In about 570 CE, a new prophet was born. This man, Muhammad, is considered by Muslims to be the last of a continuing chain of prophets who have come to restore the true religion. They regard the way revealed to him, Islam, not as a new religion but as the original path of monotheism, which also developed into Judaism and Christianity.

After carrying the torch of civilization in the West while Europe was in its Dark Ages, in the twentieth century Islam began a great resurgence. It is now the religion of nearly one-fifth of the world’s people. Its monotheistic creed is simple: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger.” Its requirements of the faithful are straightforward, if demanding. But beneath them lie profundities and subtleties of which non-Muslims are largely unaware. In fact, ignorance about Islam and perceived targeting of Muslims in general by the U.S.-led “war on terrorism” have exacerbated a dangerous and growing divide between Muslims and non-Muslims in the contemporary world. Therefore it is extremely important to study the origins, teachings, and modern history of this major world religion carefully.

Pre-Islamic Arabia

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, traces its ancestry to the patriarch Abraham (whom Muslims know as Ibrahim). He is said to have fathered two sons. The first was Isma’il, son of Hagar, an Egyptian slave whom Muslims regard as his wife. The second was Isaac, son of his wife Sarah. When Isaac was born, Abraham reportedly took Isma’il and Hagar to the desert valley of Mecca (Makkah) in a mountainous area of Arabia, presumably to spare them Sarah’s jealousy. According to the Holy Qur’an, the sacred book of Islam, Abraham and Isma’il together built the holiest sanctuary in Islam, the Ka’bah. It was thought to be the site of Adam’s original place of worship; part of the cubic stone building is a venerated black meteorite. According to the Qur’an, God told Abraham that the Ka’bah should be a place of pilgrimage. It was regarded as a holy place by the Arabian tribes.

According to Islamic tradition, the region sank into historical oblivion as it turned away from Abraham’s monotheism. For many centuries, the events of the rest of the world passed it by, aside from contact through trading caravans. The Arabs of the area were mostly nomadic cattle-breeders, shifting their herds through the desert in search of areas that had some greenery. Robbing
# Timeline of Islam

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>c.570</td>
<td>Birth of Prophet Muhammad</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.610</td>
<td>Revelation of the Qur’an to Prophet Muhammad begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>622</td>
<td>The hijrah (migration) from Mecca to Medina</td>
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<td>630</td>
<td>Prophet Muhammad’s triumphant return to Mecca</td>
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<tr>
<td>632</td>
<td>Death of Prophet Muhammad; election of Abu Bakr as first caliph</td>
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<tr>
<td>633</td>
<td>Spread of Islam begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>650</td>
<td>Written text of the Qur’an established</td>
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<td>661–750</td>
<td>Umayyad dynasty</td>
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<tr>
<td>680</td>
<td>Karbala massacre of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, and his relatives</td>
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<td>691</td>
<td>Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem</td>
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<tr>
<td>732</td>
<td>European advance of Islam stopped at Battle of Tours</td>
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<tr>
<td>750–1258</td>
<td>Islam reaches its cultural peak under Abbasid caliphs</td>
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<tr>
<td>922</td>
<td>al-Hallaj killed</td>
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<tr>
<td>980–1037</td>
<td>Ibn Sina (Avicenna), major rationalist philosopher</td>
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<td>1058–1111</td>
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<td>Ibn Rushd (Averroes), philosopher of “two truths”—revelation and reason</td>
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<td>1187</td>
<td>Salah-al-Din recaptures Jerusalem from crusaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>1300s–1400s</td>
<td>Christians reconquer Spain</td>
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<td>1453</td>
<td>Turks conquer Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul</td>
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<td>1478–1834</td>
<td>Spanish Inquisition</td>
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<td>1492</td>
<td>Surrender of Granada, last foothold of Islam in Spain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1556</td>
<td>Akbar becomes Mogul emperor in India</td>
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<td>1800s–mid-1900s</td>
<td>Muslim areas fall under European domination</td>
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<td>1947</td>
<td>Partition of Muslim Pakistan from Hindu India</td>
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<td>1970s</td>
<td>Oil-rich Muslim states join OPEC and Muslim resurgence begins</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Terrorists fly aircraft into U.S. buildings</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>United States and allies invade Iraq</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>“Arab spring” uprisings bring down several governments in Muslim-majority countries</td>
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caravans and settlements also helped them to sustain themselves, except during three months of the lunar year when raids were forbidden according to tribal religion. Drinking, gambling, and prostitution were apparently commonplace activities. There was no high civilization throughout the area. Mecca was situated along trade routes and was a trading center, but apparently it consisted only of simple palm-branch huts.

The most powerful of the tribes there were the Quraysh, comprising approximately a dozen clans who lived as merchants. Nomadic tribal rules mandated that clan chiefs should take care of their weaker and poorer clan members, but this social rule was not necessarily followed by the merchant clans.

Because of their nomadic traveling, the Arabic tribes were in contact with each other and had a relatively uniform culture and a common language. They worshiped many deities and felt that people’s lives were controlled by an impersonal force, called Fate or Time. Their tribal code of ethics held an entire clan responsible for its members’ misdoings, and often took a life for a life. Long-lasting blood feuds were therefore common. But violence was prohibited within a large area surrounding the Ka’bah. Before Islam, the Ka’bah is thought to have contained 360 idols of Arabian tribal deities, perhaps including the Daughters of God and Hubal, one of the primary deities worshiped by the Quraysh. Statues of Jesus and Mary were also enshrined there.

The Prophet Muhammad

In this unpromising pre-Islamic setting which Muslims call “the age of ignorance,” a child named Muhammad (the praised one) was born into the Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe. His great-grandfather had been the clan chief and caretaker of the Ka’bah. He was highly respected for organizing large trading caravans with concessions from the Byzantine and Ethiopian emperors and guarantees of safety from surrounding tribes. He was also appreciated for his benevolent care of pilgrims to the Ka’bah. Once, it is said, he prevented starvation from a great famine in Mecca by buying flour and bread in Syria and then killing his own camels to feed the whole tribe daily until the famine ended. Muhammad’s grandfather was also renowned for providing food and water to pilgrims to the Ka’bah and for re-digging the well of Zum-Zum, the spring that God is said to have provided for Hagar when she and Isma’il were left alone in the desert. But Muhammad’s family fell on hard times, for his father died during a trading journey before he was born. When Muhammad was sent to a Bedouin tribe to be wet-nursed, as was the custom, only a very poor woman took him in. The Prophet therefore grew up amidst poverty, and was always deeply sympathetic with the poor and underprivileged.

Muhammad’s mother also died when he was six, and then his grandfather, who had assumed the position of clan chief. Muhammad became the ward of his uncle, who put him to work as a shepherd.

Although Muhammad is not to be worshiped by Muslims, whose faith resides only in God, his life story is considered important as a model. Even in
According to tradition, Muhammad undertook spiritual retreats in this cave on Mount Hira outside Mecca. It was here that he received the first revelations of the Qur’an.

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his youth, he was known for his thoughtful and trustworthy character. The stories of Muhammad’s life and his sayings are preserved in literature called the Hadith, reports of the Prophet’s sayings and exemplary actions (Sunnah). These are of varying authenticity; the Hadith considered most reliable in the Sunni tradition are those carefully collected by Imam Bukhari (d. 870) and by his student, Imam Muslim (d. 875).

As a young man, Muhammad managed caravans for a beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy woman named Khadijah. When Muhammad was twenty-five, she appreciated his good qualities and offered to marry him. Khadijah became Muhammad’s strongest supporter during the difficult and discouraging years of his early mission.

With Khadijah’s understanding of his spiritual propensities, Muhammad began to spend periods of time in solitary retreat. These retreats were not uncommon in his lineage. They provided opportunities for contemplation, away from the world.

When Muhammad was forty years old, he made a spiritual retreat during the month called Ramadan. An angel in human-like form, Gabriel, reportedly came to him and insisted that he recite. Three times Muhammad demurred that he could not, for he was unlettered, and three times the angel forcefully commanded him. In desperation, Muhammad at last cried out, “What shall I recite?” and the angel began dictating the first words of what became the Qur’an:

Proclaim! (or Recite!)  
In the name  
Of thy Lord and Cherisher,  
Who created—  
Created man, out of  
A (mere) clot  
Of congealed blood:  
Proclaim! And thy Lord
Is Most Bountiful,—
He Who taught
(The use of) the Pen,—
Taught man that
Which he knew not.¹

Muhammad returned home, deeply shaken. Khadijah comforted him and encouraged him to overcome his fear of the responsibilities and ridicule of prophethood. The revelations continued intermittently, asserting the theme that it was the One God who spoke and who called people to Islam (which means complete, trusting surrender to God). According to tradition, Muhammad described the form of these revelations thus:

Revelation sometimes comes like the sound of a bell; that is the most painful way. When it ceases I have remembered what was said. Sometimes it is an angel who talks to me like a human, and I remember what he says.²

The Prophet shared these revelations with the few people who believed him: his wife, Khadijah; his young cousin, ’Ali; his friend, the trader Abu Bakr; and his loyal freed slave, Zayd.

After three years, Muhammad was instructed by the revelations to preach publicly. He was ridiculed and defamed by the Qurayshites, who operated the Ka’bah as a polytheistic pilgrimage center and organized profitable trading caravans through Mecca. While Muhammad was somewhat protected by the influence of his uncle, his followers were subject to persecution. A dark-skinned Abyssinian slave named Bilal, who was among the first converts, was imprisoned and brought out daily under the hot sun, pinned to the ground with a heavy stone on his chest, and ordered to deny the Prophet and worship the old gods. He staunchly refused, saying, “One, one.” Once bought by the Prophet’s friend Abu Bakr, Bilal became the first muezzin (one who calls the people to prayer from a high place), illustrating the Prophet’s discarding of racial and social class distinctions. Finally, according to some accounts, Muhammad and his followers were banished for three years to a desolate

Faithful Muslims pray five times a day, no matter where they are. The prayer rug provides a sacred precinct from which one can turn toward Mecca, the center of the faith.
place where they struggled to survive by eating wild foods such as tree leaves.

The band of Muslims was asked to return to Mecca, but the persecution by the Qurayshites continued. Muhammad’s fiftieth year, the “Year of Sorrows,” was the worst of all: he lost his beloved wife Khadijah and his protective uncle. With his strongest backers gone, persecution of the Prophet increased.

According to tradition, at the height of his trials Muhammad experienced the Night of Ascension. He is said to have ascended through the seven heavens to the far limits of the cosmos, and thence into the Divine Proximity. There he met former prophets and teachers from Adam to Jesus, saw paradise and hell, and received the great blessings of the Divine Presence.

Pilgrims to Mecca from Yathrib, an oasis to the north, recognized Muhammad as a prophet. They invited him to come to their city to help solve its social and political problems. Still despised by the Qurayshites as a potential threat, Muhammad and his followers left Mecca secretly. Their move to Yathrib, later called al-Medina (The City [of the Prophet]), was not easy. The Prophet left last, accompanied (according to some traditions) by his old friend Abu Bakr. To hide from the pursuing Meccans, it is said that they took refuge in a cave, where the Prophet taught his friend the secret practice of the silent remembrance of God.

This hijrah (migration) of Muslims from Mecca to Medina took place in 622 CE. The Muslim era is calculated from the beginning of the year in which this event took place, for it marked the change from persecution to appreciation of the Prophet’s message.

In Medina, Muhammad drew up a constitution for the city of Yathrib/Medina that later served as a model for Islamic social administration. The departure of Muslims from Mecca was viewed with hostility and suspicion by the leaders of Mecca. Their assumption was that Medina had become a rallying point for enemies of the Meccans who, under Muhammad’s leadership, would eventually attack and destroy Mecca. To forestall this, Mecca declared war on Medina, and a period of open conflict between the two cities followed.

Muhammad himself directed the first raid against a Meccan caravan. The battle between Muslim emigrants and Meccans took place at Badr near Medina; the small group of Muslims was victorious. According to the Qur’anic revelations, God had sent thousands of angels to help Muhammad. Furthermore, Muhammad threw a handful of pebbles at the Meccans and this turned the tide, for it was God who threw, and “He will surely weaken the designs of the unbelievers.” Enraged by the Islamic victory, Mecca made a surprise attack against Medina and routed the Muslims, injuring Muhammad and scattering his forces. Within two years, Mecca had mounted a much larger force, including cavalry and numerous archers, for a siege intended to subdue Medina permanently. Warned by spies, the Muslims defended Medina with a large trench encircling the city. The Meccans were forced to retreat, but rather than continue hostilities Muhammad negotiated a truce between the two warring cities.
In 630 CE the Prophet returned triumphant to Mecca with such a large band of followers that the Meccans did not resist. Reportedly, only thirty people were killed in the historic conquest of Mecca. The Ka’bah was purged of its idols, and from that time it has been the center of Muslim piety. Acquiescing to Muhammad’s political power and the Qur’anic warnings about the dire fate of those who tried to thwart God’s prophets, many Meccans converted to Islam. Muhammad declared a general amnesty. Contrary to tribal customs of revenge, the Prophet showed his unusual gentleness by forgiving those who had been his opponents.

The Prophet then returned to Medina, which he kept as the spiritual and political center of Islam. From there, a number of campaigns were undertaken. In addition to northern Africa, the Persian states of Yemen, Oman, and Bahrain came into the fold. As the multicultural, multiracial embrace of Islam evolved, the Prophet declared that the community of the faithful was more important than the older tribal identities that had divided people. The new ideal was a global family, under God. In his “Farewell Sermon,” Muhammad stated, “You must know that a Muslim is the brother of a Muslim and the Muslims are one brotherhood.”

