrection of all bodies and a great general judgment; at this time the world will be purified by fire, which will punish the evil but leave the good untouched.

Zoroastrianism has long been a highly ritualistic religion. At the center of its worship is the fire altar, where priests dressed in white attend an eternal flame. To keep the flame from impurity, an attendant must wear a white cloth (*padan*) that covers his nose and mouth. Believers who come to pray take off their shoes and touch the door frame reverently.

Several rites of passage are significant in this religion. Perhaps the most important is a coming-of-age ceremony (*Navjote*), performed for both boys and girls near puberty. The young person is given a white muslin shirt (*sudreh*) as a symbol of pure intention and a cord (*kusti*) to be worn around the waist as a symbol of dedication. The marriage ceremony is another rite of passage, important



Iranian Zoroastrians celebrate the mid-winter “feast of fire,” Jashn-eh-Sadeh.

to the whole community. The marriage is performed by a priest in the bride’s home. The bride and groom, both dressed in white, have their hands tied together during the ceremony to show the bond between them. Finally, there is the funeral rite. Because death is considered a form of corruption of the body, the corpse is disposed of in a way that will least contaminate the elements of nature. Traditionally, Zoroastrians have tried to avoid cremation (which they believe contaminates the element of fire) or burial (which they believe contaminates earth and water). Instead, they are famous for the low circular towers (*dakhma*), where dead bodies are exposed to birds of prey and to the elements of nature. These towers exist in Iran and India, but in places where no burial towers exist, contemporary Zoroastrians do make use of burial or cremation.

The central festival is NoRuz, a New Year’s festival that is held at the time of the spring equinox, on or

near March 21. It is celebrated not only by Zoroastrians but by Iranians of many faiths, who do spring cleaning, wear new clothing, and eat festive meals. Jumping over outdoor fires is a unique practice—it is thought to bring health during the coming year. Because seven is a sacred number, people create side tables at home with seven ritual items, many of which are symbolic of new life. These may include new green shoots of wheat, colored hardboiled eggs, garlic, wine or vinegar, candles, a mirror, and a bowl of goldfish. Meals made of seven other foods, such as apples, pudding, dried fruit, and pastries, are also eaten. These groups of seven originally recalled Ahura Mazda and the six Holy Immortals, the spirits through whom Ahura Mazda expresses himself.

Contemporary Zoroastrianism is in something of a state of crisis because of its dwindling numbers. Although Zoroastrianism was once the widespread

state religion of Persia, only about fifty thousand Zoroastrians live in Iran today. Large numbers moved to India more than a thousand years ago, where they settled in Mumbai (Bombay) and created their own distinctive culture. In India they are called Parsees (“Persians”) and number about a hundred thousand. Because of their regard for education and hard work, their contributions to science, industry, and music in India have been extraordinary. As a result of recent

emigration, perhaps another fifty thousand live in large cities in North America, England, and Australia. Among believers, debate rages about intermarriage with people of other faiths, about conversion, about whether the priesthood should be only hereditary, and about translation of the sacred texts for services. Conservatives believe that strict keeping of traditional practices will protect their religion, while liberals believe that the religion will die unless there is change.

To God belongs the east and the west. Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God.

—Qur’an²⁸

century. It is also possible that influences from Hindu mysticism, coming from India into Persia, were behind a great flowering of mystical poetry.

Sufis saw in the Qur’an a number of passages that invited mystical interpretation. These became their favorites. A beloved passage says that Allah is so near to every human being that he is even “closer than the jugular vein.”²⁹ Another favorite passage says, “Whether you hide what is in your hearts or manifest it, Allah knows it.”³⁰

The image of Muhammad also took on new meaning. To the Sufis, Muhammad was himself a mystic. He lived a life of deliberate simplicity, sought God, and had profound revelations. Because he submitted himself so fully to God’s will, in his Night Journey he was carried up to the highest heaven, where he spoke with God as one friend speaking to another friend. This event, the scholar A. J. Arberry remarks, “for the Sufis constitutes the Prophet’s supreme mystical experience and an example which they may aspire to follow.”³¹

One of the great early Sufi saints was a woman mystic, Rabia (c. 717–801 C.E.), who left behind ecstatic writings that speak of God as her divine lover. She is famous for her statement that she sought God not because of fear of hell or desire for heaven but simply for himself alone. In other words, she sought God not for her sake but for his.

Sufis have commonly spoken about the sense of loss of self (*fana*, “extinction”) that occurs in mystical experience: when the self is gone, all that remains is God. Some Sufis have spoken about this experience in language that has been shocking to the orthodox—their mystical descriptions seeming to weaken the distinction between God and his created world, which is strong in orthodox Islam, and even seeming to embrace pantheism, the belief that everything is God. The Persian mystic Abu Yazid (d. 875 C.E.), when he was in ecstasy, is reputed to have said, “Glory be to me—how great is my majesty.”³² Al-Hallaj (d. 922 C.E.) was one of the most alarming Sufi figures; he publicly and repeatedly applied a name for God to himself, calling himself *al-Haqq*—“the Truth,” “the Real,” or “Reality Itself.” His comments were so shocking to his contemporaries that they executed him.

Sufis continued to come into conflict with religious authorities who feared that Sufi meeting places would supplant the mosques and that a

vague command simply to love would replace the clearer, specific commands of traditional Islam. The veneration of both living and dead Sufi masters also seemed to the orthodox to be opposed to the traditional demand to worship God alone.

Al-Ghazali and Sufi Brotherhoods

The conflict was softened by the life and work of the scholar al-Ghazali (or al-Ghazzali, 1058–1111). Al-Ghazali was a renowned professor in Baghdad who adopted Sufism. In his autobiography he says that despite the respect his job gave him, he was deeply unhappy. What he was doing did not seem important to his own spiritual life. He was torn between leaving his post or staying on in comfort. At last, he followed an inner voice that demanded that he go “on the road.” He did this for more than ten years, traveling in Syria and Arabia and living simply. He eventually returned to Baghdad and formed a brotherhood of Sufis, but he insisted on keeping orthodox law and practice as well. His blend of Sufism with traditional practice, his later books on Sufism, and his scholarly reputation made an indelible mark on Islam. He explained that the Sufi language of “extinction” (*fana*) is metaphorical, which he compared to “the words of lovers passionate in their intoxication,”³³ or to a diver lost in the sea.³⁴ His explanations of Sufism and his prestige gave a legitimacy to Sufism that it had not had before. Sufism and orthodoxy no longer needed to run like parallel lines, never meeting. Now they could enrich each other.

After al-Ghazali, more Sufi brotherhoods were founded and the religion became slightly more institutionalized. Disciples gathered around a master. The disciple—in Arabic called *faqir* and in Persian *darwish*, meaning “poor”—would learn a distinctive spiritual discipline (*tariqa*) from the *shaykh*, a Sufi expert. Often a master and his disciples lived in a compound of many buildings, and the life was semimonastic. Laypersons could also be associated with the religious order, even while living an outwardly secular life.³⁵

Many Sufi orders emerged and spread widely. One of the most famous was the Maulawiya (in Turkish, Mevlevi), founded by Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (1207–1273). Born in Persia, Rumi eventually settled in what is today Turkey. Rumi’s exquisite poetry is now well known beyond the Muslim world. His great work is called *Mesnevi* (or *Mathnawi*). The Maulawiya order became famous for its type of circular dance, which Rumi asserted could assist mystical experience. (The English phrase *whirling dervish* refers to a member of this order, and the Mevlevi dance is still performed in Konya, where Rumi lived.) Among other orders to emerge, with different emphases, were the Qadiri, Suhrawardi, and Naqshbandi.

Sufi Practice and Poetry

Sufism has incorporated many techniques to encourage spiritual insight, some possibly derived from Hindu yoga or from Christian monastic practice in the Near East. One technique involved jerking the head to encourage



As evening descends,
Sufi dancers whirl in old
Istanbul.

an upward flow of blood during prayer. Two other techniques were deep, regular breathing during meditation and the repetition of the ninety-nine names of Allah (**dhikr**), sometimes counted on a rosary, to enable a constant remembrance of God. Some groups used music and others used spinning or dancing in circles or occasionally ingesting wine and psychedelic plants to alter consciousness. Some groups reportedly howled and walked on fire, among other unusual techniques. And all groups made use of allegorical interpretations of Qur'anic passages and of Islamic practices (such as the pilgrimage to Mecca), which they saw as living metaphors for their mystical search.

Sufism has also used poetry in the same allegorical and symbolic ways. When read one way, a poem might resemble the lyrics of a romantic song. Read another way, the same poem might suggest a longing of the spirit for God, a search for God, or the ecstasy of final union with God. Sufism has inspired some of the world's greatest poets, as famous in the Muslim world as are Shakespeare and Goethe in Western countries.

Until recent decades, only one Muslim poet was well known in English-speaking countries. Omar Khayyám (c. 1048–1122), who was also an astronomer and mathematician, gained fame in the West from a late-Victorian translation (by Edward FitzGerald) of the long poem *The Rubaiyat*. Many people are familiar with “a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou,” which is paraphrased from the poem and brings to mind a romantic picnic. But a Sufi

could interpret a loaf of bread symbolically as the depth of ordinary reality, the jug of wine (intoxicating but suspect) as ecstasy, and “thou” as the divine Thou—God. Through translations, many great Sufi poets, such as Rumi, Hafiz (c. 1325–1390), and Jami (1414–1492), are nowadays becoming better known and appreciated.