In the eleventh year of the Muslim era, Muhammad made a final pilgrimage to the Ka’bah in Mecca to demonstrate to the faithful the rites that were to be followed thenceforth. After his return to Medina, he became very ill. As he recognized that the end was near, he gave final instructions to his followers, promising to meet them at “the Fountain” in paradise. Muhammad died in 632 CE. In the circumstances that followed Muhammad’s death, his steadfast friend Abu Bakr was elected the first caliph (successor to the Prophet). Another possible successor was the trustworthy and courageous ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and husband of his favorite daughter, Fatima. One tradition has it that the Prophet Muhammad actually transferred his spiritual light to Fatima before his death, but that in the midst of funeral arrangements, neither she nor ‘Ali participated in the selection of the first caliph. The Shi’ite faction would later claim ‘Ali as the legitimate heir.

Muhammad’s own life has continued to be very precious to Muslims, and it is his qualities that a good Muslim tries to emulate. He always denied having any superhuman powers, and the Qur’an called him “a human being like you,” just “a servant to whom revelation has come,” and “a warner.” The only miracle he ever claimed was that, though unlettered, he had received the Qur’anic revelations in extraordinarily eloquent and pure Arabic. He did not even claim to be a teacher—“God guides those whom He will,” he was instructed to say—although Muslims consider the Prophet the greatest of teachers.

Nevertheless, all who saw the Prophet remarked on his touching physical beauty, his nobility of character, the fragrance of his presence, his humility, and his kindness. Many stories are told of his affectionate compassion toward animals, children, women, widows, and orphans, contrary to prevailing customs. When asked the short cut to heaven, he reportedly said that Paradise lies under the feet of the mother. In his devotion to God, he quietly endured poverty so extreme that he tied a stone over his stomach to suppress the pangs of hunger. He explained, “I eat as a slave eats, and sit as a slave sits, for I am a slave (of God).” Although the Qur’an says that the Prophet is the perfect model for humanity, the purest vehicle for God’s message, he himself perpetually prayed for God’s forgiveness. When he was asked how best to practice Islam, he said, “The best Islam is that you feed the hungry and spread peace among people you know and those you do not know.”
Muhammad’s mystical experiences of the divine had not led him to forsake the world as a contemplative. Rather, according to the Qur’an, the mission of Islam is to reform society, to actively combat oppression and corruption, “inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding all that is wrong.” The Prophet’s task—which Muslims feel was also undertaken by such earlier prophets as Moses and Abraham—is not only to call people back to faith but also to create a just moral order in the world as the embodiment of God’s commandments.

The Qur’an

The heart of Islam is not the Prophet but the revelations he received, which are revered as the Word of God. Collectively they are called the Qur’an (meaning “reading” or “reciting”). He received the messages over a period of twenty-three years, with some later messages replacing earlier ones. At first they were striking affirmations of the unity of God and the woe of those who did not heed God’s message. Later messages also addressed the organizational needs and social lives of the Muslim community.

After the *hijrah*, Muhammad heard the revelations and dictated them to a scribe; many of his companions then memorized them. They are said to have been carefully safeguarded against changes and omissions. Recited, the passages have a lyrical beauty and power that Muslims believe to be unsurpassed; these qualities cannot be translated. The recitation is to be rendered in what is sometimes described as a sad, subdued tone, because the messages concern God’s sadness at the waywardness of the people. Muhammad said, “Weep, therefore, when you recite it.”

Recitation of the Qur’an is thought to have a healing, soothing effect, but can also bring protection, guidance, and knowledge, according to Islamic tradition.
It is critical that one recite the Qur’an only in a purified state, for the words are so powerful that the one who recites it takes on a great responsibility. Ideally, one learns the Qur’an as a child, when memorization is easiest and when the power of the words will help to shape one’s life.

During the life of the Prophet, his followers attempted to preserve the oral tradition in writing as an additional way of safeguarding it from loss. The early caliphs continued this effort until a council was convened by the third caliph around 650 CE to establish a single authoritative written text. This is the one still used. It is divided into 114 suras (chapters). The first is the Fatiha, the opening sura, which reveals the essence of the Qur’an:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Praise be to God,
The Lord of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we worship,
And Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight way,
The way of those on whom
Thou has bestowed Thy Grace
Those whose portion
Is not wrath,
And, who go not astray.

The verses of the Qur’an are terse, but are thought to have multiple levels of meaning. These may not survive translation into other languages, particularly in the case of idiomatic expressions, subtle implications of Arabic grammatical structures, and historic references, unless there are extensive footnotes or bracketed explanations. Furthermore, there are often three layers: (1) a reference to a particular person or situation; (2) a spiritual lesson; and (3) a deeper mystical significance. With reference to the third level, noted twentieth-century Iranian scholar Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai asserted:

The whole of the Quran possesses the sense of tawil, of esoteric meaning, which cannot be comprehended directly through human thought alone. Only the Prophets and the pure among the Saints of God who are free from the dross of human imperfection can contemplate these meanings while living on the present plane of existence.¹⁰

The Qur’an makes frequent mention of figures and stories from Jewish and Christian sacred history, all of which is considered part of the fabric of Islam by Muslims. Islam is the original religion, according to the Qur’an. Submission has existed as long as there have been humans willing to submit. Adam was the first prophet. Abraham was not exclusively a Jew nor a Christian; he was a monotheistic, upright person who had surrendered to God. Jesus was a very great prophet.

Muslims believe that the Jewish prophets and Jesus all brought the same messages from God. However, the Qur’an teaches that God’s original messages have been added to and distorted by humans. For instance, Muslims do not accept the idea developed historically in Christianity that Jesus has the authority to pardon or atone for our sins. The belief that this power lies with anyone except God is considered a blasphemous human interpolation into what Muslims understand as the basic and true teachings of all prophets of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition: belief in one God and in our personal moral accountability before God on the Day of Judgment. In the Islamic view, the Qur’an was sent as a final corrective in the continuing monotheistic tradition. Muslims, citing John 14:16 and 14:26 from the Christian New Testament, believe that Jesus prophesied the coming of Muhammad when he promised that the Paraclete (advocate) would come to assist humanity after him.

The Qur’an revealed to Muhammad is understood as a final and complete reminder of the prophets’ teachings, which all refer to the same one God, known in Arabic as Allah (The God). For example, in Sura 42, Muhammad is told:

Say: “I believe in whatever Book Allah has sent down; and I am commanded to judge justly between you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord! For us is the responsibility for our deeds, and for you for your deeds. There is no contention between us and you. Allah will bring us together, and to Him is our final goal.”¹¹
The central teachings

On the surface, Islam is a very straightforward religion. Its teachings can be summed up very simply, as in this statement by the Islamic Society of North America:

*Islam is an Arabic word which means peace, purity, acceptance and commitment. As a religion, Islam calls for complete acceptance of the teachings and guidance of God. A Muslim is one who freely and willingly accepts the supreme power of God and strives to organize his life in total accord with the teachings of God. He also works for building social institutions which reflect the guidance of God.*

This brief statement can be broken down into a number of articles of faith.

The Oneness of God and of humanity

The first sentence chanted in the ear of a traditional Muslim infant is the Shahadah—"La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad-un Rasul Allah" ("There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God"). Exoterically, the Shahadah supports absolute monotheism. As the Qur’an reveals in Sura 2:163:

*Your God is One God: There is no god but He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.*

Esoterically, the Shahadah means that ultimately there is only one Absolute Reality: the underlying essence of life is eternal unity rather than the apparent separateness of things in the physical world. Muslims think that the Oneness of God is the primordial religion taught by all prophets of all faiths. Muhammad merely reminded people of it.

It has been estimated that over ninety percent of Muslim theology deals with the implications of Unity. God, while One, is referred to by ninety-nine names. These are each considered attributes of the One Being, such as *al-Ali* (The Most High) and *ar-Raqib* (The Watchful). Allah is the name of God that encompasses all the attributes. Each of the names refers to the totality, the One Being.

Unity applies not only to the conceptualization of God, but also to every aspect of life. In the life of the individual, every thought and action should spring from a heart and mind intimately integrated with the divine. Islam theoretically rejects any divisions within itself; all Muslims around the globe are supposed to embrace as one family. All humans, for that matter, are a global family; there is no one “chosen people,” for all are invited into a direct relationship with God. Science, art, and politics are not separate from religion in Islam. Individuals should never forget Allah; the Oneness should permeate their thoughts and actions. Abu Hashim Madani, an Indian Sufi sage, is said to have taught: “There is only one thing to be gained in life, and that is to remember God with each breath; and there is only one loss in life, and that is the breath drawn without the remembrance of God.”

**The “remembrance of God” is like breathing deeply in the solitude of high mountains: here the morning air, filled with purity of the eternal snows, dilates the breast; it becomes space and heaven enters our heart.**

*Frithjof Schuon*
Prophethood and the compass of Islam

Devout Muslims feel that Islam encompasses all religions. Islam honors all prophets as messengers from the one God:

Say ye: We believe
In God, and the revelation
Given to us, and to Abraham,
Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob,
And the Tribes, and that given
To Moses and Jesus, and that given
To (all) Prophets from their Lord:
We make no difference
Between one and another of them:
And we bow to God in surrender.15

Muslims believe that the original religion was monotheism, but that God sent prophets from time to time as religions decayed into polytheism. Each prophet came to renew the message, in a way specifically designed for his culture and time. The Qur’anic revelations declared Muhammad to be the “Seal of the Prophets,” the last and ultimate authority in the continuing prophetic tradition. The prophets are mere humans, although holy and powerful; none of them is divine, for there is only one Divinity.

Islam is thought to be the universal religion in its pure form. All scriptures of all traditions are also honored, but only the Qur’an is considered fully authentic, because it is the direct, unchanged, untranslated word of God. Whatever exists in other religions that agrees with the Qur’an is divine truth.

Human relationship to the divine

We are nearer to [a person] than his jugular vein.
The Holy Qur’an, Sura 50:16

In Muslim belief, God is all-knowing and has intelligently created everything for a divine purpose, governed by fixed laws that assure the harmonious and wondrous working of all creation. Humans will find peace only if they know these laws and live by them. They have been revealed by the prophets, but the people often have not believed. To believe is to surrender totally to God. As the Qur’an states:

None believes in Our revelations save those who, when reminded of them, prostrate themselves in adoration and give glory to their Lord in all humility; who forsake their beds to pray to their Lord in fear and hope; who give in charity of that which We have bestowed on them. No mortal knows what bliss is in store for these as a reward for their labors.16

The Qur’an indicates that human history provides many “signs” of the hand of God at work bestowing mercy and protection on believers. Signs such as the great flood, which was thought to have occurred at the time of Noah, illustrate that nonbelievers and evildoers ultimately experience great misfortune in this life or the afterlife. None is punished without first being warned
by a messenger of God to mend his or her ways. Creation itself is a sign of God’s compassion, as well as of God’s omnipotent will.

According to Islam, the two major human sins involve one’s relationship to God. One is *shirk* (associating anything else with divinity except the one God). The Qur’an instructs, with reference to People of the Book (Jews and Christians, who are also believed to have received revealed scriptures):

> Say: “Oh People of the book! Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; That we associate no partners with Him; That we erect not from among ourselves Lords and patrons other than Allah.”

In other words, in Islam’s pure monotheism one is enjoined not to worship anything but God—not natural forces, or mountains, or stones, or incarnations of God, or lesser deities, or human rulers. Idol worship is vigorously denounced, as is worship of natural phenomena: “Adore not the sun nor the moon, but adore Allah Who created them.”

The other major sin is *kufr* (ungratefulness to God, unbelief, atheism). Furthermore, humans tend to forget God. God has mercifully sent us revelations as reminders. The veils that separate us from God come from us, not from God; Muslims feel that it is ours to remove the veils by seeking God and acknowledging the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence of the divine. Aware that God knows everything and is all-powerful, one wants to do everything one can to please God, out of both love and fear. This paradox was given dramatic expression by the Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab:

> If God declared on the Day of Judgment that all people would go to paradise except one unfortunate person, out of His fear I would think that I am that person. And if God declared that all people would go to hell except one fortunate person, out of my hope in His Mercy I would think that I am that fortunate person.”

**The unseen life**

Muslims believe that our senses do not reveal all of reality. In particular, they believe in the angels of God. These are nonphysical beings of light who serve and praise God day and night. They are numerous, and each has a specific responsibility. For instance, certain angels are always with each of us, recording our good and bad deeds. The Qur’an also mentions archangels, including Gabriel, highest of the angelic beings, whose main responsibility is to bring revelations to the prophets from God. But neither he nor any other angel is to be worshiped, according to strict monotheistic interpretation of Islam, for the angels are simply utterly submissive servants of God. By contrast, according to Islamic belief, there is a nonsubmissive being called Satan. He was originally one of the jinn—immortal beings of fire, whose nature is between that of humans and angels. He proudly refused to bow before Adam and was therefore cursed to live by tempting Adam’s descendants—all of humanity, in other words—to follow him rather than God. According to the Qur’an, those who fall prey to Satan’s devices will ultimately go to hell.

Popular Muslim piety also developed a cult of saints. The tombs of mystics known to have had special spiritual powers have become places of pilgrimage.
Many people visit them out of devotion and desire for the blessings of the spirit, which is thought to remain in the area. This practice is frowned upon by some reformers, who assert that Muslim tradition clearly forbids worship of any being other than God.

The Last Judgment

In the polytheistic religion practiced by Arabs before Muhammad, the afterlife was only a shadow, without rewards or punishments. People had little religious incentive to be morally accountable. By contrast, the Qur’an emphasizes that after a period of repose in the grave, all humans will be bodily resurrected and assembled for a final accounting of their deeds. At that unknown time of the Final Judgment, the world will end cataclysmically: “The earth will shake and the mountains crumble into heaps of shifting sand” (Sura 73:14). Then comes the terrible confrontation with one’s own life:

_The works of each person We have bound about his neck. On the Day of Resurrection, We shall confront him with a book spread wide open, saying, “Read your book.”_ 20

Hell is the grievous destiny of unrepentant nonbelievers—those who have rejected faith in and obedience to God and His Messenger, who are unjust and who do not forbid evil. Hell also awaits the hypocrites who even after making a covenant with God have turned away from their promise to give in charity and to pray regularly:

_It is a flaming Fire. It drags them down by their scalps; and it shall call him who turned his back and amassed riches and covetously hoarded them._ 21

Muslim piety is ever informed by this belief in God’s impartial judgment of one’s actions, and of one’s responsibility to remind others of the fate that may await them.

Basically, Islam says that what we experience in the afterlife is a revealing of our tendencies in this life. We awaken to our true nature, for it is displayed before us. For the just and merciful, the state after death is a Garden of Bliss.
The desire of the purified souls will be for closeness to God, and their spirits will live in different levels of this closeness. For them, there will be castles, couches, fruits, sweetmeats, honey, houris (beautiful virgin women), and immortal youths serving from goblets and golden platters. Such delights promised by the Qur’an are interpreted metaphorically to mean that human nature will be transformed in the next life to such an extent that the disturbing factors of this physical existence will no longer have any effect.

People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up.

Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad

By contrast, sinners and nonbelievers will experience the torments of hell, fire fueled by humans, boiling water, pus, chains, searing winds, food that chokes, and so forth. It is they who condemn themselves; their very bodies turn against them “on the Day when their tongues, their hands, and their feet will bear witness against them as to their actions” (Sura 24:24). The great medieval mystic al-Ghazali speaks of spiritual torments of the soul as well: the agony of being separated from worldly pleasures, burning shame at seeing one’s life projected, and terrible regret at being barred from the vision of God. Muslims do not believe that hell can last forever for any believer, though. Only the nonbelievers will be left there; the others will eventually be lifted to paradise, for God is far more merciful than wrathful.

The Five Pillars

The basic spiritual practices incumbent on all Muslims are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. They were specified by theologians after the death of the Prophet Muhammad as the actions that define what it means to be a member of the Muslim community. The intention with which a Muslim undertakes each practice is of prime importance. The Pillars are not prescribed simply as outer rituals.

Belief and witness

The first pillar of Islam (the Shahadah) is believing and professing the unity of God and the messengership of Muhammad: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God,” to which Shi’ites add “and ‘Ali is the Master of the believers.” The Qur’an requires the faithful to tell others of Islam, so that they will have the information they need to make an intelligent choice. However, it rules out the use of coercion in spreading the message:

Let there be [or: There is] no compulsion
In religion: Truth stands out
Clear from Error: whoever
Rejects Evil and believes
In God hath grasped
The most trustworthy
Hand-hold, that never breaks.22

The Qur’an insists on respect for all prophets and all revealed scriptures.
Daily prayers

The second pillar is the performance of a continual round of prayers (salaat). Five times a day, the faithful are to perform ablutions with water (or sand or dirt if there is no water), face Mecca, and recite a series of prayers and passages from the Qur'an, bowing and kneeling. Around the world, this joint facing of Mecca for prayer unites all Muslims into a single world family. When the prayers are recited by a congregation, all stand and bow shoulder to shoulder, with no social distinctions. In a mosque, women and men usually pray separately, with the women in rows behind the men, or in a separate area, to avoid distracting the men. There may be an imam, or prayer-leader, but no priest stands between the worshiper and God. On Friday noon, there is usually a special prayer service in the mosque. Remembrance of God is an everyday obligation; such remembrance continually polishes the rust from the heart.

Prayer is thought to strengthen one’s belief in God’s existence and goodness and to carry this belief into every aspect of external life. Praying thus is also expected to purify the heart, develop the mind and the conscience, comfort the soul, encourage the good and suppress the evil in the person, and awaken the innate sense of higher morality and higher aspirations. The words of praise and the bowing express continual gratefulness and surrender to God. During the prayers, one turns to the two recording angels on one’s shoulders to say the traditional Muslim greeting—“Assalamu Alaykum” (“Peace be on you”)—and another phrase adding the blessing, “and mercy of God.”

While mouthing the words and performing the outer actions, one should be concentrating on the inner prayer of the heart. The Prophet reportedly said, “Prayer without the Presence of the Lord in the heart is not prayer at all.”

In addition to the obligatory prayers five times a day, one may do additional supererogatory prayers, the most valuable of which is prayer offered...
Salaat

The practice of salaat (formal prayer) varies somewhat between men and women and by local custom, but nonetheless follows rather standard patterns around the world. No matter what the local language, salaat is always performed in Arabic.

According to references in the Holy Qur’an, the five obligatory daily prayer times are usually understood to be (1) early morning after dawn and before sunrise; (2) early afternoon; (3) late afternoon; (4) immediately after sunset; and (5) night before going to bed. Each consists of a certain number of rak’ahs, or complete acts of devotion, some of which are congregational (fardz) and some of which are individual (sunnah). The morning prayer, for instance, consists of two individual rak’ahs and then two congregational rak’ahs. During the congregational rak’ahs, the whole congregation prays side by side, with their movements matching each other, but during the individual rak’ahs, people may be praying at their own pace.

There are four parts to each rak’ah. The first part is done in standing position, facing the Ka’bah in Mecca. Hands are first raised with open palms, thumbs touching the edge of the ears, and then folded reverently over the waist or breast, with the right hand covering the left. Inwardly, the person should feel that he or she is standing before the Divine Presence. The open palms mean, “I have come empty-handed into this world and I shall leave empty-handed.” Hands crossed over the breast or waist may be understood as a gesture to subdue desires and worldly thoughts, so that all attention can be given to God. The worshiper utters “Allahu Akbar” (“God is great,” or “God is the greatest”), followed by the Fatiha, and perhaps a traditional prayer and a passage chosen from the Qur’an, all recited softly to avoid disturbing others, who may be reciting different passages at their own speed. In the congregational part of the prayer, however, the imam who leads the prayers recites any passage from the Qur’an audibly while the others listen and perhaps quietly praise or make requests to God according to the content of the passage.

For the second part of each rak’ah, the worshiper bows over, standing with hands on knees and praises the glory of the divine by a phrase such as “Subhanna Rabbii-al-Azim” (“Glory to my Lord, the Great”), repeated three times. A prayer may also be added thereafter.

In the third part of each rak’ah, the worshiper first rises up to standing position with hands hanging down freely, while saying “Sami’ Allahu li-man hamidah” (“Allah listens to him who praises Him”) and “Rabbana wa la-k-al-hamd” (“Our Lord! All praise is due to Thee.”). Then the worshiper drops down to his knees in humble prostration with forehead touching the ground while saying “Allahu Akbar.” Rising briefly to sitting position, he then prostrates himself again in a gesture of surrender.

The fourth part is a period of sitting with feet tucked under, a posture assumed after two rak’ahs have been completed. In this position, the worshiper utters several prayers, such as the following: “My Lord! Make me and my offspring keep up prayer, our Lord! And accept my prayer, our Lord! Grant protection to me and my parents and the believers on the day when the reckoning will take place.” Turning his head to the right and then the left, the person then says to the angels on each shoulder, “As-salamu ‘ali-kum wa rahmatu-llah” (“Peace be on you and the mercy of Allah”).

The final prayers usually include the famous Ayat al-Kursi (Verse of the Throne) from Surah 2:255, “Allah! There is no god but He: the Living, the Self-subsisting, Supporter of all.” The worshiper may also repeat “subhan-Allah” (“Glory be to Allah”), “al-hamduli-ilah” (“Praise be to Allah”), and “Allahu Akbar” (“God is the greatest”) several times. Variations in choice of prayers and utterances of praises during the individual rak’ahs allow the worshiper to express inner feelings of reverence and submission, while the congregational rak’ahs uttered together give a powerful feeling of unity with the global Muslim community.
At a Muslim mosque, there are no social distinctions, as all worshipers line up shoulder to shoulder to pray together. These men are praying at Mahmoud mosque in Cairo.

during the middle of the night. The Prophet reportedly used to stand in prayer so long at night that his feet were swollen. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani explains:

This is the time when the world is asleep, but the lovers and seekers of God (al-‘ibad) are awake and traveling toward reality and their divine destinations. It is under the veil of the night that the plane of consciousness is clear from the chaos of worldly affairs, for it is a time when the mind and heart operate most effectively.24

Ideally, in Islamic spirituality, one should be constantly remembering God inwardly, and one’s whole life should become a means of worship.

Zakat

The Qur’an links prayer with zakat, charity or almsgiving, the third pillar. One’s prayer is accepted only if one also shares with others. Accordingly, at the end of the year, all Muslims must donate at least two and a half percent of their accumulated wealth to needy Muslims. This provision is designed to help decrease inequalities in wealth and to prevent personal greed. Its literal meaning is “purity,” for it purifies the distribution of money, helping to keep it in healthy circulation.

Saudi Arabia devotes fifteen percent of its kingdom’s GDP to development and relief projects throughout the world. The Islamic Relief Organization that it funds makes a point of helping people of all religions, without discrimination, where there is great need following disasters. Many stories from the life of the Prophet Muhammad teach that one should help others whether or not they are Muslims. For example, the Prophet’s neighbor was Jewish. The Prophet reportedly gave him a gift every day, even though the neighbor daily left garbage at his door. Once the neighbor was sick, and the Prophet visited him. The neighbor asked, “Who are you to help me?” The Prophet replied, “You are my brother. I must help you.”
Fasting

The fourth pillar is fasting. Frequent fasts are recommended to Muslims, but the only one that is obligatory is the fast during Ramadan, commemorating the first revelations of the Qur’an to Muhammad. For all who are beyond puberty, but not infirm, sick, menstruating, or nursing children, a dawn-to-sunset abstention from food, drink, sexual intercourse, and smoking is required for the whole month of Ramadan.

Because Muslims use a lunar calendar of 354 days, the month of Ramadan gradually moves through all the seasons. When it falls in the summer, the period of fasting is much longer than in the shortest days of winter. The hardship of abstaining even from drinking water during these long and hot days is an unselfish surrender to God’s commandment and an assertion of control over the lower desires. The knowledge that Muslims all over the world are making these sacrifices at the same time builds a special bond between haves and have-nots, helping the haves to experience what it is to be hungry, to share in the condition of the poor. Those who have are encouraged to be especially generous in their almsgiving during Ramadan.

Fasting is thought to bring great spiritual rewards. The great mystic poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) wrote:

*There’s hidden sweetness in the stomach’s emptiness. We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox is stuffed full of anything, no music. If the brain and the belly are burning clean with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire. The fog clears, and new energy makes you run up the steps in front of you. Be emptier and cry like reed instruments cry. Emptier, write secrets with the reed pen. ... When you fast, good habits gather like friends who want to help. ... A table descends to your tents, Jesus’ table. Expect to see it, when you fast, this table spread with other food, better than the broth of cabbages.25*

Many people indeed feel that they are spiritually more sensitive and physically more healthy during Ramadan fasting. Fasting liberates a person’s body from the heaviness of food and it is also a lesson for the soul, teaching it not to allow anything into the mind and heart that would distract one from God. It is believed that control of the body’s desires builds the patience and mastery needed to control the lower emotions, such as anger and jealousy. Fasting can also help a person develop humility. The mystic teacher Abu Madyan (1126–1198) of Algeria emphasized this ascetic practice because “One who is hungry becomes humble, one who becomes humble begs, and one who begs attains God.”26

Hajj

The fifth pillar is hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are physically and financially able to do so are expected to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It involves a series of symbolic rituals designed to bring the faithful as close as possible to God. Male pilgrims wrap themselves in a special garment of unsewn cloths, rendering them all alike, with no class distinctions. The garment is like a burial shroud, for by dying to their earthly life they can devote all their attention to God. It is a time for dhikr, the constant repetition of the Shahadah, the remembrance that there is no god but God.

Pilgrims walk around the ancient Ka’bah seven times, like the continual rotation around the One by the angels and all of creation, to the seventh heaven. Their hearts should be filled only with remembrance of God.
Another sacred site on the pilgrimage is the field of Arafat. It is said to be the place where Adam and Eve were taught that humans are created solely for the worship of God. Here pilgrims pray from noon to sunset to be forgiven of anything that has separated them from the Beloved. In addition, pilgrims carry out other symbolic gestures, such as sacrificing an animal and throwing stones at the devil, represented by pillars. The animal sacrifice reminds the hajjis of Abraham’s willingness to surrender to God that which was most dear to him, his own son, even though in God’s mercy a ram was substituted for the sacrifice. Most of the meat is distributed to the needy, a service for which Saudi Arabia has had to develop huge preservation and distribution facilities. Hajjis also perform symbolic acts at the holy well of Zum-Zum.

Hajj draws together Muslims from all corners of the earth for this intense spiritual experience. Because Islam is practiced on every continent, it is truly an international gathering. The crowds are enormous. The Ka’bah has been expanded to the point that three million people can worship at a time within it. To help handle the crowds, the Saudi government has built the immense King Abdul Aziz International Airport near Jedda. The journey was once so hazardous that many people and camels died trying to cross the desert in fulfillment of their sacred obligation. Now there are new dangers from the presence of such masses of pilgrims. The Saudi government has tried to organize the sites to avoid tragedies, but at times hundreds of hajjis have died in stampedes and fires.