There is a warmth about Sufism that appeals to the ordinary layperson, and some Sufi groups have served as fraternal societies in people’s lives—providing comfort, helping the poor, and even burying the dead. Sufism’s characteristic warmth and practicality helped Islam spread to countries far from its place of origin, such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

The Sufi connection with common people, however, has sometimes made the orthodox think of Sufism as a superstitious folk religion. For example, Sufi practice has encouraged devotion to deceased shaykhs and has promoted visits to their tombs, hoping for miracles. To the orthodox, this recalls the Christian veneration of saints, who may be prayed to for favors—a practice that, according to the orthodox, takes attention away from the sole worship of God. Sufis also have sometimes substituted their spiritual practice for the regular daily prayer expected of all Muslims, and some Sufis have held themselves exempt from certain religious laws. Therefore, despite the esteem generated by al-Ghazali and the Sufi poets, Sufism is still held in disregard by some and is not always practiced openly by its devotees. Although mosques are plentiful and visible in the Islamic world, Sufi meeting places are hard to find, as are individuals who will actually admit to being Sufis. Luckily, however, Sufism has been buoyed in recent years by a growing appreciation of Sufi poetry and practice.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: RAMADAN IN MOROCCO

During my first trip to Europe as a college student, I found myself spending a very cold February in “sunny” Spain. No one had told me that snow falls in Madrid. But there it was, pure, white, everywhere. As I trudged through Plaza Mayor one night, looking at my breath and feeling ice in my veins, I realized that if I were to survive, I had to go south—quickly.

I took a train from Madrid, then a ferryboat across to Morocco, and finally a bus inland. At first the land was sandy, dry, and flat, but soon the countryside grew greener, with small hills and low trees. I saw children watching over flocks of sheep, and donkeys pulling carts and carrying food on their backs. Animals seemed to be as much a part of everyday life as cars are in Los Angeles. As I traveled south, Morocco appeared to be much like Spain, except that many of the men were dressed in long, hooded robes, and I could hear the call to prayer regularly during the day and early evening.

I reached Fez at the beginning of Ramadan. Old Fez is a traditional, Islamic-style city on a hill, brimming with mosques, shrines, and medersas (religious schools). Its streets, just wide enough for two people to pass, twisted and curved. Mules laden with saddlebags rushed past, their drivers



The owner of this shop reads from the Qur'an as he awaits pilgrims who might buy his spiral candles. Note the black mark on his forehead, the result of repeatedly touching his forehead to the ground during prayer.

yelling, “Balek!”—“Watch out!” On each side of the narrow streets, tiny shops sold fruit, vegetables, sweets, spices, perfumes, robes, brass, and leather. All kinds of fruit were piled high; spices were arranged in neat pyramids of red, yellow, and orange; and sweet desserts made of honey and almonds were heaped in thick stacks. People were buying for the evening meal that would end the day's fasting, but I never saw anyone eat or drink during the daytime. In the evening, the recitation of the Qur'an could be heard loudly, coming from radios placed in shops and on windowsills.

Many shops sold spiral candles with paper decorations on them, meant as offerings at shrines. At a shop where I stopped to buy a candle, the old owner was reading a copy of the Qur'an. I was hesitant to disturb him, but then two young customers came and helped. They each bought a candle, too, then introduced themselves. Moulay and Nouredine were students in Casablanca and were in Fez on vacation. Moulay was Berber, a member of the native tribal people of Morocco, and his parents lived in the north, near Oujda. Nouredine was Arab, from Ourzazate in the south. He told me proudly that his name (which he pronounced *nur-deen'*) means “light of religion.” The two friends were making a pilgrimage together to the main religious sites of Fez, Meknes, and places in central Morocco. Soon their pilgrimage would end with a visit to the shrine of the saint after whom Moulay was named, in the hilltop town of Moulay-Idriss. They invited me to join them, and I accepted gladly.

All along the way we talked about religion—about my beliefs and theirs. They explained that their way of practicing Islam was not strict. They did not pray at all the times of daily prayer, and they did not keep all the customs. But, they told me, they prayed at the public prayer on Fridays, and they kept Ramadan. I could see that: they rose before dawn to eat and would not eat or drink again till after sunset. They kindly encouraged me to eat whenever I was hungry, thinking I must be weaker than they were. “You have no practice in fasting,” Nouredine explained. They recommended, however, that during the day I not let others see me eat the bread and oranges or drink the water that I carried in my shoulder bag.

From our conversations, I discovered that Moulay and Nouredine were both interested in Sufism. Commenting on its teachings, Moulay said, “Allah is not something always clear and certain, like a tree or a mountain, that you

DEEPER INSIGHTS



The Meaning of Muslim Names

Muslim names, mostly from Arabic, can sound exotic to some Western ears. But their meanings frequently involve everyday virtue and beauty. Many refer to religion, particularly by making reference to Allah or by recalling the names of Muhammad or of his wives, children, and companions. Some names are used for females, others for males, and some have both male and female forms (whose spellings may vary). Among the most common names are these:

Abdul: "servant [of God]"
 Abdullah: "servant of Allah"
 Afaf: "modesty"
 A'ida: "returning"
 A'isha: "generous" (name of a wife of Muhammad)
 Amal: "hope"
 Amin (m.), Aminah (f.): "faithful"
 Barak (Barack): "blessing"
 Hassan: "lovely"
 Hussein (Husayn): "lovely"
 Iman: "belief"
 Jamal: "beauty"

Jamila: "beautiful"
 Kareem (m.), Kareema (f.): "generous, noble"
 Khalid: "eternal"
 Latifah: "gentle"
 Leena: "tender"
 Mahmoud: "praised"
 Mustafa: "chosen"
 Noor: "light"
 Nurdeen: "light of religion"
 Rasheed (m.), Rasheeda (f.): "wise"
 Saleem (m.), Saleema (f.): "safe, whole"
 Shafiq: "compassionate"
 Shakira: "grateful"
 Shalala: "waterfall"
 Shareef: "noble"
 Tareef: "rare"
 Waheed: "unequaled"
 Yasmeen: "jasmine"
 Zahir (m.), Zahira (f.): "shining"

only have to look at to see. Allah is a reality that you have to look for and discover for yourself. The word *Allah* is an invitation, like an invitation to a meeting or a party. You don't quite know what will happen until you go there yourself. I practice my religion to see what will happen. I think you have to do it in order to know it."

Noureddine pointed to some boys on the road who were riding bicycles. "Maybe it's like that," he said. "You don't know how to ride a bicycle until you do it. In fact, it looks a little crazy. It even looks impossible. But when you do it, it works, and you get where you need to go."

Our first vision of Moulay-Idriss was from a distance: a white town at the top of two steep hills. "They say it's shaped like a camel's back," said Noureddine. When we arrived, the town was mobbed with people. Luckily, we found a small place to stay and left our things there. We then walked down to the entrance to the shrine, the burial site of Moulay Idriss I (d. 791 C.E.), a descendant of Muhammad and an early Muslim ruler of Morocco. My friends bought colorful green candles, decorated with cut paper, and asked me to wait for them. They went up a long corridor and disappeared;

a small sign high up on the wall said, “No entry for non-Mussulmans.” I passed the time observing people’s faces and their clothing. One thing that struck me was the contrasting nature of some women’s appearance: their faces were modestly veiled, almost to the point of being entirely covered, yet their gowns attracted one’s attention because of their bright colors—purple, red, yellow, chartreuse.

When my friends returned, they took me up a seemingly endless flight of stairs to the top of the town. We looked down on square towers with roofs of green tile and across to the beautiful green mountains beyond. “That is the shrine down there,” Moulay said, “but I’m sorry you cannot go inside.” Nouredine smiled but looked serious. Then he had an idea. He asked me, “Wouldn’t you like to become a Muslim, too?”

ISLAMIC LAW AND PHILOSOPHY

Islamic thought focuses on both practice and belief. It asks, How should I live my life according to God’s will, and how am I to understand and relate to God? Over the first five hundred years of Islam, these questions were debated intensely, and some basic principles were acknowledged. Islam also recognized that there could be reasonable disagreement. Thus, various schools of opinion emerged.

Because the Qur’an does not give specific laws for every possible human situation, Muslims have found it necessary to discuss how to interpret the Qur’an. Muslims believe that the Qur’an offers principles for correct guidance in all of human life; but rules for specific instances have to be worked out by considering parallels and utilizing those basic principles.

The Qur’an is, of course, the primary authority. Also authoritative are the hadiths—remembrances of Muhammad’s words and actions. The most important collection has been that of al-Bukari (died c. 870), which contains almost three thousand hadiths. The use of hadiths enlarged the body of material that could be drawn on for guidance, but it also created problems of its own. Disagreement about which hadiths were genuine prevented their universal acceptance. Also, even apparently worthy hadiths were not always consistent with each other.

Islam has a long history of scholarly debate. Over the centuries (from the eighth century on), four major schools of Islamic law have emerged in Sunni Islam and three schools in Shiite Islam, each school differing on what it has looked to as an authoritative guide for making judgments on particular cases: On what grounds may a wife request a divorce? Can a village without a mosque be taxed and forced to build one? How many witnesses are necessary to legitimize a marriage? and so on. In arriving at decisions, scholars have relied on a variety of things: the Qur’an (which has been interpreted both literally and symbolically), the hadiths, logic, precedents, analogy (*qiyas*), the consensus of early jurists, and the decisions of religious scholars.

Islamic Law and Legal Institutions

Islamic law, called **Sharia** (also spelled Shariah), is the entire body of laws that guides the believer in this life. The legal ideal of Islam is different from what is now considered the norm in many countries. Most modern industrialized countries expect laws to reflect a kind of civilized minimum, something that all citizens, of any background or belief, can be expected to accept and obey in their public life. Often these laws have a distant religious background or origin, but they are framed for very diverse populations and are deliberately secular in nature. In everyday life, we often hear a distinction made between church and state. In industrialized countries, the two realms—secular and religious—generally exist somewhat apart.

The traditional Islamic ideal, however, does not separate religious and secular spheres, and this ideal is the subject of intense argument in strongly Muslim countries today. In the traditional Islamic ideal, laws bring everyday life into ever-closer harmony with the regulations of the Qur'an and traditional teaching.

Traditional Islam is theocratic, seeking the "rule of God" in all aspects of everyday life, for in its view there is one God and one correct religion. Nature is orderly because it follows the laws of God spontaneously—for example, gravitation governs the movement of the planets and the change of tides. Similarly, in Islamic thought God presents human beings with laws of human order. There cannot be different sets of laws for different human beings; otherwise, chaos would ensue. The laws of God must be obeyed not only because they are his commands but also because they lead to human fulfillment.