Though considerably modernized now, hajj is still the vibrant core of the global Muslim community. To be a hajji is as much as ever a badge of pride. Throughout Muslim history, hajj has brought widely diverse people together, consolidating the center of Islam, spreading information and ideas across cultures, and sending pilgrims back into their communities with fresh inspiration. Hajji Ibrahim Keskin Hafiz, a fisherman from Turkey, says:

_When you reach the holy places, you feel as though you are just in front of God. When you change your clothes and put on the white sheet (ehraam), your identity changes. In those huge crowded places, you feel as though everyone has collected and you are waiting for the Judgement. When I visited those places we knew from Islamic history, I was just crying. Whatever we learned from our parents, whatever we learned from books—we are seeing all those things. Wherever you go, you have to try to identify yourself with those historic people. When you are standing near the well of Zum-Zum, you have to identify yourself with Hagar and her son Isma’il. She was trying to take care of her son in the desert. And you think of the Prophet Abraham; you remember his good_
Pilgrimage begins at the Great Mosque, with seven circumambulations of the Ka’bah.

Pilgrims stop at Mina.

They pray from noon to evening in the Arafat valley. The Prophet Muhammad gave his last talk here.

Pilgrims gather forty-nine stones.

They throw their stones at three pillars which represent the devil. Three days of ritual sacrifice begin.

They return to the Great Mosque and again circle the Ka’bah seven times.

Pilgrims walk seven times between hills near the Great Mosque and then drink from the sacred spring Zum-Zum.

The Great Mosque can hold up to three million pilgrims at a time.

The Ka’bah is a black cubic structure fifty feet (fifteen meters) high, draped in black silk, embroidered in gold thread with the sacred names of Allah. Pilgrims walk around it seven times until they reach the center and touch the Ka’bah itself.
Dr. Syed M. Hussain is a nephrologist—a specialist in kidney disorders, dialysis, and kidney transplants—at a major hospital in New Delhi. His manner with patients is very kind and concerned. He may be called for emergencies at any time, night or day, and yet he also observes the rules of fasting, particularly during Ramadan. He explains:

Ramadan is a very holy month in the Muslim calendar, because the Holy Qur’an was sent to the Prophet Muhammad during this month. It is a ritual for Muslims to fast during this month so that you become a little more spiritual and healthier. At the same time, you also have the pinch of hunger. Many people in their lifetime who are very wealthy will never experience what is hunger and what is thirst. A king, for instance, will never experience hunger and thirst. Fasting will make you understand what a hungry person is going through. Altogether, such sacrifices make you closer to life. You see that God has given you such beautiful things. Whether you have a penny or not, you are still able to enjoy these things—you see how valuable they are for life.

During this holy month of Ramadan, Muslims usually take something in the morning between 4 and 4:30 a.m., and after that, they say their morning prayer at 5 to 5:30 a.m. They will fast until sunset, and then they will have their meal. The logic is that if 100,000 people are missing one or two meals, then 100,000 people are receiving their meals [when that money is given in charity]. This is also a philosophy of equality.

Many people misunderstand Islam, but the religion is not bad. It gives you very good values. It is people who sometimes misuse and misunderstand it.

As a doctor I myself practice, and I see that if you are fasting your system gets toned up. Your physical fitness increases and you become healthier. Your mental alertness rises. When I fast during Ramadan my mind becomes very, very clear. I am relieved of bad thoughts, and when I see patients I feel closer to them. If a patient is not able to take his meal because of sickness you feel closer to him and try your best to see that he is being helped in all respects. When you see someone who suffers you recognize what he is going through. Then you cannot be cruel. If you are cruel, you are not doing religious practice from the bottom of your heart—you are doing it just for show. There is no place for such things in any religion.

If you fast for some time your digestive tract—which otherwise produces so many secretions all the time—gets a rest. When you give a rest to your digestive system, you also give rest to your brain and heart. If you are fasting, you are giving a rest to your entire system. Your system gets lightened, and if you do it on a spiritual level there is more strength. More natural rays come within the body so you become not only more fit and healthy but also more compassionate and more softhearted. If you are not taking a meal, your metabolism will be low and you will not have anger; you will not fight or be cruel.

If other people are eating when I am fasting, I feel nothing. In the hospital some of my colleagues will say, “You are fasting, so let me hide and take my food.” I say, “Don’t worry—if I get upset when I see food, then my motive is defeated. Instead, you should get all the best food which I like, and I’ll be happier, because that will give me more strength to control my nafs (inner passions).” That makes me a better person. All religions are religions of sacrifice. The more you sacrifice, the more you become a better person in all respects. People used to trouble the Prophet Muhammad, but when he heard that one of those people was sick he would go to his house and serve him in every way. He would even help him go to the toilet. After that, the person would become a changed person. You can’t win a person by fighting. He may be stronger than you, but with love you can capture anybody.

In modern times I don’t know what is going on that people are becoming so aggressive. I don’t think any religion has any place for fighting and killing. No religion has a place for terrorist actions. Many people think that Islam is a fundamentalist religion, but no. Look at the basics in the Book. If ten people are practicing the wrong things, that doesn’t make the system wrong. The system is right. Some people may have deviated, but if you practice from the heart, then you are compassionate, you are soft, you are helping, and you are generous to all the people around you, whatever little you can do during your lifetime. If you at least help one person seriously in your life, then you have learned something in your life. You can show your face to God, that you have helped one of his creatures who was suffering. Otherwise what is life? It won’t make any sense.
qualities and think how you can follow his good example. At the Hira cave, we remember our Prophet. We go there by buses now, but he was alone. He was walking on that hill, and he had so many enemies around him. Islam started in those conditions, and now it has very huge crowds of followers. When you enter the Ka’bah, you become very emotional and enthusiastic. In one of the prayers there, you say, “Oh Lord, we are in front of you. We have promised that we are going to follow Your rules. Whatever mistakes we made, we are ready to leave all of them, and we are not going to repeat the same mistakes again and again.”

Sunni and Shi’a

The preceding pages describe beliefs and practices of all Muslims, although varying interpretations of the beliefs have always existed. Groups within Islam differ somewhat on other issues. After Muhammad’s death, resentments over the issue of his succession began to divide the unity of the Muslim community into factions. The two main opposing groups have come to be known as the Sunni, who now comprise about eighty percent of all Muslims worldwide, and the Shi’a (adj. Shi’ite).

As discussed earlier, a caliph was elected to lead the Muslim community after Muhammad’s death. The office of caliph became a lifetime appointment. The first three caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, were elected from among the Prophet’s closest companions. The fourth caliph was ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. He was reportedly known for his holy and chivalrous qualities, but the dynasty of Umayyads never accepted him as their leader, and he was assassinated by a fanatic who was a former
member of his own party. ‘Ali’s son Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, challenged the legitimacy of the fifth caliph, the Umayyad Mu‘awiyya. When Mu‘awiyya designated his son Yazid as his successor, Husayn rebelled and was massacred in 680 by Yazid’s troops in the desert of Karbala along with many of his relatives, who were also members of the Prophet’s own family. This martyrdom unified Shi’ite opposition to the elected successors and they broke away, claiming their own legitimate line of succession through the direct descendants of the Prophet, beginning with ‘Ali. The two groups are still separate.

Sunnis Muslims today form the majority of the population in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, northern African countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union, and Indonesia. Syria and Iraq have more mixed populations of Sunnis and Shi’as. The major Shi’a-majority country is Iran.

Sunnis

Those who follow the elected caliphs are “the people of the Sunnah” (the sayings and practices of the Prophet, as collected under the Sunni caliphs). They consider themselves traditionalists, and they emphasize the authority of the Qur’an and the secondary authority of the Hadith. They believe that Muhammad died without appointing a successor and left the matter of successors to the ummah, the Muslim community. They look to the time of the first four “rightly guided caliphs” (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and ‘Ali) as the golden age of Islam. They regard the caliph as the leader of worship and the administrator of the Shari’ah, the sacred law of Islam. Sunnis regard not only the life of the Prophet but also the lives of the rightly guided caliphs—who had heard the revelations of the Prophet firsthand and been inspired by his personal example—and a few other close companions of the Prophet as the models for the ideal Muslim.

The Shari’ah is based chiefly on the Qur’an and Sunnah of Muhammad, who was the first to apply the generalizations of the Qur’an to specific life situations. Religion is not a thing apart; all of life is to be integrated into the spiritual unity that is the central principle of Islam. The Shari’ah specifies patterns for worship (instructions pertaining to the Five Pillars of Islam) as well as detailed prescriptions for social conduct, to bring remembrance of God into every aspect of daily life and practical ethics into the fabric of society. These prescriptions include injunctions against drinking intoxicating beverages; eating certain meats; gambling and vain sports; sexual relations outside of marriage; and sexually provocative dress, talk, or actions. They also include positive measures, commanding justice, kindness, and charity. Women are given many legal rights, including the right to own property, to divorce (according to certain schools of law), to inherit, and to make a will. These rights, divinely decreed during the time of the Prophet, 1,400 years ago, were not available to women in the West until the nineteenth century. Polygyny is allowed for men who have the means to support several wives, to bring all women under the protection of a husband. Women are allowed to inherit only half as much as men because men have the obligation to support women financially. The faithful are enjoined to exercise justice and honesty in their relationships and business interactions, to manage their wealth carefully, and to avoid arrogance.

The Shari’ah is said to have had a transformative effect on Muhammad’s
community. As we have seen, before Muhammad, the people’s highest loyalty was to their tribe. Tribes made war on each other with few restraints. Women had no rights. Children were often killed at birth either because of poverty or because they were females in a male-dominated culture. People differed widely in wealth. Drunkenness and gambling were commonplace. Within a short time, Islam made great inroads into these traditions, shaping tribes into a spiritual and political unity with a high sense of ethics.

In the second century of Islam, the Abbasid dynasty replaced the Umayyads, who had placed more emphasis on empire-building and administration than on spirituality. At this point, there was a great concern for purifying and regulating social and political life in accord with Islamic spiritual tradition. Mechanisms for establishing the Shari’ah were developed. Since then, Sunnis have felt that as life circumstances change, laws in the Qur’an, Hadith, and Sunnah should be continually interpreted by a consensus of opinion and the wisdom of learned people and jurists. For instance, divorce has always been addressed by the Shari’ah, but the conditions under which a wife may petition for divorce have been closely examined in recent years.

Careful study of the Qur’an and Sunnah as the basis for legal opinions is undertaken by the ulama, scholars who devote their lifetimes to developing this knowledge. The most renowned school for the training of the ulama is al-Azhar in Cairo. Founded in the tenth century, it is the world’s oldest university. A fatwa, or legal opinion, from the scholars of al-Azhar is considered authoritative by Sunni Muslims around the world.

Shi’a

The initial difference between Sunnis and Shi’a occurred over the issue of leadership. The Shi’a feel that ‘Ali was the rightful original successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Several weeks before his death, the Prophet reportedly took ‘Ali’s hand and said, “Whoever I protect, ‘Ali is also his protector. O God, be a friend to whoever is his friend and an enemy to whoever is his enemy.” This is construed by the Shi’a as a veiled way of designating ‘Ali as his successor. They feel that spiritual power was passed on to ‘Ali, and that the caliphate is based on this spiritual as well as temporal authority. They are ardently devoted to the memory of Muhammad’s close relatives: ‘Ali, Fatima (the Prophet’s beloved daughter), and their sons Hasan and Husayn. The martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala in his protest against the alleged tyranny, oppression, and injustice of the Umayyad caliphs is held up as a symbol of the struggle against human oppression. It is commemorated yearly as ‘Ashura, a memorial on the tenth day of the month of Muharram. Participants in mourning processions cry and beat their chests or, in some areas, offer cooling drinks to the populace in memory of the martyred Husayn. Shi’ite piety places great emphasis on the touching stories told of ‘Ali and Husayn’s dedication to truth and integrity, even if it leads to personal suffering, in contrast to the selfish power politics ascribed to their opponents.

Rather than recognize the Sunni caliphs, the Shi’a pay allegiance to a succession of seven or twelve Imams (leaders, guides). The first three were ‘Ali, Hasan, and Husayn. According to a saying of the Prophet acknowledged by both Sunni and Shi’a:

_‘I leave two great and precious things among you:_
_the Book of Allah and my Household._

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<th>THE TWELVE SHI’A IMAMS:</th>
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<td>5. Muhammad ibn ‘Ali (676–743)</td>
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“Twelver” Shi’a believe that there were a total of twelve Imams, legitimate hereditary successors to Muhammad. The twelfth Imam, they believe, was commanded by God to go into an occult hidden state to continue to guide the people and return publicly at the Day of Resurrection as the Mahdi. A minority of the Shi’a, the Nizari Isma’ils, recognize a different person as the seventh Imam. This line of Imams has continued to the present forty-ninth Imam, HRH Prince Karim Aga Khan IV.

Unlike the Sunni caliph, the Imam combines political leadership (if possible) with continuing the transmission of Divine Guidance. This esoteric religious knowledge was given by God to Muhammad, from him to ‘Ali, and thence from each Imam to the successor he designated from ‘Ali’s lineage. It includes both the outer and inner meanings of the Qur’an. The Shari’ah is therefore interpreted for each generation by the Imam, for he is closest to the divine knowledge, or by the clerics if the Imam is thought to be in occultation.