Of course, this ideal of a single religion guiding an entire society has rarely been attained. Muhammad himself recognized that there must be exceptions. Although he demanded that people who followed tribal folk religion convert to Islam, he was more lenient toward Jews and Christians. In fact, he allowed Jews and Christians to continue their own laws and practices (although they were charged a special tax for this right). In Muhammad's eyes, Jews and Christians were "people of the book" and were thus considered as followers of the same general "religion of Abraham" as were Muslims—although living at a less perfect level.

Some governments, such as that of Iran since 1979, have imposed a theocratic rule. There and in a few other strongly Muslim countries, the rules of the Qur'an and the rulings of religious scholars have had great political power. Although Islam does not have an official clergy, it does have religious specialists and scholars (*ulama*, *mullahs*) who have various levels of influence, both religious and political.

Islamic Philosophy and Theology

Many profound questions emerged quite naturally as early thinkers began to consider the basic beliefs of Muhammad and of Islam. One of the first questions regarded intellectual investigation itself. Is a good Muslim allowed to question religious topics? Does the philosophical study of religion (*kalam*,

“theology”) hurt a person’s spiritual life, or can it deepen it? Do faith and reason contradict each other, or can they coexist happily?

In theory, there is a distinction between philosophy and theology. Philosophy considers all questions by the light of reason alone, without making use of religious revelation. Theology, however, mixes philosophy and religion, for it uses philosophy to investigate religious doctrines. In reality, pure philosophy is rather difficult to find, for the religion of a surrounding culture will inevitably color both the questions and the methods of its philosophers. This happened frequently, as we will see, from the beginning of Islam.

Early thinkers posed important questions that had to be addressed. Some questions were simply intriguing, while others presented serious philosophical problems. For example, the Qur’an calls God both just and merciful. But how is it possible to be strictly just and also to be really merciful? Doesn’t one virtue exclude the other? Or a second question: If God is truly all-powerful, how can a human being really be free to make a choice? Doesn’t God make everything happen? And even when human beings think they are acting by their own choice, isn’t God really doing the choosing? Or another question: If God is all-loving, why does he allow bad things to happen? Wouldn’t an all-loving God prevent evil things from happening in the world? The list of many similar questions goes on.

Some philosophical questions arose early as a result of studying the Qur’an. Others, however, emerged as Islam encountered the philosophies and religions of its neighbors, such as when Greek philosophical works were first translated into Arabic and were then taught in the great schools of Baghdad, Córdoba, and Cairo. Aristotle, for example, taught that the universe was eternal. But didn’t this conflict with the Qur’an’s vision of God as creator of the universe? Further questions arose when Islam moved into India and had contact with a monistic Hindu spirituality. Certain schools of Hindu thought taught that everything, ultimately, was God. But didn’t this conflict with the Muslim notion that Allah, as creator, is different from his creation?

In general, there have been two philosophical poles within Islam. The more liberal view values reason and maintains that everything can be examined intellectually. It argues that human beings are basically free and that reason is a God-given gift that illuminates and complements faith. The other, more conservative view is suspicious of reason, which it sometimes sees as an expression of false human pride. It therefore values intellectual submission, believing that ultimately neither God nor anything else can be explained fully by reason. It tends to see the entire universe, including human lives, as being strongly determined by God. Like a pendulum, the history of Islamic thought has swung back and forth between these two poles.

One of the first intellectual movements, the eighth-century Mutazilite school, was an early form of rationalism. In attempts to defend the young religion of Islam, this movement tried to answer several perplexing questions. When the Qur’an speaks of God in human terms (for example, the “face of God”), does this mean that God has a body, or is the language simply symbolic of God’s characteristics? And regarding the Qur’an itself,

what is its ultimate origin and nature? Is the Qur'an an earthly creation of God? Or is the Qur'an—because it is God's thought and words—uncreated and eternal? The Mutazilites argued that the anthropomorphic speech of the Qur'an is symbolic and that the Qur'an is not eternal but was created by God. But the Mutazilites were opposed by other thinkers.³⁶

The voice of conservatism responded firmly about a century later in the work of al-Ashari (died c. 935 C.E.). He spoke of God as being entirely sovereign and transcendent, and he stressed the power of God to determine human lives. It is said that al-Ashari was one of the most important influences on the common Muslim emphasis on the absolute power of God.

The value that Islam has placed on philosophical reasoning appears in the works of two Muslim thinkers who are considered prominent figures of world philosophy. They are Ibn-Sina (980–1037) and Ibn-Rushd (1126–1198), known in medieval European philosophy by their Latin names Avicenna and Averroës, respectively. Because of their interest in medicine and the natural sciences, as well as philosophy, they thought that using reason to explore nature would give insight into nature's Creator.

Perhaps the most influential philosophical formulations, however, were more conservative. They came from al-Ghazali (mentioned earlier) and his intellectual disciple al-Arabi (d. 1240). Both rejected rationalism. Defending the conservative approach, al-Ghazali wrote two influential books: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. In these books he showed the inconsistency of several philosophers who had based their thought on Aristotle's. He criticized philosophy for generating arguments and false pride, and he distanced himself from both rational theology and legalism. The elements that he thought to be the core of religion, instead, were direct religious experience and submission of the heart to God—ideals attainable by anyone, not just by philosophers.

Al-Arabi continued this line of thought, but, influenced also by Sufism, he moved even further in a mystical, monistic direction. For him, all apparently separate realities were images of God, and all activity was ultimately the activity of God.³⁷ Submission to God meant a lived awareness of God's active presence in all things.

ISLAM AND THE ARTS

Islam has had a unique influence on the arts. Its prohibition of much figural art, its love of the chanted word, its weekly public worship, and its focus on the Qur'an have channeled the inspiration of its artists in intriguing directions and helped create works of great imagination.

Architecture

Perhaps the greatest art form of Islam is its architecture. When we think of Islam, we envision tall towers and immense domes. It takes only a few

visits—to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, to the Sultan Ahmet “Blue Mosque” in Istanbul, to the former grand mosque of Córdoba, or to the Hassan II mosque of Casablanca—to sense the architectural genius of Islam, whose uniquely shaped spaces express beauty in what is vast and empty.

Islamic architecture expresses itself most importantly in the place of public prayer, the mosque (*masjid*, meaning a space for prostration). Because a mosque can be any building or room where Islamic prayer is offered, its design can be quite simple, as it is in villages or in cities where the Muslim population is small. Grand mosques, however, provide greater opportunity for artistic attention. A mosque has at least one formal entry to the compound, where shoes are to be taken off and left outside. Because purification is necessary before prayer, there is at least one fountain inside the compound for washing one’s hands, face, neck, and feet. There is a high pulpit indoors or outdoors for sermons—although as an act of humility the speaker does not stand at the very top. Worshipers stand and prostrate themselves in

This mosque in Istanbul displays the genius of Islamic architecture. Design, light, and grand spaces together hint at heaven, even here on earth.



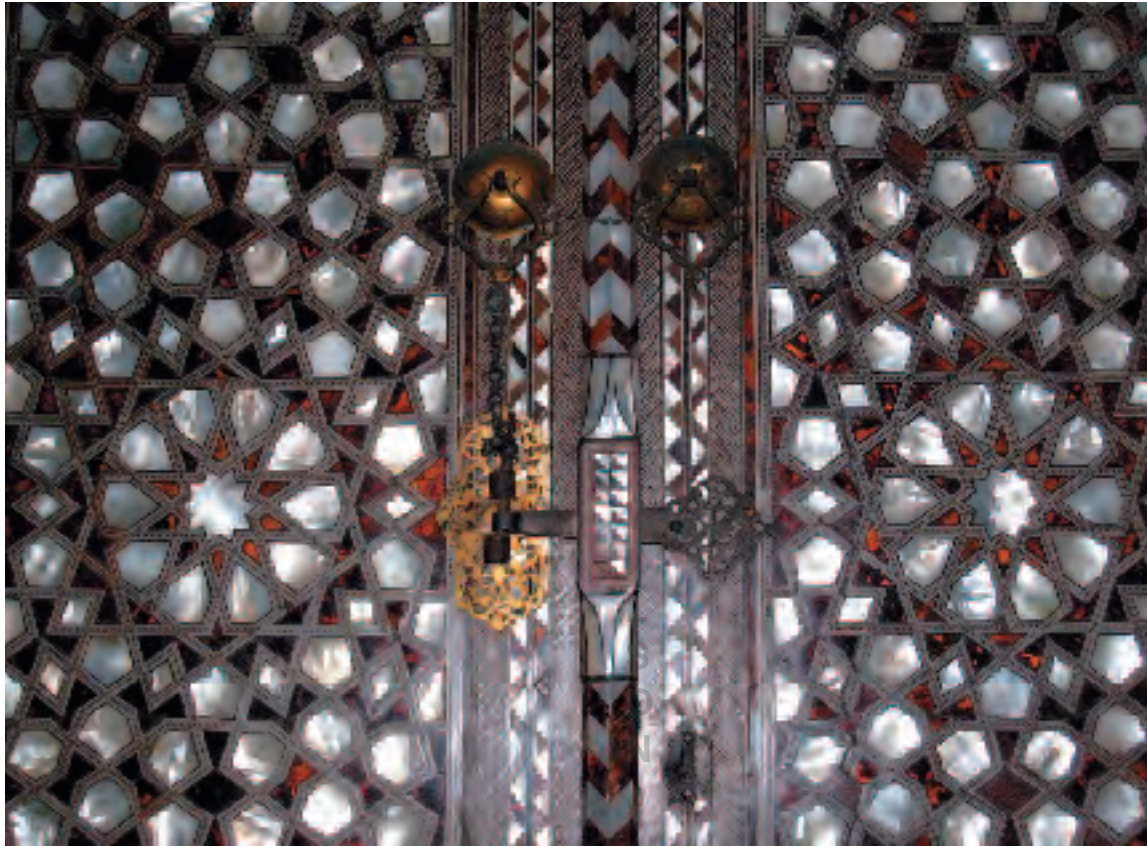


rows, facing the mihrab (the special marker that indicates the direction of Mecca). The floor is usually covered with rugs or mats. Frequently, there are covered porches for protection from the sun and rain. Other wings or buildings—used for schoolrooms and libraries—are often a part of the complex. Outdoors there is also usually a minaret—a tall tower, either round or square, from which people are called to prayer. Although only one minaret is needed, there are frequently two; in grand mosques there might be four or even six. Inside the minaret is a staircase, which leads up to a balcony near the top, from which the muezzin can chant his call.