Sufism

In addition to the two orthodox traditions within Islam—Sunni and Shi’a—there is also an esoteric tradition, which is said to date back to the time of the Prophet. He himself was at once a political leader and a contemplative with a deep prayer life. Around him were gathered a group of about seventy people. They lived in his Medina mosque in voluntary poverty, detached from worldly concerns, praying night and day.

After the time of the first four caliphs, Muslims of this deep faith and piety, both Sunni and Shi’a, were distressed by the increasingly secular, dynastic, wealth-oriented characteristics of Muhammad’s Umayyad successors. The mystical inner tradition of Islam, called Sufism (Arabic: tasawwuf), also involved resistance to the legalistic, intellectual trends within Islam in its early development.

Sufis have typically understood their way as a corrective supplement to orthodoxy. For their part, some orthodox Sunnis do not consider Sufis to be Muslims. Sufis consider their way a path to God that is motivated by longing for the One. In addition to studying the Qur’an, Sufis feel that the world is a book filled with “signs”—divine symbols and elements of beauty that speak to those who understand. The intense personal journeys of Sufis and the insights that have resulted from their truth-seeking have periodically refreshed Islam from within. Much of the allegorical interpretation of the Qur’an and devotional literature of Islam is derived from Sufism.

The early Sufis turned to asceticism as a way of deepening their piety. The Prophet had said: “If ye had trust in God as ye ought He would feed you even as He feeds the birds.” Muhammad himself had lived in poverty, reportedly gladly so. Complete trust in and surrender to God became an essential step in the journey. Dervishes (poor mendicant mystics) with no possessions, no attachments in the world, were considered holy people like Hindu sannyasins. But Sufi asceticism is based more on inner detachment than on withdrawal from the world; the ideal is to live with feet on the ground, head in the heavens.

To this early asceticism was added fervent, selfless love. Its greatest exponent was Rabi’a (c.713–801). A famous mystic of Iraq, she scorned a rich man’s offer of marriage, saying that she did not want to be distracted for
a moment from God. All her attention was placed on the Beloved, which became a favorite Sufi name for God. Rabi’a emphasized disinterested love, with no selfish motives of hope for paradise or fear of hell. “I have served Him only for the love of Him and desire for Him.”31 When no veils of self exist, the mystic dissolves into the One she loves.

The Beloved is all, the lover just a veil.
The Beloved is living, the lover a dead thing.

Jalal al-Din Rumi32

In absolute devotion, the lover desires fana, total annihilation in the Beloved. This Sufi ideal was articulated in the ninth century CE by the Persian Abu Yazid al-Bistami. He is said to have fainted while saying the Muslim call to prayer. When he awoke, he observed that it is a wonder that some people do not die when saying it, overwhelmed by pronouncing the name Allah with the awe that is due to the One. In his desire to be annihilated in God, al-Bistami so lost himself that he is said to have uttered pronouncements such as “Under my garment there is nothing but God,”33 and “Glory be to Me! How great is My Majesty!”

The authorities were understandably disturbed by such potentially blasphemous statements. Sufis themselves knew the dangers of egotistical delusions inherent in the mystical path. There was strict insistence on testing and training by a sufficiently trained, tested, and illumined murshid (teacher) or shaykh (spiritual master). Advanced practices were taught only to higher initiates. It was through the shaykh that the barakah (blessing, sacred power) was passed down, from the shaykh of the shaykh, and so on, in a chain reaching back to Muhammad, who is said to have transmitted the barakah to ‘Ali.

A number of tariqas (esoteric orders) evolved, one of which traced its spiritual lineage back to Junayd of Baghdad (who died in 910 CE). He knew that it was dangerous to speak openly of one’s mystical understandings; the exoteric-minded might find them blasphemous, and those who had not had such experiences would only interpret them literally and thus mistakenly. He counseled veiled speech, and much Sufi literature after his time is couched in metaphors accessible only to mystics.

Despite such warnings, the God-intoxicated cared little for their physical safety and exposed themselves and Sufism to opposition. The most famous case is that of Mansur al-Hallaj (c.858–922). After undergoing severe ascetic practices, he is said to have visited Junayd. When the master asked, “Who is there?”, his disciple answered, “ana’l-Haqq” (“I am the Absolute Truth,” i.e., “I am God”). After Junayd denounced him, al-Hallaj traveled to India and throughout the Middle East, trying to open hearts to God. He introduced into the poetry of divine love the simile of the moth that flies ecstatic into the flame and, as it is burned up, realizes Reality.

Authorities imprisoned and finally killed al-Hallaj for his “ana’l-Haqq.” Now, however, al-Hallaj is considered by many to be one of the greatest Muslim saints, for it is understood that he was not speaking in his limited person. Like the Prophet, who had reportedly said, “Die before ye die,”34 al-Hallaj had already died to himself so that nothing remained but the One.
Pilgrimage to the tombs of Sufi saints is a popular form of piety. People of all religions pay their respects at the tomb of the revered Indian Sufi saint, Nizamuddin Aulia.

What’s in your head—toss it away! What’s in your hand—give it up! Whatever happens—don’t turn away from it. … Sufism is the heart standing with God, with nothing in between.

Abu Sa’id Abu al-Khayr

A more moderate Sufism began to make its way into Sunni orthodoxy through Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111). He had been a prominent theologian but felt compelled to leave his prestigious position for a life of spiritual devotion. Turning within, he discovered mystical truths, which saved him from his growing scepticism about the validity of religion. Like mystics of all religions, he urged awareness of the certainty of death as an antidote to entanglements in worldly concerns:

Death does not come upon us at a specified time or in a specified way or at a specified age; but come upon us he does, and so preparation for death is better than preparation for this world. You know that you remain here for only a brief space—perhaps there remains but a single day in your allotted span, perhaps but a single breath. Imagine this in your heart every day and impose upon yourself patience in obeying God daily.

Al-Ghazali’s persuasive writings combined accepted Muslim theology with the assertion that Sufism is needed to keep the mystical heart alive within the tradition. By the fourteenth century, mysticism was generally accepted by the orthodoxy as one of the sciences of religion, along with theology and jurisprudence.

Over the centuries, other elements have been added to Sufism. Some Sufis have embraced teachings from various religions, emphasizing that the Qur’an clearly states that the same Voice has spoken through all prophets.
Shihabuddin Suhrawardi (1153–1191), for instance, combined many currents of Islam with spiritual ideas from the Zoroastrians of ancient Iran and the Hermetic tradition from ancient Egypt. His writings are full of references to the divine light and hierarchies of angels. We humans have descended from the angels and realms of light, he wrote; we are in exile here on earth, longing for our true home, searching for that radiant purity, dimly remembered, in this dark world of matter.

Although Sufi teachings and practices have been somewhat systematized over time, they resist doctrinal, linear specification. They come from the heart of mystical experiences which defy ordinary logic. Paradox, metaphor, the world of creative imagination, of an expanded sense of reality—these characteristics of Sufi thought are better expressed through poetry and stories. A favorite character in Sufi teaching tales is Mulla Nasrudin, the wise fool. An example, as told by Idries Shah:

One day Nasrudin entered a teahouse and declaimed, “The moon is more useful than the sun.” Someone asked him why. “Because at night we need the light more.”

These “jokes” boggle the mind, revealing the limitations of ordinary thinking at the same time that they offer flashes of metaphysical illumination for those who ponder their deeper significances.

Poetry has been used by Sufis as a vehicle for expressing the profundities and perplexities of relationship with the divine. The Turkish dervish Jalal al-Din Rumi (c.1207–1273), by whose inspiration was founded the Mevlevi Dervish Order in Turkey (famous for its “Whirling Dervishes” whose dances lead to transcendent rapture), was a master of mystical poetry. He tells the story of a devotee whose cries of “O Allah!” were finally answered by God:

Was it not I that summoned thee to service?  
Did not I make thee busy with My name?  
Thy calling “Allah!” was My “Here am I,”  
Thy yearning pain My messenger to thee.  
Of all those tears and cries and supplications  
I was the magnet, and I gave them wings.
The aim of Sufism is to become so purified of self that one is a perfect mirror for the divine attributes. The central practice is called dhikr, or “remembrance.” It consists of stirring the heart and piercing the solar plexus, seat of the ego, by movements of the head, while continually repeating “la ilaha illa Allah,” which Sufis understand in its esoteric sense: “There is nothing except God.” Nothing in this ephemeral world is real except the Creator; nothing else will last. As the seventy thousand veils of self—illusion, expectation, attachment, resentment, egocentrism, discontent, arrogance—drop away over the years, this becomes one’s truth, and only God is left to experience it.

The spread of Islam

In the time of Muhammad, Islam combined spiritual and secular power under one ruler. This tradition, which helped to unify the warring tribes of the area, was continued under his successors. Islam expanded phenomenally during the centuries after the Prophet’s death, contributing to the rise of many great civilizations. The ummah became a community that spread from Africa to Indonesia. Islam was not usually spread by the sword. The Qur’an forbids coercion in religion, recommending instead that Muslims invite others to the Way by their wisdom, beautiful teaching, and personal example. Islam spread mostly by personal contacts: trade, attraction to charismatic Sufi saints, appeals to Muslims from those feeling oppressed by Byzantine and Persian rule, and unforced conversions. There were some military battles conducted by Muslims over the centuries, but they were not necessarily for the purpose of spreading Islam, and many Muslims feel that wars of aggression violate
Muslim principles. Non-Muslim citizens of newly entered territories were asked to pay a poll tax entitling them to Muslim defense against enemies and exempting them from military service.

Muhammad’s nonviolent takeover of Mecca occurred only two years before he died. It was under his successors that Islam spread through West Asia and far beyond. Only a year after Muhammad died, a newly converted Qurayshite, Khalid ibn al-Walid (d. 642), commanded a series of campaigns that within seven years had claimed the entire Arabian peninsula and Syria for Islam. Newly Islamic Arab armies quickly swept through the Sassanian Persian Empire, which had stood for twelve centuries. Defeated in battle in 637 CE, the Persian emperor fled, leaving the capital in Arab hands. Within ten years of the Prophet’s death, a mere 4,000 horsemen commanded by Amr ibn al-As took the major cities of Egypt, centers of the Byzantine Empire. Another wave of conquest soon penetrated into Turkey and Central Asia, North Africa, and north through Spain, to be stopped in 732 CE in France at the battle of Tours. At this point, only 100 years after Muhammad died, the Muslim ummah under the Umayyad caliphs was larger than the Roman Empire had ever been.

Muslims cite the power of the divine will to establish a peaceful, God-conscious society as the reason why this happened. By contrast with their strong convictions, the populations they approached were often demoralized by border fighting among themselves and by grievances against their rulers. Many welcomed them without a fight. For example, the Christians of Damascus expected Muslim rule to be more bearable than Byzantine rule, so they opened the city gates to the Muslim armies. Jerusalem and Egypt accepted the Muslims in similar fashion. Syrian Christians at Shayzar under Byzantine rule reportedly went out to meet the Muslim commander and accompanied him to their city, singing and playing tambourines. In Spain, Visigoth rule and taxation had been oppressive; the persecuted Jews were especially glad to help Islam take over. Both Christians and Jews often converted to Islam.

Some historians cite economic factors as an underlying motive for Arabs’ expansion beyond their original territory. However, although Islamic civilization did become quite opulent, the central leadership did not always support the far-reaching adventures. The conquered peoples were generally dealt with in the humane ways specified in the Qur’an and modeled by Muhammad in his negotiations with tribes newly subjected to Muslim authority. The terms offered by Khalid to the besieged Damascans were these:

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. This is what Khalid would grant the inhabitants of Damascus when he enters it. He shall grant them security for their lives, properties and churches. Their city wall shall not be demolished, neither shall any Moslem be quartered in their homes. Thereunto we give them the pact of God and the protection (dhimmah) of His Messenger, upon whom be God’s blessing and peace, the caliphs and the Believers. So long as they pay poll-tax nothing but good shall befall them.39

Monotheistic followers of revealed traditions, Christians and Jews, who like Muslims were “People of the Book,” were treated as dhimmis, or protected people. They were allowed to maintain their own faith, but not to try to convert others to it. The Dome of the Rock was built on the site of the old temple of the Jews in Jerusalem, honoring Abraham as well as Muhammad in the city that is still sacred to three faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
The Umayyad caliphs had their hands full administering this huge ummah from Damascus, which they had made its capital. They tended to focus more on organizational matters than on the spiritual life. Some were also quite worldly; Walid II, for example, is said to have enjoyed a pool filled with wine so that he could swim and drink at the same time. In 747 CE a rival to the caliphate is said to have invited eighty of the princes of the line to a banquet, where he had them all killed. Three years after “the bloodshedder,” a new series of caliphs took over: the Abbasids. They held power until 1258 CE.

Islamic culture

Under the Abbasids, who took over the caliphate in 750 CE, Muslim rule became more Persian and cosmopolitan and Islamic civilization reached its peak. The capital was moved to the new city of Baghdad. No more territories were brought under centralized rule, and merchants, scholars, and artists became the cultural heroes. A great House of Wisdom was built, with an observatory, library, and an educational institution where Greek and Syriac manuscripts on subjects such as medicine, astronomy, logic, mathematics, and...
philosophy were translated into Arabic. In Cairo, under the Fatimid Ismaili Caliphate, Muslims built in 972 CE the great university and mosque, Al-Azhar, still important in Muslim scholarship and legal decisions.