Most styles of religious architecture in the world emphasize ornamentation, but the aesthetic principles of Islamic religious architecture are more austere. This simplicity enhances one's appreciation of space and balance, particularly in the mosque and its attendant structures.

The value of empty space is one of an art student's first lessons. Some paintings, for example, are partially devoid of paint or drawing, and although those parts seem to have no function, the student learns that the empty space actually acts in harmony with whatever is depicted. The space gives rest to the eye and directs the viewer's focus. In art this necessary emptiness is called *negative space*. In architecture, negative space is the space above or beside or around a building. The building shapes the space within and without, and both the space and the building work together to balance each other. Large mosques especially demonstrate a skillful use of negative space, such as in the shaped space between a dome and a minaret.

A worker, still in his pharmacy smock, takes time out from work for afternoon prayer. He faces an elaborate niche called the mihrab, which indicates the direction of Mecca.



Some art historians see Islam's fascination with complex designs, such as the design of this crystal door, as an outgrowth of the prohibition against the portrayal of persons.

Because many mosques, particularly in dry climates, have extensive open courtyards, the negative space of most importance is the sky. It is beautifully balanced and complemented by the columns, arches, and walkways below. Other types of mosques, particularly in wetter climates, are almost entirely enclosed, frequently covered with one or more domes. But even inside, a person can experience the beauty of negative space—especially in the large mosques of Turkey, which are primarily domed buildings. A vast dome, although it shelters one from the sky, is itself like the sky in its feeling of expansiveness. The internal and external shaping of space also helps one experience the divine, for in Islam space is an important symbol of God, invisible but present everywhere.

In Islamic architecture, balance is another important feature, especially as it relates to the use of color. Perhaps because Islam spread throughout hot, sunny regions, the most typical color of its architecture is white, to reflect the sunlight. White is balanced by black, particularly in the dark shadows that are created by windows and doors, covered porches, and colonnades. Sometimes, too, alternating lines of black and white are painted on walls for decorative effect.³⁸ This white-black contrast is a fundamental theme of much Islamic architecture. A second color scheme contrasts blue with gold, often in the form of ceramic tiles on domes, where the dome is covered in one color and its base in another. (Good examples are the golden Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the blue domes of Isfahan in Iran.) The blue can vary in shade from sea-blue to blue-green. The Islamic tendency

toward the color blue-green is hinted at by the original meaning of the word *turquoise*, which in French means “Turkish.”

Fine Art

To talk of “Islamic art” might seem a contradiction in terms, owing to the Muslim prohibition against making images of human beings or animals. Nonetheless, Islam has a rich tradition of pictorial art.

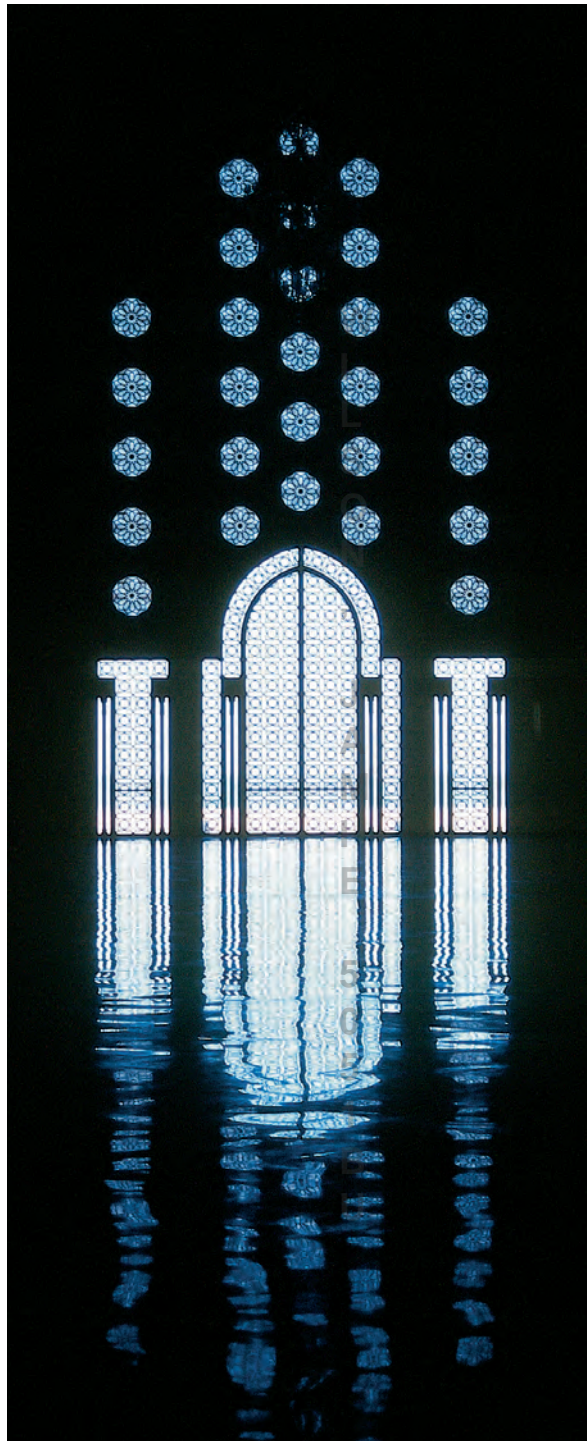
Paradise as a Theme in Art One theme that seems to have inspired much Islamic art—as well as architecture and garden design—is the theme of paradise. In the Qur’an and the Muslim imagination, paradise is quite concrete and sensuous. It is not just a heaven of diaphanous angels, singing hymns and resting on wispy clouds. Paradise is more like a fertile oasis or an enclosed garden. The Qur’an repeatedly says that paradise is “watered by running streams.”³⁹ Wildflowers are at our feet, and we sit under date palms and other fruit trees, whose fruit is ready to be eaten.⁴⁰ In the afternoon, we feel cooling breezes. Paradise is safe, too. (Literally, the word *paradise*, from Middle Iranian, means “wall around.”) We can stay outdoors in this garden, enjoying nature without fear.

This image of paradise in Islamic art often appears in symbolic form in the prayer carpet. Although the prayer carpet is not usually recognized as religious art, it is to Islam what stained-glass windows are to Christianity. Both are objects of contemplation for people at prayer. Interestingly, both manifest the same fundamental color scheme—every shade of red and blue. A major difference between the stained-glass window and the prayer carpet is that the latter does not depict human images. Instead of portraying figures of saintly persons, prayer carpets often contain a symbolic image of the garden of paradise. At the center of the carpet might be a stylized fountain that sends water in straight lines to each of the four directions and then around the entire border, the four sides of the border representing the walls of the garden. The rest of the carpet might be filled with stylized flowers. To walk into a large mosque where immense carpets are laid out side by side, such as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, gives the feeling of entering a magical garden.

The paradise theme is carried over in Muslim architecture as well: slender pillars resemble the trunks of trees, and arches that come to a point suggest adjoining tree branches. Ceilings often suggest a night sky full of stars: blue ceramic tiles may form a backdrop for golden six-pointed stars, clustered in complex patterns. Or delicate wood and plaster stalactites hang from the ceiling, suggesting light coming from heaven. The paradise theme is sometimes evident in and around mosque buildings, shrines, palaces, and even homes. It may express itself in fountains and narrow canals, in a grove of orange trees, in a garden full of fragrant plants (such as rose and jasmine), or in a decorated porch from which one can enjoy the sights and sounds of the garden.

470 CHAPTER 10 ISLAM

The reflected window in Morocco's Hassan II Mosque, completed in 1993, shows how Islamic artists can create a paradise in the worshiper's imagination.





The Generalife gardens, constructed when Granada was the center of Islamic power in Spain, illustrate the Muslim ideal of paradise.

The Islamic love of the Qur'an often continues the theme of paradise. The words of the Qur'an are symbolically the sounds of heaven: they are the voice of God, heard not only by human beings but also by angels. In spoken and chanted form, they fill the air and remind us of God and paradise. In written form, they decorate the domes, doors, walls, and windows to remind us of the divine presence. The care and beauty that are lavished on handwritten copies of the Qur'an extend the sense of paradise: because the Qur'an is the book of God's speech, to open the Qur'an is to psychologically enter God's presence. Thus, beautiful writing has become an integral part of the Islamic art of creating paradise on earth.

Despite what has been said about the Islamic love of simplicity, Islamic art, particularly in manuscript writing and illustration, demonstrates an appreciation for ornamentation. Extremely fine, handwritten copies of the Qur'an feature pages surrounded by filigree. Similarly, geometrical designs on doors and walls create an effect of hallucinatory complication. Although Islamic ornamentation is complex, it is usually also subtle, allowing the eye to wander and inviting the mind to lose itself in the experience. Because many geometrical designs have no visual center, experiencing them can be like looking at stars or waves, inducing a gentle ecstasy.

Exceptions to the Prohibition against Image Making The prohibition against image making has been widely observed in Islam, but there have been three important exceptions. One is the imagery surrounding Muhammad's Night Journey—his ascent to the highest heaven. As shown by many Muslim artists, Muhammad rises through the air on his human-headed horse Buraq. Both are surrounded by golden flames and by hovering angels.

As a bow to the Muslim prohibition against image making, however, Muhammad's face often appears as a rather ghostly blank space.

The second exception to image making is a whole category of art—Persian miniatures. (This tradition was continued in Turkish and Indian Mughal art as well.) Influenced by artistic traditions from nearby India, the Persian court commissioned innumerable small paintings of its personages and its activities—rulers on horseback, picnicking courtiers, and lovers enjoying the afternoon in a garden pavilion. The topics are usually secular, but the treatment has that same hallucinatory quality—evoked by complex designs—that we see in Islamic mosaic, stucco, and woodwork. Thousands of tiny flowers seem to carpet the meadows, and tens of thousands of leaves cover the trees. The eye becomes lost in infinity.

The third exception to image making belongs to the realm of folk art. Pilgrims who return successfully from Mecca have a natural pride in their accomplishment, as have their families. Often they will make or commission a picture of their pilgrimage on the way to or from Mecca—nowadays looking happily out of an airplane. Sometimes this picture is even placed outside the house, near the front door, where it cannot be missed.

Over the past century, the prohibition against making images has begun to break down. Statues are still not made, but photographs are common, often of religious leaders and family members. It is even possible nowadays to see carpets and wall hangings woven with recognizable human figures.

ISLAM AND THE MODERN WORLD

Modern life presents great challenges to traditional Islam. Industrial work schedules make daily prayer and other religious practices difficult; women are demanding total equality with men and complete independence; and individualism is weakening family ties and social responsibility. Islam is being pulled in many directions.

Islam and Contemporary Life

Soon after its beginnings, Islam became and remained a world power for about eight hundred years. During that period, Islamic universities—in Baghdad, Córdoba, and Cairo—were among the great centers of learning and scientific investigation in the world. Islamic cities were centers of civilized living. During this period, Islamic strength contrasted with the general weakness of western Europe: the Roman Empire had ceased to exist in the West by the late fifth century, not long before Muhammad was born. Ruling from Constantinople, the Byzantine emperors continued the Eastern Roman Empire in weakened form. Islam's last great military victory was the conquest of Constantinople, and thus of the Eastern Roman Empire, in 1453. Islam continued to spread and consolidate eastward, as far as Indonesia and the Philippines, but after that its expansion slowed.

Toward the end of the fifteenth century the pendulum of power swung in the opposite direction. While Islam became fairly settled in its territory, western Europe began to expand its control. Significant turning points were Columbus's journeys to the New World, beginning in 1492, and Vasco da Gama's journey around Africa and his arrival in India in 1498. These explorations changed the patterns of trade. Before then, trade was conducted primarily by land routes, which were frequently controlled by Muslim rulers. Now journeys could be made by ship, a form of travel that greatly enlarged the opportunity for travelers to influence others. These journeys were just the beginning of powerful waves of expansion by European traders, soldiers, political figures, and Christian missionaries. Coupled with circumnavigation were the growth of scientific understanding during the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the development of technology during the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Islamic and European cultures came into more frequent contact with each other, their differing values and social ideals led to conflict. That conflict continues today, in both military and cultural ways. The spread of European-American culture (called Coca-Colonization by some critics) is manifested in many forms: clothing (blue jeans, T-shirts), food (hamburgers, pizza, french fries), music (rock and rap), technology, modern Western medicine, and sociopolitical philosophy (industrial capitalism, democracy, nationalism, and individualism). Although Muslim countries have adopted Western technology and medicine, individualistic Western social behavior has caused them alarm. Modern Islam is an often unwilling partner in a tug-of-war that has been going on with European Christian culture for hundreds of years.

The Challenge of Secularism The most difficult of the Western models for Islam to accept is secularism. The word *secularism* comes from a Latin word for "world" (*saeculum*) and implies a focus on this world, without reference to values or entities beyond this world. Secularism seeks to create political institutions that are independent of any established religion.

Secularism is not necessarily antireligious. In its political form, it actually developed in part for religious reasons—to avoid religious fights and to enable all religions to flourish. The point of the secular model was not to destroy religion but to allow all religions to exist without hindrance from any one religion or from government. But secularism is based on a governmental system of laws, courts, and legislatures that operate independently



In the twenty-first century, traditional Islamic female attire takes a fashionable turn. With sunglasses as an accessory to their colorful headscarves, these women take a Sunday stroll past Istanbul's Hagia Sophia.

from any religion. That ideal of independence from religion has caused dismay in many Islamic countries.

Science has also promoted secularism. Although investigators such as Isaac Newton (1642–1727) once looked into the properties of light in order to better understand the nature of God, scientists nowadays rarely carry on their work in this spirit. Science pursued for its own sake has led to a view of the universe that does not include God, as either its creator or its moral guide. In this worldview, God is not necessarily excluded but is simply not mentioned. (To appreciate this fact, look for the word *God* in a textbook on biology, chemistry, or physics.) But Islamic tradition holds that to view the universe apart from God is to live without God.

A Range of Solutions One of the great challenges for Islam, therefore, has been to adopt from the West what is obviously useful, to avoid what is dangerous, and to continue holding on to what it thinks valuable. There are a variety of intriguing solutions to this challenge—a few are extreme responses, yet the majority are attempts at compromise.

Turkey has arrived at the most clearly secular solution. For centuries, Islam had a caliph, God's representative on earth, who united in himself religious and political power. As we discussed earlier in the chapter, the last caliphate existed for centuries in Istanbul. But in 1924, trying to build a modern country, Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) dissolved the caliphate and created a new secular nation, modeled after the European pattern. He replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Roman alphabet for writing Turkish; he created a legal system independent of Muslim religious authorities; and he set up a democratic form of government that allowed women to vote. In his desire to Europeanize, he even outlawed men's wearing the fez (a traditional round hat) and women's wearing the veil, and he encouraged European styles of clothing. Turkey has generally kept to this secular vision, although religious conservatives make regular attempts to establish an Islamic government. Furthermore, Atatürk's hope of transforming Turkey into a European-style nation has not yet been fully realized.

At the other end of the spectrum is Saudi Arabia. When Saudi Arabia was declared an independent nation in 1932, the Qur'an was named the constitution of the country and the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam became dominant. There are no movie theaters, and alcohol is forbidden. Women, in general, may not drive, they must be covered by the cloaklike *abaya* in public, and they go to their own schools, separated from men. Religious police (*mutawa*) ensure conformity to these rules. The Wahhabi emphasis on simplicity can be seen in its recommendation that followers dress simply and that their mosques be plain, with no minarets or decoration. Because of the influence and financial aid of Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is spreading in many countries, particularly in those where religious schools have been financed by Saudi citizens and government agencies.

Iran, because it no longer has a king (shah), is even more clearly a theocracy. It has been influential in the Muslim world as a modern attempt to

create an Islamic state. The situation was once quite different. For decades, Iran seemed to be moving inexorably toward westernization. After World War II, the ruling families of Iran traveled regularly to Europe (particularly to France) and adopted European ways of thinking and living. The royal family spoke French and English, and Tehran was an international center and a destination for most major airlines. Iran also had close political ties to the United States. All this ended when an exiled mullah, the Ayatollah Khomeini, returned to Iran in 1979 and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi went into exile himself. Iran rapidly became a Muslim theocracy. A new constitution was written by the religious authorities, who also held a majority of the seats in the legislature. Khomeini had a new post created for himself as “legal guide,” from which he could oversee and validate all legal and political developments. Mosques became centers of civil as well as religious activity; women were forced to veil themselves in public; and alcohol was strictly forbidden. Iran thus became a fully Muslim state.

Most countries that are primarily Muslim, however, lie uncomfortably between the two poles of secular government and theocracy. Increasingly, conservative Islamic groups nudge them in the direction of becoming Islamic states. Liberal movements in Islam are accused of giving in too much to modern secular thought and abandoning Islam.⁷ Consequently, countermovements, sometimes violent, have arisen; they attempt to create a path that makes Islam relevant and active in the modern world. This was the goal, for example, of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928. Blamed for the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, it was officially banned in Egypt, but it is active there nonetheless.

Egypt is typical of those countries that have to work out a compromise, partly out of necessity. At least 10 percent of its population is Coptic Christian, and Jews and Greeks living primarily in Alexandria play an important role in Egyptian shipping and business. Moreover, because Egypt is dependent on foreign tourism for its economic survival, it has at least a limited acceptance of alcohol in tourist hotels. The Egyptian government has generally recognized that solely Islamic laws would not work well for everyone. However, fundamentalist groups (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) offer a different vision—of an Egyptian Islamic state, governed by Sharia. Because they believe that tourism brings influences that are considered corrupting, these groups tolerate or even sponsor attacks of the sort that have sometimes been made on tourist groups.

In many countries the debate is becoming broader and the volume rising. In India, conflict between Muslims and Hindus has broken out frequently, particularly over the status of Kashmir (which is predominantly Muslim, but ruled by India) and about mistreatment of each group by the other. The destruction of a mosque at Ayodhya by Hindus in 1992 became a flashpoint. Mob violence at the time caused the death of about two thousand people, and another thousand people were killed in 2002.

In Pakistan, the government tries to find a balance between official tolerance of all religious groups and support for Qur’anic schools, some of

which preach extreme fundamentalism. The population of Pakistan is both Sunni (77 percent) and Shiite (20 percent), and there is a small but important minority of Christians, Hindus, and Parsees (Zoroastrians). Unfortunately, attacks on mosques and churches are increasing.

In Indonesia the fundamentalist view is in conflict with the Western influence that comes from tourism and business. (Bombings at a bar in Bali in 2002 and a hotel in Jakarta in 2003 were violent responses.) It is also in conflict with the traditional Indonesian form of Islam that blends Islam with Hinduism and native religions. Reformers (sometimes called *santri*) oppose the traditional practitioners (*abangan*), and they criticize traditional Indonesian practice as impure. Some of this reformism is also caused by the fact that great masses of people can now make the pilgrimage to Mecca; they learn there that their own form of Islam is considered to be imperfect.

The conflict between two visions—of a secular government and of an Islamic state—has been clearest in Afghanistan. The country was taken over in 1996 by the puritanical Taliban. The core of their movement came from students in Deobandi schools in Pakistan. (*Taliban* literally means “seekers of truth”—religious students—but we should note that the Taliban’s views are even stricter than those of the founders of the Deobandi school itself.) The goal of the Taliban is to create the world’s purest Islamic state, and they follow their own strict interpretation of the Qur’an. Taliban regulations about gender forbid men to cut their beards. Women are restricted solely to domestic roles. When the Taliban took control in Afghanistan in 1996, women were no longer allowed to work outside the home, they had to be totally covered when in public, and when away from home they were to be accompanied by a male relative.⁴¹ The Taliban forbade all nonreligious music and destroyed tapes and CDs in public demonstrations. Films, television, e-mail, and the Internet were banned. Public executions and amputations were performed in soccer stadiums.