In its great cities, Islam went through a period of intense intellectual and artistic activity, absorbing, transmitting, and expanding upon the highest traditions of other cultures. For instance, from Persia, which was to become a Shi’ite stronghold, it adopted a thousand-year-old tradition of exquisite art and poetry. To these avid cultural borrowings Islam added its own innovations. The new system of nine Arabic numerals and the zero derived from Indian numbers revolutionized mathematics by liberating it from the clumsiness of Roman numerals. A love of geometry and a spiritual understanding of numbers, from the One to infinite divisions, provided the basis for beautifully elaborated art and architectural forms. Muslim philosophers were highly interested in Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic thought, but in their unique synthesis these intellectual ways were harmonized with revealed religion.
Muslim scholars’ research into geography, history, astronomy, literature, and medicine lifted these disciplines to unprecedented heights.

The pivotal institution of Islamic society was the ulama, whose primacy and influence were unchallenged. The ulama were not only guardians of the faith but were also the pervasive force holding together Islamic society. They were qadis (judges), muftis (jurisconsultants), guides and pastors of the artisans’ guilds, spiritual leaders, mosque imams, teachers of the civil and military schools, state scribes, and market inspectors. The major sources of their economic power and their independence from the state were religious and private endowments, run and controlled by the ulama.

Although Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasids, independent caliphates were declared in Spain and Egypt. Muslim Spain was led by successors to the Umayyads and became a great cultural center. Córdoba, the capital, had 700 mosques, seventy libraries, 300 public baths, and paved streets. Europe, by contrast, was in its Dark Ages; Paris and London were only mazes of muddy alleys. Spanish Muslim scientists developed a prototype of a flying machine, mechanical clocks, and highly accurate astronomical clocks, many centuries before such inventions were introduced into Europe through translations of Arabic manuscripts.

Tunisia and Egypt comprised a third center of Islamic power: the Shi’ite Fatimid caliphate (so named because they claimed to be descendants of Muhammad’s daughter Fatima). While otherwise known for their brilliant cultural and scientific accomplishments, under the troubled Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim (985–c.1021), the Fatimids broke with Islamic tradition and persecuted dhimmis; they also destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, provoking European Christian crusades to try to recapture the Holy Lands.

Crusading Christians fought their way to Jerusalem, which they placed under siege in 1099. When the small Fatimid garrison surrendered, the crusaders slaughtered the inhabitants of the holy city. Eyewitnesses recount the beheading of 70,000 captives at the al-Aqsa mosque, near the altar site of the ancient Jewish Temple. Severed hands and feet were piled everywhere. Anti-crusading Muslims led by the famous Salah-al-Din (known in the West as Saladin) retook Jerusalem in 1187 and treated its Christian population with the generous leniency of Islam’s highest ideals for the conduct of war. But widespread destruction remained in the wake of the crusaders, and a reservoir of ill-will against Christians lingered, to be exacerbated centuries later by European colonialism in Muslim lands.

The Islamic period in Spain was known for its tolerance of Judaism. But during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Christians took Spain and later instituted the dread Inquisition against those not practicing Christianity. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, an estimated three million Spanish Muslims had either been killed or had left the country.

Eastward expansion

Its westward advance stopped at Europe, Islam carried its vitality to the north, east, and south. Although Mongol invasions from Central Asia threatened, the Mongols were converted to Islam; so were the Turks. While Uzbek Khan, Mongol leader from 1313 to 1340, zealously desired to spread Islam throughout Russia, he nonetheless maintained tolerance toward the Christians in the conquered lands. He granted a charter to the Orthodox Metropolitan concerning the treatment of Christians: “Their laws, their Churches; their
monasteries and chapels shall be respected; whoever condemns or blames this religion, shall not be allowed to excuse himself under any pretext but shall be punished with death.”

Similar tolerance toward other religions was practiced by the Muslim Turks, but in 1453 the Turks conquered Constantinople, the heart of the old Byzantine Empire, and renamed it Istanbul; Hagia Sophia was turned into a mosque even though it did not face Mecca. At its height, the Turkish Ottoman Empire dominated the eastern Mediterranean as well as the area around the Black Sea.

Farther east, Islam was carried into northern India, where Muslim conquerors destroyed some Hindu idols and temples but allowed the Hindu majority a protected dhimmi status. The Chishti Sufi saints drew people to Islam by their great love for God.

Under the Muslim Moguls, the arts and learning flourished in India. In the ecumenical spiritual curiosity of the emperor Akbar, who rose to the Mogul throne in 1556, representatives from many traditions—Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jain, Christian—were invited to the world’s first interfaith dialogues. Eventually Akbar devised a new religion that was a synthesis of Islam and all these other religions, with himself as its supposedly enlightened head, but it died with him, and Muslim orthodoxy gained ascendancy with his great-grandson, Aurangzeb.

Under British colonization of India, tensions between Hindus and Muslims were inflamed, partly to help Britain divide and rule. India gained its independence under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who was unable to devise a political solution to the concerns of Muslims fearing domination by a Hindu-majority government. In 1947, West and East Pakistan (the East

The Taj Mahal, a beautiful seventeenth-century Mogul tomb built by Akbar’s grandson Shah Jahan as a monument to his beloved wife, who died in childbirth, is embellished with passages from the Holy Qur’an, but it is mostly visited as a tourist attraction.
section now the independent nation of Bangladesh) were partitioned off to be Muslim-ruled and predominantly populated by Muslims, while India was to be run by Hindus. The creation of Pakistan was one of the major contemporary attempts to create a model nation based on the principles of Islam. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the London-educated lawyer who is regarded as the founder of Pakistan, conceived of Pakistan as a modern and democratic state in which women, minorities, and human rights would be respected, according to Islam’s true tenets of tolerance, compassion, and justice. However, the entrenched powers and ethnic and cultural divisions within the country have prevented realization of his dream. At its inception, the partition of India into Muslim majority and Hindu majority nations turned into a violent and chaotic nightmare. Millions lost their lives trying to cross the borders. The strife between the two faiths continues despite recurrent attempts to renew peaceful relationships between the peoples of Pakistan and India, who, though divided into different religions, actually share one culture. In India, Hindus and Muslims had long lived side by side in relative harmony, but in December 1992, militant Hindus set off renewed communal violence by destroying a mosque in Ayodhya, India, in the belief that it had been built by the Moguls on the site of an ancient temple to Lord Rama. Another terrible wave of Hindu violence against Muslims occurred in the state of Gujarat in 2002, in retaliation for the burning of a train illegally carrying Hindu volunteers to build a new Ram temple on the disputed Ayodhya site.

The greatest concentration of Muslims developed even farther east, in Indonesia, where Muslim traders and missionaries may have first landed as early as the tenth century CE. Nearly ninety percent of the people are now Sunni Muslims, but the government has thus far preserved a secular, pluralistic society rather than establish Islam as the state religion, as some Islamist groups have sporadically tried to do.

China and the former Soviet Union encompass tens of millions of Muslims. To the south, Islam spread into Africa along lines of trade. In competition...
with Christianity, Islam sought the hearts of Africans and eventually won in many areas. Many converted to Islam; many others maintained some of their indigenous ways in combination with Islam. The prosperous Mali Empire was headed by a Muslim, who made an awe-inspiring pilgrimage to Mecca with a gold-laden retinue of 8,000 in 1324. As the spread of Islam encompassed an increasing diversity of cultures, hajj became important not only for individuals but also for the religion as a whole, holding its center in Mecca in the midst of worldwide variations.

**Relationships with the West**

Although Islam honors the prophets of all traditions, its own religion and prophet were denounced by medieval Christian Europe. Christianity had considered itself the ultimate religion and had launched its efforts to bring the whole world under its wings. Islam felt the same way about its own mission. In the struggle for souls, the Church depicted Muhammad as an idol-worshiper, an anti-Christ, the Prince of Darkness. Islam was falsely portrayed as a religion of many deities, in which Muhammad himself was worshiped as a god (thus the inaccurate label “Muhammadanism”). Europeans watched in horror as the Holy Lands became Muslim and the “infidel” advanced into Spain and elsewhere in Europe. Even though Muslim scholars and artists preserved, shared, and advanced the classic civilizations while Europe was benighted, the wealth of Arabic culture was interpreted in a negative light.

By the nineteenth century, Western scholars began to study the Arabic classics, but the ingrained fear and loathing of Muhammad and Muslims remained. The ignorance about, and negative stereotyping of, Muslims continues today. Annemarie Schimmel, late Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture, Harvard University, explained:

> The idea that the Muslims conquered everything with fire and sword was unfortunately deeply ingrained in the medieval mind. All these misconceptions about Islam as a religion and the legends and lies that were told about it are really unbelievable. I have often the feeling that this medieval image of Islam as it was perpetuated in ever so many books and even scholarly works is part of our subconscious. When someone comes and says, “But real Islam is something completely different,” people just will not believe it because they have been indoctrinated for almost fourteen hundred years with the image of Islam as something fierce and something immoral. Unfortunately, some of the events of our century have revived this medieval concept of Islam.42

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*Borrow the Beloved’s eyes. Look through them and you’ll see the Beloved’s face everywhere. …

Let that happen, and things you have hated will become helpers.

*Jalal al-Din Rumi*43

Although it had enjoyed great heights of culture and political power, the Muslim world fell into decline. It seems that the Mongol invasions were at least partly responsible, for they eradicated irrigation systems and libraries and killed scholars and scientists, erasing much of the civilization that had been built up over 500 years. Some Muslims today feel that spiritual laxness was
the primary reason that some of the previously glorious civilizations became impoverished underdeveloped countries. Another theory is that Muslims were simply overtaken by stronger military and economic powers better equipped than they were, such as the Mongols in the thirteenth century, and subsequently the Europeans.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many Muslim populations fell under European domination. From the mid-twentieth century onward, most gained their independence as states that had adopted certain Western ideals and practices. In many cases, they let go of some aspects of their Muslim heritage, considering it a relic that prevented them from success in the modern world. Arabic was treated as an unimportant language; Western codes of law replaced the Shari’ah in social organization. But yet they were not totally Westernized, and they resumed local rule with little training for self-government and participation in a world economy dominated by industrial nations.

Societies that had been structured along traditional lines fragmented from the mid-nineteenth century onward, as wide-ranging programs of modernization were unleashed throughout the Muslim world. The local autonomy of the traditional Islamic society was swept away and replaced by centralized regulations of Western origin. Traditional schools, markets, guilds, and courts into which the societies had been organized lost much of their reason for being.

Before the colonial forces moved out, foreign powers led by Britain helped to introduce a Jewish state in West Asia. After long and terrible persecution in many countries, Jewish Zionists sought resettlement in Palestine, which they considered their ancient homeland. But some historians allege that the chief motive of the countries supporting this claim was to protect European interests. Lord Palmerston of Britain suggested that a wealthy Jewish population transplanted to Palestine, and highly motivated to protect itself, would prop up the decaying Ottoman Empire so that it could serve as a bulwark against Russian imperialism; the new Jewish presence in Palestine would also serve as a check against the attempts of Egypt to create a pan-Islamic state encompassing Egypt, Syria, and the Arabian peninsula. In 1948 Jordan and Egypt annexed twenty-two percent of Palestinian territory—the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; in 1967, this territory was occupied by Israel. Decades of violence and counterviolence have followed, with Palestinians in the disputed area suffering from appropriation of their lands, destruction of their houses, severe curtailment of their material supplies, and restrictions on their movements, and Israelis living in fear of terrorist attacks.
Islam in the West

Even as Muslims were feeling humiliated by foreign domination elsewhere, they were growing in numbers and self-pride within the United States. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, and may now be the second largest religion in the country. Two-thirds of American Muslims are immigrants; one-third of American Muslims are converts, most of them African Americans.

Conversion to Islam by African Americans was encouraged early in the twentieth century as a form of separatism from white oppression. Awareness grew that many of the slaves who had been brought from West Africa had been of Muslim faith. A number of movements developed to bring the former slaves back to their suppressed ancestral faith. For instance, in 1913 Noble Drew Ali (1886–1929) began a movement that was designed to begin teaching the elements of the faith to African Americans and thus give them a strong sense of their own identity. Members were encouraged to adopt Noble Drew Ali’s understanding of Muslim lifestyles, with modest dress, gender separation, traditional family structure, and community solidarity.

Some other early Muslim communities in the United States were based on missionary efforts, such as that of the Ahmadiyyah Movement from India, which was active in publishing tracts and English translations of the Qur’an and in helping African American converts learn Arabic. However, most Muslims do not accept the Ahmadiyyah Movement as Muslim, for the movement’s prophet proclaimed himself the Mahdi and Messiah, contrary to mainstream understanding of Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets.”

Other movements had a strong nation-building character. In particular, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, who proclaimed himself a messenger of God, tens of thousands of African Americans became “Black Muslims,” calling themselves the Nation of Islam. However, faith in Elijah Muhammad himself was shaken by allegations about his sexual relationships with his secretaries. Some followers—especially the influential leader Malcolm X and Warith Deen Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad—developed contacts with mainstream Muslims in other countries and came to the conclusion that Elijah Muhammad’s version of Islam was far removed from Muslim orthodoxy. They steered converts toward what they perceived as the true traditions of Islam and alliance with the world Muslim community.

Others of African American heritage, especially Minister Louis Farrakhan, current leader of the Nation of Islam, maintain Elijah Muhammad’s more political focus on unifying against white oppression, despite Islam’s strong tradition of nonracism. However, politicization of Islamic identity is probably not the main factor encouraging the growth of Islam. Many American Muslims embrace their religion as a bulwark of discipline and faith against the degradations of materialism.