The Taliban were subsequently ousted from power by Western forces in 2001, but the movement eventually regrouped and remains active in many parts of the country. At the time of this writing, the Taliban have taken control of the Swat Valley, in northwestern Pakistan, and are fighting for even greater control.

Other countries that are being pressed by mostly conservative Muslim groups are the Philippines, China, and Malaysia. In the Philippines, Muslim groups are fighting for the independence of Mindanao, the large southern island, which is home to almost five million Muslims.

In China, the majority of its twenty million Muslims live in the western province of Xinjiang; and of the more than thirty thousand mosques of China, more than two-thirds are in that province. On the one hand, Islam has gained official respect as a legal religion of China, and Muslims have been granted legal rights to practice their religion. (For example, time off to make the pilgrimage to Mecca is coordinated with work schedules.) On the other hand, the Chinese government is vigilant against Islamic independence movements—particularly after protests and bombings in Urumqi in 1996–1997. There are also claims that non-Muslim Han Chinese are being encouraged to relocate in

CONFLICT IN RELIGION



Sunni versus Shiite: Why the Conflict?

Sunnis and Shiites, the two dominant branches of Islam, share the Qur'an, the five pillars of Islam, and many articles of faith. Yet, as we know from contemporary news reports, conflict between the two groups is common.

The division arose quite early in the history of Islam, originating in a disagreement regarding the proper successor of Muhammad. The division became bitter and irreparable in 680. In that year, at Karbala in present-day Iraq, Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad, was killed by Sunni forces. For Shiites, Hussein's assassination was viewed as the denial of his rightful place as successor to Muhammad, and his death was seen as the heroic death of a martyr. As a result, veneration of Hussein and of his father Ali has become a major characteristic of Shiite practice.

Although Shiites and Sunnis share many essential elements of faith, over the centuries some of their beliefs and practices have diverged. For example, Shiites and Sunnis differ not only in their interpretation of many passages of the Qur'an but also over which sayings of Muhammad (hadiths) are authoritative. There are also major differences in ritual. Shiites normally combine some of the daily prayers, praying three times a day rather than the five times a day typical of Sunni Muslims. When engaged in ritual prayer, Shiites lower their foreheads to a small prayer stone on the floor and hold their arms at their sides, rather than crossing them in front of the body, as do Sunnis. More significantly, Shiite prayer explicitly invokes the figure of Ali. Also, Sunni and Shiite periods of prayer and fasting may begin and end at different times. The many differences have led the two groups to worship at different mosques. (Shiite places of prayer are often called *husseiniyahs* rather than mosques.)

The two branches differ over important religious laws, particularly those regarding marriage and inheritance. Smaller differences abound as well. Shiites often have pictures of Hussein in their cars and homes, and they regularly name their children after Ali, Hassan, and Hussein.

Distinctive Shiite rites appear at New Year's, when Shiites ritually mourn for Hussein, whose death occurred during the first lunar month of the Muslim calendar (Muharram). This mourning period (called Ashura) reaches its peak on the tenth day of the new year, when men perform public reenactments of the Battle of Karbala. Dressed in black, with red and green headbands, devotees walk in procession, beating their chests. Others go shirtless, flogging themselves with chains and metal whips and cutting themselves with swords and knives to draw blood. In this way, they recall and imitate Hussein's tragic death. Focus on the suffering experienced by Hussein reinforces among Shiites the value of heroic martyrdom.

Veneration of Ali and his sons, Hassan and Hussein, thus marks Shiite Islam. (A common Shiite saying, for example, is "God, Muhammad, Ali.") Some Shiites even hold that Ali was sinless. Sunnis, however, see this veneration as being too close to worship of a mere human being. Thus Sunnis prohibit veneration of Ali or of his sons. (Some Sunnis even take their sense of purity in worship so far as to also prohibit celebrating the birthday of Muhammad, who was a messenger of God but was not divine.) Because Sunnis so emphasize the absolute uniqueness of God (*tawhid*) alone, they see Shiites as dangerous heretics. By opposing them, Sunnis seek to assert pure Islamic belief in the one God.

the western part of the country in order to dilute the power of the Muslim population there. At one time constituting only 4 percent of the population, non-Muslim Han Chinese now make up 50 to 60 percent of Xinjiang's people. Throughout the country, mosques and Islamic religious training are tightly controlled by the government.

Malaysia is perhaps the most successful of all predominantly Muslim countries in integrating Islam with the modern industrial world. Malaysia is now the tenth-largest trading nation in the world, and its national income has



Wherever there were trade routes in Africa and Asia, Islam has left its mark. This mosque in Xi'an, China, is still in use today.

gone up every year for the past thirty years.⁴² Its educational system is excellent, corruption has been controlled, private property is protected by law, and the courts are generally trusted. About a quarter of the population is Chinese and 8 percent is Indian, and the government works actively to minimize racial or religious conflict. Passages from the Qur'an are emphasized that support private property, women's rights, and tolerance. There is a system of affirmative action in place for Malays. However, religious groups are gaining success in promoting the wearing of the head scarf by Muslim women, the keeping of the fast during Ramadan, and other Islamic practices.

Islam in the West and Beyond

Islam has begun to spread to the West through immigration and conversion. It has spread to England, Canada, and Australia through emigration from some former British colonies, particularly Pakistan and India; and many French cities have large populations of emigrants from Algeria. Large cities in North America have also attracted Muslim emigrants, particularly from Iran, Lebanon, and Africa; for example, there are now more than 300,000 Muslim émigrés from Iran living in Los Angeles. Islam is also spreading in Chicago and Detroit, cities with special appeal to minorities.

Because of its simplicity and strong moral guidance, Islam has been successful in attracting converts in places far away from traditionally Muslim regions. For example, Koreans who worked in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia have taken Islam back to South Korea. It is also growing strongly in sub-Saharan Africa, where it is attractive to some converts because it is a way of expressing a deliberate rejection of Christianity, which many people associate with European exploitation. Islam is also attractive in sub-Saharan Africa because of its acceptance of the traditional practice of polygamy.

Some relatively new forms of Islam have emerged that are not as inclusive as orthodox Islam, and their relation to mainstream Islam has occasionally been questioned. The movement known at first as the Nation of Islam, for example, was begun as an Islamic religious movement meant exclusively for African Americans. Its founders were Wali Farrad Muhammad (W. D. Fard, born c. 1877; he mysteriously disappeared in 1934) and his successor Elijah Muhammad (Elijah Poole, 1897–1975), who set up the first centers of worship in Detroit and Chicago. The Nation of Islam, whose members are known as Black Muslims, attempted to bring pride to African Americans by

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES



Malcolm X

Malcolm X, originally Malcolm Little, was born in 1925 in Nebraska. His father was a Baptist minister who had been influenced by the thought of Marcus Garvey (see Chapter 11), a Jamaican who preached the importance of pride in African descent.

Malcolm spent his teen years in Boston, living with his sister. While there, he was imprisoned for four years for theft. In jail he became a convert to the Nation of Islam. It was then that he changed his name to Malcolm X. The X was both a symbol representing the destruction of African families by slavery and a sign of a new way of living.

After release from prison, Malcolm X helped to found temples of the Nation of Islam and became a minister of the faith, first in Boston and then in New York. After conflict with founder Elijah Muhammad, he left the Nation of Islam. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca, in 1964, where he experienced a profound change of thought. Prior to his pilgrimage, Malcolm X held violently anti-white views. During his visit to Mecca, though, he met Muslims of many races and ethnicities. His journey gave him new understanding of the spiritual implications within Islam for universal brotherhood.

Upon his return to the United States, Malcolm X devoted himself to working for racial equality and was



Malcolm X at the National African Bookstore in 1964.

vitaly interested in spreading knowledge not only of Islam but also of African culture. He founded his own group, the Organization for Afro-American Unity, whose focus was political change. Tragically, he was assassinated in 1965, but his life story, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, has become a classic and keeps his ideals alive.⁴³

instilling the virtues of thrift, hard work, education, and self-defense. It created an organization for young men, called the Fruit of Islam, and one for young women, called Muslim Girl Training.

The Nation of Islam's original vision was anti-white, but this emphasis has softened due to the preaching of one of its most important members, Malcolm X. Under Wallace Deen Muhammad (b. 1933), the son of Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam has renounced its purely racial basis, changed its name to the American Muslim Mission, and worked to integrate itself into mainstream Sunni Islam.

A follower of the early views of Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan (b. 1933), has attempted a revival of the Nation of Islam, particularly through preaching the values of hard work and social responsibility. His Million Man March on Washington in 1995 and his Million Family March in 2000 were successful attempts to generate self-pride and political activism among African Americans.

It is hard to predict the development of Islam in the future. (To be able to predict the future of any religion over the next centuries would truly

American Muslim political activism produced both the Million Man and the later Million Family Marches on Washington, DC. Both demonstrations gave prominent emphasis to the importance of male commitment.



require prophetic vision.) One possibility, encouraged by liberals, involves the gradual emergence of modern democratic states, with elections, written constitutions, and a guarantee of individual rights. Although some conservatives would like to unify Islam, it seems doubtful that there will ever again be a unified Islam or a single caliph. There are simply too many areas of possible disagreement. Islam will probably remain divided into nation-states, each with its own interpretation of the Muslim religion and its own path.

On the other hand, fundamentalist Islamic groups are becoming increasingly influential in the policy making of their governments. Because the Qur'an contains a great many specific laws about such things as property rights, marriage, divorce, and sanctions for crimes, some Islamic groups wish to replace the laws of their country with Qur'anic laws (Sharia). Saudi Arabia has followed Sharia since its beginnings in 1932, and the establishment of a Muslim theocracy in Iran in 1979 has encouraged people to seek the introduction of Sharia elsewhere—particularly in Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Increasingly we will see a struggle between those who wish to have a secular system of laws, modeled at least to some extent on Western practice, and those who wish to follow Sharia instead.