The homes of African American Muslims become places of refuge from the surrounding culture, with Qur’anic inscriptions, provisions for prayer spaces, cleanliness and lack of clutter, and windows covered as privacy screens. Soon after birth, children are placed with their mothers on their prayer rugs and gradually learn to recite portions of the Qur’an. They are carefully trained in politeness to elders, modest dress, and proper behavior. The environment these children encounter in public schools is a great contrast to this traditional upbringing. Young Muslim girls are taunted about their headscarves, and sex education classes, which begin at an early age, are offensive to Muslim
parents who do not accept dating and extramarital sexuality for their children. Some African American Muslim parents thus attempt to home-school their children.

In Europe, decades of immigration from formerly French and British colonies in Africa and Asia have expanded the Muslim presence considerably. There are now over twenty million Muslims in western Europe. There they have often maintained their traditional cultures rather than adopting European behaviors. The secular policies of the French government have prompted a legal ban since 2004 on overt display of religious symbols, including the headscarves traditionally worn by Muslim women. Refusal to allow wearing of headscarves in school has led some Muslim girls to leave public schools and pursue education through home schooling or religious schools, causing further separation between Muslim and non-Muslim populations.

In 2011, face veils were banned in France in all public places. In Switzerland, construction of new minarets (tall towers) on mosques was also banned by a 2009 public referendum. Such restrictions of religious symbols have been linked with various kinds of fears, including concerns about security and political power, as well as resentment in European welfare states that Muslim immigrants are benefitting from their welfare systems. Negative right-wing and nationalistic responses are thus accompanying the growth of Islam in Europe. As an Austrian researcher into this trend observed, “resentments, fears and constructions of the enemy, which have formed in response to historic burdens and a lack of information, [have] now come to the surface.”

Muslim resurgence

The Muslim world had lost its own traditional structure and was also generally helpless against manipulations by foreign nations until it found its power in oil. In the 1970s, oil-rich nations found that by banding together they could control the price and availability of oil. OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) brought greatly increased revenues into previously
impoverished countries and strengthened their self-image as well as their importance in the global balance of power. Most of the oil-rich nations are predominantly Muslim.

As the wealth suddenly poured in, it further disrupted established living patterns. Analysts feel that some people may have turned back to a more conservative version of Islam in an effort to restore a personal sense of familiarity and stability amid the chaos of changing modern life. Moreover, the increase in literacy, urbanization, and communications helped to spread revived interest in Islam. There was also the hope that Islam would provide the blueprint for enlightened rule, bringing spiritual values into community and politics as Muhammad had done in Medina. It is thought that the Prophet had intentionally tried to create a united community in which each Muslim is responsible for his fellow human beings, in which no one should be hungry or unfairly treated, and in which the leader of the community is a just and religious person. This ideal has perhaps never been fully realized, but it continues to inspire committed Muslims today as the best defense against social decadence and, perhaps, as the salvation of the world.

Traditionally, Muslims have seen the world as divided into *dar al-Islam*, “the abode of Islam” (those places where Muslims are a majority and Shari’ah governs worldly life), *dar al-sulh*, “the abode of peace” (where Muslims are a minority but can live in peace and freely practice Islam), and *dar al-harb*, “the abode of conflict” (where Muslims are in the minority, struggling to practice Islam).

As overt colonialism wanes, the world has become divided into autonomous nation-states with strong central governments. In this process, forty-three primarily Islamic nation-states have been created. They differ greatly in culture and in the degree to which each society is ruled by Islamic ethics. But all are now being reconsidered as possible frameworks for *dar al-Islam*, within which the Muslim dream of religion-based social transformation might be accomplished. Those who seek to establish Islamic states in which the sovereignty of God is supreme are often now referred to as Islamists.

*A woman in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, wears a burqa over her clothes in order to go to the market.*
In the past few centuries, modern industrial societies separated religion from politics. Social, political, and economic issues were treated without any reference to a higher authority or to the values taught by the prophets; religion has been considered a largely private matter, even within some Muslim-majority states such as Turkey, where separation of religion from government became law after reformist President Ataturk led his people in abolishing the Ottoman sultanate and establishing the secular Republic of Turkey in 1923. By contrast, the re-emerging ideal among some Muslim social reformers is that cultures oriented toward the sovereignty of God, acting according to divine commands, can create a new world order of peace.

**Tradition in modern life**

Islamist social restructuring takes several forms. One is a call for a return to Shari’ah rather than secular law derived from European codes. The feeling of the orthodox is that the world must conform to the divine law, rather than diluting the law to accommodate it to the material world. In Iran, for instance, an attempt has been made to shape every aspect of life according to Shari’ah. Fasting during Ramadan is strictly enforced in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and restaurants in many Muslim countries close during the fasting hours. In Muslim-dominated northern Nigeria, a 1999 Shari’ah ruling barred men and women from traveling in the same public vehicles, in an effort to combat immorality and crime.

Private behaviors are also becoming more traditional. In particular, to honor the Qur’anic encouragement of physical modesty to protect women from being molested, many Muslim women have adopted hijab (veiling), covering their bodies except for hands, face, and feet, as they had not done for decades. In Saudi Arabia, where women have been ordered to be “properly covered” outside their homes, some wear not only head-to-toe black cloaks but also full veils over their faces without even slits for their eyes. Some
Muslim women assert that they like dressing more modestly so that men will not stare at them. Others feel that men are simply treating women as slaves.

In some Muslim-majority countries, women are allowed to join the workforce only if they are veiled. In Iran, the replacement of more Westernized customs with Muslim moral codes, including veiling of women, has allowed women from conservative backgrounds to leave their homes and enter public life without antagonizing their families. Now that a great number of Iranian Muslim women have been educated and have entered the workforce and politics, they are a formidable part of reformist efforts to challenge the control of the male clerical elite over social life. They have also become active participants in contemporary Iranian attempts to reconcile Islam with human rights and democracy.

Women’s rights to divorce and to choose their own marriage partners are among the hotly debated issues in contemporary attempts to define Shari’ah. Shari’ah has been locally adapted to various societies over the centuries; some feel that to attempt to restore its original form is to deny the usefulness of its flexibility. Certain customs thought to be Muslim are actually cultural practices not specified in the basic sources; they are the result of Islamic civilization’s assimilation of many cultures in many places. Muhammad worked side by side with women, and the Qur’an encourages equal participation of women in religion and in society. Veiling and seclusion were practices absorbed from conquered Persian and Byzantine cultures, particularly their upper classes; peasant women could not carry out their physical work under encumbering veils or in seclusion from public view.

Muslim women scholars are now carefully re-examining the Qur’an and Hadith to determine the historical realities and principles of women’s issues that have long been hidden behind an exclusively male interpretation of the traditions. Qur’anic scholar Amina Wadud, for instance, asserts that the Qur’an is potentially a “world-altering force” that offers universal moral guidance for all believers, be they male or female:

_The more research I did into the Qur’an, … the more affirmed I was that in Islam a female person was intended to be primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally a full human being, equal to all who accepted Allah as Lord, Muhammad as Prophet, and Islam as din [religious way]. … Conservative thinkers read explicit Qur’anic reforms of existing historical and cultural practices as the literal and definitive statement on these practices for all times and places. What I am calling for is a reading that regards those reforms as establishing precedent for continual development toward a just social order._

Another problem with applying Shari’ah as civil law is that some ethical issues that arise today either did not exist in their present form at the time the legal codes were created or were not specifically addressed by the Qur’an or Hadith. Artificial birth control methods, for example, were not available then. However, infanticide was mentioned by the Qur’an: “Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We will provide for them and for you.” Does this mean that all forms of population control should be considered forbidden by Islam, or should the overpopulation of the earth be a major contemporary consideration? According to Islamic legal reasoning, the accepted method for determining such ambiguous issues is to weigh all the benefits and disadvantages that might result from a course of action and then discourage it if the
Shirin Ebadi

In 2003, Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi became the first Muslim woman to win the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize, which is awarded annually for extraordinary efforts for the sake of peace and social improvement. In her work and in her speeches, Ebadi is fighting to convince people that Iran can be at the same time a democracy in which leaders are fairly elected and accountable to the citizenry, and also a nation observing Islamic values.

Ebadi was born in 1947 as the daughter of a progressive professor and lawyer. She became Iran’s first woman judge, President of the City Court of Tehran during the rule of Shah Pahlavi, who tried to increase women’s rights and decrease the power of Islamic religious leaders, amidst the harshness of his own rule. When the shah was deposed by the 1979 revolution, Iran was declared an Islamic state with Ayatollah Khomeini as its leader. Khomeini cancelled the shah’s reforms and instituted strict observance of Shari’ah. Women lawyers were forbidden to practice independently, so Ebadi lost her position. Rather than leave the country, as many intellectuals did, she chose to remain in Iran and try to bring transformation in consonance with Islamic law, particularly with respect to human rights.

After the 1989 death of the ayatollah, women were again allowed to practice law, and Ebadi began to defend people whose rights had been denied by the government. She founded the Association for Support of Children’s Rights in Iran and also the Center for the Defense of Human Rights. Her position is that while Shari’ah can serve as the basis for law, it can be interpreted in ways that support freedom and equality. She maintains that Islam is a religion of peace and justice, and that the Qur’an includes many references to ideals such as respect for others’ opinions. For speaking thus, she has been arrested, imprisoned in solitary confinement, attacked in newspapers, criticized by protestors while speaking, and subjected to death threats. Nevertheless, she continues to speak and write, emphasizing the need for education and justice if terrorism is to be stopped, rather than using the war on terrorism as a pretext for violation of human rights. In her acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, she explained:

I am a Muslim. In the Qur’an the Prophet of Islam has been cited as saying: “Thou shalt believe in thy faith and I in my religion.” That same divine book sees the mission of all prophets as that of inviting all human beings to uphold justice. Since the advent of Islam, too, Iran’s civilization and culture has become imbued and infused with humanitarianism, respect for the life, belief, and faith of others, propagation of tolerance and compromise and avoidance of violence, bloodshed, and war. … The people of Iran have been battling against consecutive conflicts between tradition and modernity for over a hundred years. By resorting to ancient traditions, some have tried and are trying to see the world through the eyes of their predecessors and to deal with the problems and difficulties of the existing world by virtue of the values of the ancients. But many others, while respecting their historical and cultural past and their religion and faith, seek to go forth in step with world developments and not lag behind the caravan of civilization, development, and progress. The people of Iran, particularly in the recent years, have shown that they deem participation in public affairs to be their right, and that they want to be masters of their own destiny.

This conflict is observed not merely in Iran, but also in many Muslim states. Some Muslims, under the pretext that democracy and human rights are not compatible with Islamic teachings and the traditional structure of Islamic societies, have justified despotic governments, and continue to do so. …

Islam is a religion whose first sermon to the Prophet begins with the word “Recite!” The Qur’an swears by the pen and what it writes. Such a sermon and message cannot be in conflict with awareness, knowledge, wisdom, freedom of opinion and expression, and cultural pluralism. …

If the twenty-first century wishes to free itself from the cycle of violence, acts of terror and war, and avoid repetition of the experience of the twentieth century—that most disaster-ridden century of humankind—there is no other way except by understanding and putting in practice every human right for all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, faith, nationality, or social status.”
likely disadvantages outweigh the advantages. For those Muslim intellectuals who want to retain their faith within the context of modern life, the process of *ijtihad* (reasoned interpretation, independent judgment by a qualified scholar) is critical.

The global family of Islam is not a political unit; its unity under Arab rule broke up long ago. There is as yet no consensus among Muslim-majority states about how to establish a peaceful, just, modern society based on basic Muslim principles. But there is widespread recognition that there are problems associated with modern Western civilization that should be avoided, such as crime, drug abuse, corruption of values, and unstable family life.

> Today everyone cries for peace but peace is never achieved, precisely because it is metaphysically absurd to expect a civilization that has forgotten God to possess peace.
> Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁴⁷

### Outreach and education

Another sign of Muslim resurgence is the increase in outreach, as Muslims become more confident of the value of their faith. Islam is the fastest growing of all world religions, with over 1.2 billion followers. New mosques are going up everywhere. Some Muslims who constitute a minority in their countries are trying to assert their rights to practice their religion by praying five times a day, leaving work to attend Friday congregational prayer at noon, and wearing traditional head-coverings. Special Islamic satellite channels offer alternatives to Western-oriented programming that Muslims find offensive, and also act as a force for international Muslim unity. The channel Iqraa, for instance, is financed by a Saudi Arabian millionaire, offering free broadcasting of what it describes as “entertaining programmes that are devoid of decadence and impropriety and are appropriate for viewing by Muslim families.”⁴⁸

A third sign of Muslim resurgence is the increasing attention being given to developing educational systems modeled on Islamic thought. Islam is not anti-scientific or anti-intellectual; on the contrary, it has historically bridged reason and faith and placed a high value on developing both in order to tap into the fullness of human potential. Western education has omitted the spiritual aspects of life, so Muslims consider it incomplete and imbalanced.

While there are many excellent Muslim educational institutions, the numerous *madrasas*, traditional religious schools, typically teach a narrow version of Islam, ignoring its sophisticated cultural and scientific heritage and nuanced philosophy. Because some of these schools have proved to be breeding grounds for militants, fanning hatred of the West, particularly among the poor rural students, they are now coming under closer scrutiny. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Islamabad released a report in 2003 which identified a number of troubling features of textbooks and curricula in Pakistan:

- inaccuracies and omissions of facts that lead to distorted interpretations of national history
- insensitivity to the diversity of religions in the country
- glorification of violence
• encouragement of prejudices toward women, religious minorities, and other countries
• omission of material and perspectives for developing critical thinking
• outdated teaching practices that fail to stimulate interest and insight.49

Pakistan is now revising its textbooks to correct such points. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has come under criticism for giving distorted religious messages through its schools, and is now revising its curricula and textbooks to promote peace and harmony. To increase educational opportunities for women, a large university for women encompassing fifteen colleges was opened in Riyadh in 2011.