This struggle is actually part of a larger struggle between fairly different cultures, and conflict perhaps will be inevitable. As we have already seen, Islam has several important areas in which it differs strongly from mainstream European and American culture. Public prayer must be performed on Friday—which is a workday in Western countries. Interest on loans is forbidden—a demand that opposes a cornerstone of Western business practice. Wine (as well as other alcohol) is forbidden—whereas in traditional Western cuisines wine or beer plays an important role. (We might recall that

both Judaism and Christianity use wine in religious services, and the New Testament explicitly recommends wine for health [1 Tim. 5:23].) Meat eaten by Muslims must be *halal* (slaughtered according to religious rules). Gambling is forbidden.

The area of greatest cultural conflict, however, regards the treatment of women. Islamic seclusion of women (which actually was patterned on Persian and Byzantine practice) is in conflict with the principles of women's liberation. The demand for modest dress (commanded by the Qur'an) and for covering of the hair (not clearly commanded by the Qur'an) are both opposed by modern fashion. And although monogamy is the norm in Islamic countries, marrying as many as four wives is allowed by Islamic law.

An intractable problem that adds fuel to the conflict is resentment within the Muslim world over the Palestinian issue. The problem areas include Palestinians' poverty, the land that Palestinians lost when Israel was created in 1948, Israeli control of the West Bank, and the lack of a Palestinian state. There can probably be no peace until the Palestinian issue is resolved. Resentment has led to regular clashes and bombings, both in Israel and beyond, and those countries that are perceived as supporting Israel have become targets.

The destruction of New York City's World Trade Center in 2001 was perhaps the most horrifying single instance of cultural conflict. That and the simultaneous attack on the Pentagon were aimed at crippling the United States. The bombing in Bali in 2002 was aimed at Australia, and the 2004 train bombings were aimed at Spain. The suicide bombings in London in 2005 were ostensibly a retaliation against the British presence in Iraq. Rioting and arson in French cities in the same year brought attention to the substandard conditions in which many French Muslims live. The conflict has unfortunately become a struggle between two different civilizations—Muslim and Western—that threatens to intensify. (Consider, for example, the protests and deaths that occurred when political cartoons of the prophet Muhammad appeared in European newspapers.) Many Muslim laypeople and clerics, though, decry what has happened. They particularly oppose any violence against civilians.

The religious and cultural conflict is further exacerbated by the fact that Islam can be embraced for political reasons. We must recall that virtually all Muslim regions were once colonized by European powers. Colonization began when the British began to take over India in the eighteenth century and Napoleon invaded Egypt (1798). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries France colonized Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Syria. At the same time, England colonized Libya, Egypt, Jordan, India, and Malaysia; and the Dutch took Indonesia. (The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the United States and Britain is viewed by many Muslims as just another instance of the same pattern of colonization.) Muslims in once-colonized countries will quite naturally utilize Islam to emphasize their own national identity.

On the other hand, it can now no longer be a matter of enemies looking at each other from opposite, distant trenches. Islam is already a major part of Europe and North America. At least five million Muslims now live in France, making up one-tenth of the population, and France has at least 1,500

CONFLICT IN RELIGIONS



Jihad and the Modern World

The word **jihad** in Arabic means “strive” or “struggle.” Two types of jihad are called for in Islam. The first is individual; it involves the personal daily struggle to live virtuously. The second is public; it is the attempt to establish in all of society the Islamic ideals of truth, justice, and morality. When the word *jihad* is used, the second meaning is the more common, but we should also be aware of the first meaning. Jihad, because of its importance, has sometimes been called “the sixth pillar of Islam.”

We should realize that the importance of spreading religious beliefs and values is not limited to Islam. We find it in other religions, particularly those—such as Christianity and Buddhism—with a history of seeking to convert members from other religions. Like Islam, Christianity and Buddhism have shown a strong desire to spread their understanding of life and their standards of morality, and both have a long history of missionary effort. One difference with Islam, though, is that each Muslim feels strongly the obligation to practice jihad. The task of spreading religious values is not left only to missionaries.

Believers in Islam generally agree about their obligation to spread the Muslim view of justice and truth.

However, Muslims disagree on exactly which elements to emphasize and where and how to spread their faith. Disagreement particularly exists around the use of force. Muhammad was a fighter and at times played the role of a military general. He endorsed the use of force when he thought it necessary. We do not have to read far in the Qur’an to realize that it urges believers to fight for their beliefs. “Fighting is obligatory for you, much as you dislike it” (2:216) and “Fight for the cause of God and bear in mind that God sees all and knows all” (2:244). On the other hand, we find passages in the Qur’an that command tolerance of other religions, such as this famous passage: “There shall be no compulsion in religion” (2:256).

Difficulties arise both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims because of the strong differences between some Islamic ideals and everyday practices in much of the secular world. First, Muslims believe strongly in only one God, which has led in some countries to conflict with polytheistic religions, such as Hinduism and some Chinese forms of religion. Related to the rejection of polytheism, Muslim societies have often prohibited all images of human beings, fearing that such images might lead to idolatry

mosques. It is estimated that by the end of this century, Muslims will make up one-third of the French population. In England there are perhaps two million Muslims today, with about 600 mosques. A large minority of Germans, whose parents came from Turkey, are Muslim. In the United States, the size of the Muslim population is uncertain, but probably at least five million; that population will be increasingly influential.

Approaches to reducing conflict vary. In England, the emphasis is on accepting differences as legitimate forms of multiculturalism. In France, the official approach has been to maintain a secular ideal and force people to assimilate to that (one topic of debate concerns the wearing of the head scarf by girls in public schools). The approach in North America, though less clearly formulated, seems to be closer to the British model.

Adding to the complexity is an uncertainty: the role that popular culture will play in the cultural and religious mix. Popular culture is spreading everywhere. There have been attempts to shut it out, of course. Saudi Arabia allows no movie theaters—but DVDs abound. Iran legally banned Hollywood films (a move that helped its film industry, which is creating films of quality and

and diminish devotion to Allah. But this prohibition is jarringly different from the artistic traditions of Europe, India, and East Asia, where representation of the human figure, even of gods and saints, plays an important role. Third, in accord with Islamic law, devout Muslims reject gambling, taking interest on loans, eating pork, drinking alcohol, engaging in premarital sex or adultery, or wearing immodest dress, and they frown on unrestricted social interchange between male and female. Many believe that women should be veiled in public. A few very conservative Muslim societies even hold that it is inappropriate for women to drive, to vote, to work outside the home, or to travel without the accompaniment of a male relative. These views are certainly in great conflict with much modern practice. (Think, for example, of the difference between contemporary life in Tehran and in Las Vegas.) Differences such as these are highly dissonant and can become flashpoints.

Clearly, the general principles that guide Islamic life already present a way of living (Sharia) that is quite different from the ordinary secular life of non-Muslim societies. A further difficulty arises because the Qur'an presents a rather detailed system of punishment and legal practice (*hudud*) that differs from much contemporary legal practice. For example, adultery is considered a serious public offense, to be punished by public

execution; and robbers are to be punished by amputation of limbs. Of course, many devout Muslims do not want the laws of Sharia and *hudud* to be imposed on their societies; however, conservative Muslim groups in some countries—such as in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia—are working toward just such a goal. Some believers even approve violent means to achieve their traditionalist agendas. (For example, there have been explosions in Indonesian markets where pork was being sold; barbers have been killed in Pakistan for removing men's beards; and some teachers in Afghanistan who have taught female students have been killed. These are, however, exceptional cases.)

Of the world's more than one billion Muslims, most are moderate. They recognize that in a multicultural world, tolerance of all religions is necessary. Many Islamic rulers are now trying to create policies that retain Muslim ideals and at the same time teach tolerance. Saudi Arabia has begun to sponsor conferences that explore ways to encourage moderation and to discourage extremism. But can the devout Muslim accept the moral and religious differences in the modern world, yet still be faithful to the ideals of Sharia and jihad? This is the challenge that Islam, one of the world's largest religions and social forces, is facing today.

depth). Iran has also legally banned satellite dishes, but the success of this ban is limited—people hide them. The Taliban in Afghanistan banned movies, CDs, and the Internet, but those all began to return when the Taliban fell in 2001. The cultural influx is especially evident in Muslim countries of northern Africa, where people watch satellite-broadcast quiz programs, rock concerts, and soap operas from Europe. In Europe and North America, Muslims, of course, are inundated with popular culture. It is already changing the way young people act, dress, and entertain themselves. Those responsible for making the films and creating the television programs that people watch may ultimately have the greatest influence on the future of Islam.

Some people focus on the differences between traditional Islamic culture and the dominant cultures of Europe and North America. They fear the conflicts that will necessarily arise. Yet religions show a strong tendency not only to change over time, but to change radically when they enter new cultures. Those who are fearful about the ability of Islamic and Western cultures to mix should reflect on the blending that has already occurred since the Middle Ages. Scholastic philosophy was made possible by translations of Aristotle

made from Arabic into Latin. Gothic architectural style is thought to have originated in the Muslim world, and Western mathematics, chemistry, and astronomy were all enriched by Muslim thinkers. We get a sense of the contributions of the Islamic world to many areas of our Western world if we consider some of the words that have come into English from or through Arabic (*al* means “the”): *alcove*, *algorithm*, *alchemy*, and (ironically) *alcohol*. We might note the number of words used in science. But we also find many words of foods that were once delicacies in Europe: *orange*, *lemon*, *lime*, *sugar*, *sherbet*, *syrup*, and *coffee*. Other words with Arabic origins refer to objects that have added, in their own way, to human life: *lute*, *lacquer*, *mattress*, and *magazine*. The West has been greatly enriched by Muslim cultures.

There are elements of Western culture that orthodox Islamic societies will wish to avoid: alcohol abuse, gambling, high divorce rates, and urban violence. There will be regular debate about the roles and dress of women. And Muslim nations will continue to grapple with how much traditional Islamic law can be imposed in a modern society. Particularly under pressure from conservative movements, Islamic countries will do what they can to oppose what they see as dangerous elements. In the long run, however, we should expect them to maintain long-standing practices—regular prayer, charity, the Ramadan fast, pilgrimage to Mecca, and the ideals of generosity and justice.

READING

THE QUR'AN

In the Qur'an, Allah reveals himself. Toward the end of this passage, Allah rejects the idea that he might have either a wife (consort) or a son. For non-Muslims, a first reading of the Qur'an can be confusing because Allah refers to himself as both He and We. New readers will cease to notice the shift in pronouns, however, when they read the Qur'an regularly.

It is God who splits the seed and the fruit-stone. He brings forth the living from the dead, and the dead from the living. Such is God. How then can you turn away?

He kindles the light of dawn. He has ordained the night for rest and the sun and the moon for reckoning. Such is the ordinance of the Mighty One, the All-knowing.

It is He that has created for you the stars, so that they may guide you in the darkness of land and sea. We have made plain Our revelations to men of knowledge.

It was He that created you from one being and furnished you with a dwelling and a resting-place. We have made plain Our revelations to men of understanding.

It is He who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth buds from every plant. From these we bring forth green foliage and close-growing grain, palm trees laden with clusters of dates, vineyards and olive groves, pomegranates alike and different. Behold their fruits when they ripen. Surely in these there are signs for true believers. . . .

Creator of the heavens and the earth. How should He have had a son when He had no consort? He created all things and has knowledge of all things. Such is God your Lord. There is no God but him, the creator of all things. Therefore serve him. Of all things he is the Guardian.⁴⁴

TEST YOURSELF

1. *Islam* literally means “_____.”
 - a. sacred
 - b. holy
 - c. enlightened
 - d. submission
2. Muslims refer to God as _____. The word is a contraction of two Arabic words that mean “the” and “God.”
 - a. Elohim
 - b. Salam
 - c. Allah
 - d. El Shaddai
3. The _____ is the single sentence, when recited with belief, that makes a person a Muslim.
 - a. Salat
 - b. Shahadah
 - c. Ramadan
 - d. Hajj
4. Fasting is thought to be an important bond that unites Muslims during the period of shared fasting known as _____.
 - a. Salat
 - b. Shahadah
 - c. Ramadan
 - d. Hajj
5. All Muslims, unless prevented by poverty or sickness, are expected to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime in the religious journey (pilgrimage) known as _____.
 - a. Salat
 - b. Shahadah
 - c. Ramadan
 - d. Hajj
6. The name *Qur’an* means “_____.”
 - a. successor
 - b. recitation
 - c. the book
 - d. the writings
7. _____ was the father of Muhammad’s youngest wife and was recognized as the first Caliph.
 - a. Abu Bakr
 - b. Umar
 - c. Ali
 - d. Uthman
8. _____ derive their name from an Arabic word that means “faction” and are the group that followed Ali.
 - a. Sunnis
 - b. Shiites
 - c. Sufis
 - d. Zaydis
9. _____ take their name from the Arabic word for “tradition,” referring back to the entire body of traditional teachings that are based on the life and teachings of Muhammad, as given in the *Qur’an* and the authoritative hadiths.
 - a. Sunnis
 - b. Shiites
 - c. Sufis
 - d. Zaydis
10. Islamic law, called _____, is the entire body of laws that guides the believer in this life.
 - a. Sharia
 - b. Decalogue
 - c. Faqir
 - d. Dhikr
11. “Although Islam is similar in many ways to Judaism and Christianity, its greatest difference from these religions is _____.” What word or phrase would you use to fill in the blank? Explain your answer using information from the reading.
12. Imagine you are writing a research paper about the relationship between Islamic architecture and Islamic understandings of God. Choose a one-sentence thesis statement that you might use to express your paper’s main argument about this relationship. Why would you choose this statement?

RESOURCES

Books

- al-Arabi, Ibn. *101 Diamonds from the Oral Tradition of the Glorious Messenger Muhammad*. New York: Pir Press, 2002. A modern version of Ibn al-Arabi's collection of oral traditions (hadiths), which illuminate the wisdom of Islam.
- Aslan, Reza. *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2006. A chronicle of the growth of Islam, from its origins in Muhammad's community up to the present conflict between modernizers and fundamentalists.
- Dirks, Debra L., and Stephanie Parlove, eds. *Islam Our Choice: Portraits of Modern American Muslim Women*. Brattleboro, VT: Amana, 2003. The personal accounts of six American women who converted to Islam.
- Hilldenbrand, Robert. *Islamic Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. An authoritative guide to the arts of Islam.
- Idliby, Ranya, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner. *The Faith Club: A Muslim, a Christian, a Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding*. New York: Free Press, 2007. Three American women of different faiths explore the meaning of their beliefs.
- Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam*. New York: Modern Library, 2003. A review of Islamic history, with the conclusion that Islamic countries need to embrace the future.
- Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Orig. pub. 1964. New York: Random House, 1989. The story of the development of a young African American—a convert first to the Nation of Islam and then to traditional Islam—who has been a major influence on American political thinking.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. New York: HarperOne, 2008. A concise overview of Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, that includes a detailed history of the movement and an examination of its various orders.
- Ramadan, Tariq. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. An argument that Islam and Western values are compatible.

Film/TV

- Expressing the Inexpressible: Shirin Neshat*. (Films Media Group.) A documentary about the many dimensions of Islamic women's experiences.
- Hajj: The Pilgrimage*. (Films Media Group.) A documentary about the events performed during the pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Inside Mecca*. (Director Anisa Mehdi; National Geographic.) A documentary that follows the stories of three different people—a Muslim American professor, a black South African journalist, and an Indonesian businessman—as they make a pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Islam: Empire of Faith*. (PBS.) A three-part documentary that explores a thousand years of Islamic history, from the prophet Muhammad to the height of the Ottoman Empire under Suleyman the Magnificent.
- Islam in America*. (Films Media Group.) Interviews with Muslims living in a post-9/11 America.
- Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*. (Director Albert Brooks; Warner.) A comedy that explores Albert Brooks's attempts to determine what makes Indian and Pakistani Muslims laugh.
- Malcolm X*. (Director Spike Lee; Warner Brothers.) A film about the life of Malcolm X, including his pilgrimage to Mecca.
- The Message*. (Director Moustapha Akkad; Anchor Bay.) An epic film about the time of Muhammad.
- Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*. (Director Omar Al-Qattan and Michael Schwarz; Unity Productions Foundation.) A documentary that recounts the story of Muhammad and explores the significance of the prophet's life and teachings.
- The White Balloon*. (Director Jafar Panahi; Evergreen Entertainment.) The adventures of a Muslim girl in Tehran on New Year's day.

Music/Audio

- Islamic Liturgy*. (Smithsonian Folkways.) The Islamic call to prayer and Qur'anic odes and litany.
- The Last Prophet*. (Real World.) Devotional hymns, sung by the world-renowned Pakistani qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.
- The Music of Islam*. (Celestial Harmonies.) A comprehensive seventeen-disc set of Islamic music from around the world, including Qur'anic recitations,

Sufi qawwali, the music of whirling dervishes, and songs from many Muslim countries.

Sufi Ceremony. (Smithsonian Folkways.) A recording of the Sufi Rifai ceremony honoring the Sufi saint Abdul Hadir Beker.

Sufi Chants From Cairo. (Institute du Monde Afrique.) A collection of Egyptian Sufi prayers.

Internet

Compendium of Muslim Texts: <http://www.msawest.net/islam/>. An online database of Islamic texts in

English, maintained by MSA West, an organization of Muslim Student Associations representing campuses across the West Coast.

Islamic Arts and Architecture: <http://www.islamicart.com/>. A Web site whose mission is to promote the awareness of Islamic arts as a discipline of humanistic study.

IslamiCity.com: <http://www.islamicity.com/>. A leading online source of Islamic information.

KEY TERMS

caliph (*kay'-lif*): (Arabic: *khalifa*) "successor"; a religious and political leader.

dhikr (*tik'-ur*): A devotional remembrance of Allah through the recitation of his ninety-nine names and other devotional practices.

fana (*fah-nah'*): "Extinction"; the sense of loss of self in mystical experience.

hadith (*huh-deeth'*): "Recollection"; remembrance of an act or saying of Muhammad. (The plural is spelled *ahadith*.)

Hajj (*hahj*): Pilgrimage to Mecca.

Hijra (*hij'-ra*): "Flight"; Muhammad's escape from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina).

Id al-Adha (*eed' ahl-ahd'-hah*): The Day of Sacrifice during the month of the Hajj when an animal is sacrificed to recall the submission of Abraham.

Id al-Fitr (*eed' ahl-fee'-tur*): The festival at the end of the month of Ramadan during which people feast and visit friends and often the graves of ancestors.

imam (*ee-mahm'*): A religious leader; specifically, one of the hereditary successors of Muhammad, venerated in Shiite Islam.

Islam: "Submission"; the Muslim religion and the community of believers who have submitted themselves to Allah.

jihad (*jee-hahd'*): "Struggle"; the ideals both of spreading Islamic belief and of heroic self-sacrifice.

Kabah (*kah'-bah*): "Cube"; the square shrine at the center of the great mosque of Mecca.

Khadijah (*kah-dee'-juh*): First wife of Muhammad.

mihrab (*meeh-rahb'*): The decorated niche inside a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca.

minaret (*min-a-ret'*): A tower used by a chanter to call people to prayer.

mosque (Arabic: *masjid*): a Muslim place of worship.

muezzin (*mu-edz'-in*): A chanter who calls people to prayer.

Muslim: A person who submits to Allah.

qiblah (*kib'-lah*): The direction toward Mecca; the direction toward which Muslims pray.

Qur'an (*koor-ahn'*): "Recitation"; God's words as revealed to and recited by Muhammad; an authorized edition of the written words that appeared after Muhammad's death.

Ramadan (*rah'-mah-dahn*): The month of fasting; the ninth month of the Muslim calendar.

Sharia (*shah-ree'-uh*): "Path"; the whole body of Islamic law, which guides a Muslim's life. (Also spelled *Shariah*.)

Shiite (*shee'-ait*): A minority branch of Islam, which holds that Muhammad's genuine successors descended from his son-in-law Ali.

Sufism (*soof'-ism*): A group of devotional movements in Islam.

Sunni (*soon'-ee*): The majority branch of Islam, which holds that genuine succession from Muhammad did not depend on hereditary descent from his son-in-law Ali.

sura (*soo'-rah*): A chapter of the Qur'an.

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