At the same time, efforts are being made in some countries to increase the accuracy and sensitivity of portrayals of Islam in the education of non-Muslims. Western textbooks have tended to present history as the progress of Western civilization, from which perspective Islam is described mainly as an adversary rather than a high civilization in its own right which has made great contributions to science and culture, not to mention philosophy. Vincent Cornell, editor of the five-volume series *Voices of Islam*, writes:

> It has long been a truism to say that Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world. However, the situation expressed by this statement is more than a little ironic because Islam is also one of the most studied religions in the world, after Christianity and Judaism. ... Why is it that most Americans and Europeans are still largely uninformed about Islam after so many books about Islam have been published? Even more, how can people still claim to know so little about Islam when Muslims now live in virtually every medium-sized and major community in America and Europe? ... Scholars of Islam in American universities still feel the need to humanize Muslims in the eyes of their students. A basic objective of many introductory courses on Islam is to demonstrate that Muslims are rational human beings and that their beliefs are worthy of respect.50
At higher levels of academic research, some efforts are now being made by Western scholars to understand Islamic beliefs and practices in their own terms, rather than through Western lenses such as feminist theory or secular-liberal thinking.

Philanthropic projects funded by Muslims are also on the increase. Most notably, the Ismaili Shi’a Muslim community, under the contemporary direction of its current imam, His Highness the Aga Khan, has organized many award-winning public service projects under the aegis of the extensive Aga Khan Development Network, from rebuilding historic cultural sites to projects in improving health, education, urban and rural development, microfinance, and food security for people of all faiths in many countries. Under the Aga Khan’s guidance, Ismailis are trying to make positive contributions to society, understanding that this is a central way of being good Muslims. Noordin Kassam, a chartered accountant from England who serves as a regional officer in the network, explains:

The impetus that spurred this development derives from the Muslim ethic to serve one’s fellow man in the spirit of brotherhood. ... We serve because we want to. Over ninety-five percent of the work of the network across twenty-five countries is undertaken by volunteers—people of all walks of life.51

Islam in politics

At present, the facet of Islam that is of greatest concern around the world to both Muslims and non-Muslims is its association with politics. Many governments are becoming Islamicized. Political leaders are referring more frequently to Islam and Qur’anic statements. Some use this approach to support the status quo and glorify Islam’s past heights. In Arabic countries, others have used Muslim idealism to rally opposition to ruling elites who are perceived as being corrupt or oppressive. Such religiously based idealism was not a major part of the impetus of the “Arab spring,” in which several entrenched governments were brought down by citizen protests in 2011; other social and economic factors were at work. But now that power vacuums have been created, militant Islamist organizations are trying to move in, a trend feared by those in favor of more liberal, humanistic interpretations of Islam.

Some charismatic leaders have used their own interpretations of Islam to ignite violent political expressions of frustration and hatred against Western global domination. These include suicidal terrorist attacks against civilian targets by those who have been assured that their self-sacrifice for the cause will earn them quick entry to paradise, contrary to Qur’anic passages refusing suicide and upholding the value and sanctity of each human life.

A major issue at stake is the understanding of jihad. All Muslims are enjoined by the Qur’an to carry on jihad. Commonly mistranslated as “holy war,” it means “striving.” The Prophet Muhammad is said to have distinguished between two types of jihad. Of these, he said, the Greater Jihad is the struggle against one’s lower self. It is the internal fight between wrong and right, error and truth, selfishness and selflessness, hardness of heart and all-embracing love. This inner struggle to maintain peaceful equilibrium is then reflected in outer attempts to keep society in a state of harmonious order, as the earthly manifestation of Divine Justice. The Lesser Jihad is an external effort to protect the Way of God against the forces of evil. This jihad is the safeguarding of one’s life, faith, livelihood, honor, and the integrity of
the Muslim community. The Prophet Muhammad reportedly said that “the preferred jihad is a truth spoken in the presence of a tyrant.”

Jihad is not to be undertaken for personal gain. The Qur’anic revelations that apparently date from the Medina period when the faithful were being attacked by Meccans make it clear that:

To those against whom
War is made, permission
Is given (to fight), because
They are wronged;—and verily,
God is Most Powerful
For their aid;

(They are) those who have
Been expelled from their homes
In defiance of right,
(For no cause) except
That they say, “Our Lord
Is God.”

The Qur’an gives permission to fight back under such circumstances, and Islamic Shari’ah law gives detailed limitations on the conduct of war and the treatment of captives, to prevent atrocities.

Muhammad is considered the prototype of the true mujahid, or fighter in the Path of God, one who values the Path of God more than life, wealth, or family. He is thought to have had no desire for worldly power, wealth, or prestige. By fasting and prayer, he continually exerted himself toward the One, in the Greater Jihad. In defending the Medina community of the faithful against the attacking Meccans, he was acting from the purest of motives. It is believed that a true mujahid who dies in defense of the faith goes straight to paradise, for he has already fought the Greater Jihad, killing his ego.

The absolute conviction that characterizes jihad derives from the recognition of the vast disparity between evil and the spiritual ideal, both in oneself and in society. Continual exertion is thought necessary in order to maintain a peaceful equilibrium in the midst of changing circumstances. Traditionalists and radicals have differed in how this exertion should be exercised in society.

In terms of the Lesser Jihad, support can be found in the Qur’an both for a pacifist approach and for active opposition to unbelievers. The Qur’an asserts that believers have the responsibility to defend their own faith as well as to remind unbelievers of the truth of God and of the necessity of moral behavior. In some passages, Muslims are enjoined simply to stand firm against aggression. For example, “Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not be aggressive. Allah does not love the aggressors.” In other passages, the Qur’an suggests active opposition to people who do not believe in the supremacy of the one God:

Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter.
Nor will they cease fighting you
Until they turn you back from your faith
If they can. …
Fight them on
Until there is no more tumult or oppression
And there prevail justice and faith in God.

In addition to varying interpretations of Quranic passages regarding jihad, contemporary use of violence in the name of Islam involves a complex of varying historical, cultural, and political circumstances in different countries. There is as yet no political unity among Muslim states, but growing antagonism toward the West is tending to create a certain political unity in opposition to
pre-emptive use of American military power against Muslim countries in the “war against terror.”

One of the leading radical voices that emerged in the twentieth century was that of the Egyptian scholar and activist Sayyib Qutb (1906–1966). After World War II, he saw most Muslim countries being controlled either by corrupt monarchies or by cruel military dictatorships. He had also visited the United States, but was disgusted by its culture. Devoutly religious, he saw the sex, violence, and selfish greed in Western culture as the headwaters of evil that was spreading around the world. His writings during years of imprisonment by the Egyptian government before they eventually executed him have been pivotal in the thinking of later Islamists. Compared to the ideal example of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, he described Westernization thus:

*Humanity today is living in a large brothel! One has only to glance at its press, films, fashion shows, beauty contests, ballrooms, wine bars, and broadcasting stations! Or observe its mad lust for naked flesh, provocative postures, and sick-suggestive statements in literature, the arts and the mass media! And add to all this, the system of usury which fuels man’s voracity for money and engenders vile methods for its accumulation and investment, in addition to fraud, trickery, and blackmail dressed up in the garb of law.*

Similar thinking later came to the fore in Iran, one of the first Muslim-majority countries in which violence was used in recent times as a political tool to advance the cause of Islam. In predominantly Shi’ite Iran, the Pahlavi shahs had tried to rapidly modernize their country, turning it into a major military and industrial power. In the process, they eroded the authority of the *ulama*, the clerics and expounders of the Shari’ah. A revolutionary leader emerged from this disempowered group, the Ayatollah Khomeini (c.1900–1989), and swept the shah from power in 1979. Khomeini insisted that social transformation should be linked with spiritual reformation, with government
headed by a ruler “who acts as trustee and maintains the institutions and laws of Islam.”

However, he made some drastic changes in the interpretation of Islam in order to justify violent revolutionary behavior. He also attempted to export his revolution to other Muslim countries with Shi’ite populations that could carry on the work. Khomeini’s call for governmental change was not heeded, so radicals resorted to sabotage and terrorism as their most powerful weapons, in what Khomeini described as a great world battle between Islam and the Satanic forces of Western imperialism and Zionism. The radicals’ surprise attacks on civilians tended to turn world opinion against Islam, rather than promoting its ideals. Reformers such as Shirin Ebadi (see Box, p. 420) propose that the government should be founded on Islamic law, but that this law should be interpreted in ways that allow a considerable degree of individual freedom and free expression rather than authoritarianism. In 2009 Iran’s unique blend of theocracy and democracy witnessed unprecedented citizen protests over a contested presidential election in which eighty-five percent of the population had voted. The protests themselves have been interpreted as a sign of the growing freedom and confidence of Iran’s educated citizenry.

Iraq has also seen Islam used as a rallying point for political power. Islam was cast as a political football by both sides in the Gulf War (1990–1991), in which Iraq’s president Saddam Hussein tried to reannex Kuwait, using references to Islam as a means of mass mobilization against what he saw as Western intrusion in the Gulf.

The United States launched massive bombings of Iraq in 2003 in a campaign it said would “shock and awe” the Iraqi regime and liberate the people from the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein, as well as saving the world from what it claimed were Iraq’s massive stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. By contrast, many Muslims around the world perceived the American-led attacks and occupation of the country as an unprovoked attack on innocent Muslim civilians as well as an attempt to control its oil resources. No such weapons of mass destruction were found. Terrorist activity increased in Iraq and elsewhere in protest at the American-led invasion, and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed in the chaotic aftermath of the U.S. intervention, including casualties of Sunni–Shi’a conflicts in the destabilized country. When Saddam Hussein was hanged at the end of 2006, many Muslims regarded him as a martyr for his resistance to American power.

In Afghanistan during the 1980s, the United States supported armed Muslim militants—including Osama bin Laden, the Saudi leader who ran terrorist-training camps in rural Afghanistan—to help them drive out the Soviet Union. When the Russian troops left, Afghanistan collapsed into factional fighting and chaos, from which emerged oppressive control by the Talibān from 1996 to 2001. Theirs was an extreme and exclusivist view of the ideal Muslim state. Originally Islamists trained in a particular school in Kandahar, the ardent Taliban discarded all secular laws and replaced them with their interpretation of Shari’ah. To deter crime, for instance, they organized public spectacles in which the hands of thieves were amputated and adulterers were whipped, contradicting the Prophet’s insistence on compassion and tolerance. They bombed the huge ancient cliff-hewn statues of Buddha at Bamiyan with the understanding that they were idolatrous, and they severely restricted women, keeping them out of the workplace, denying them education, and insisting that they wear head-to-toe burqas. Law professor Azizah Y. al-Hibri analyzed the issue of how the Taliban were interpreting and using Shari’ah:
While there is no central interpretive authority in Islam, an acceptable interpretation must satisfy a minimum number of requirements. For example, the interpretation must be based on the Qur’an and Sunnah. It must be based on knowledge and motivated by Piety. It must also serve (rather than harm) maslaha, the public interest of Muslims in particular and humanity in general. … The Taliban seems to have no such concerns. This is consistent with their rejection of other basic Islamic principles, such as shura (consultation with other Muslims) and bay ah (a system of elective non-authoritarian governance). It is also consistent with their rejection of the Islamic injunction that the pursuit of education is the duty of every Muslim, male and female. Finally, it is consistent with their rejection of the overarching Islamic model of harmonious gender, racial, religious, and general human relations.58

Under military attack by the United States, the Taliban’s political power in Afghanistan was broken. Hundreds of women in the capital city of Kabul shed their burqas publicly, demanding the right to work, education for their daughters, and a voice in politics. While a coalition backed by the United States tries to maintain order, with a constitution attempting to combine the teachings of the Qur’an with democracy, the country is still torn and poverty-stricken. Talibanism has entered neighboring Pakistan, where a Gallup poll in 2011 found that sixty-seven percent of the populace is in favor of “Islamising” the government.59 The world’s most well-known self-styled jihadi, Osama bin Laden, was found and killed by U.S. commandos in 2011 in his villa near the Pakistani capital city.

Bin Laden was an exiled member of the Saudi aristocracy. In his extremist mixture of religion with politics, martyrdom is an heroic cult, the world is strictly divided into good and evil, destruction of property and lives is justified, and the faithful are urged to undertake jihad on a global scale. Bin Laden’s militant organization, Al Qaeda, is thought to be responsible for many acts of terrorism around the globe, including the devastating 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States, which set in motion a sea change in relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims everywhere. Al Qaeda’s agenda is to strike back at the United States for its support for Israel and its intrusive presence in the Arabian peninsula, which bin Laden and others have interpreted as non-Muslim control over Muslim lands. Shortly after the 11 September attacks, for which Al Qaeda claimed responsibility, bin Laden issued a videotaped address that included the following insights into his way of thinking:

What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than eighty years of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated. …

They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. … But when a few more than ten were killed in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Afghanistan and Iraq were bombed and hypocrisy stood behind the head of international infidels: the modern world’s symbol of paganism, America, and its allies.

I tell them that these events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels. May God shield us and you from them.

Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion. The wind of faith is blowing and the wind of change is blowing to remove evil from the Peninsula of Muhammad, peace be upon him.50
Bin Laden’s death was greeted with exuberant celebrations in the United States, for the citizenry had been indelibly imprinted with the horrors of the September 11 attacks by continuous sensationalist media coverage. However, their celebrations were decried as unseemly by many non-Muslim spiritual leaders. The associate editor of the Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, for instance, wrote:

Not only does such a raucous display of pleasure in response to the killing of another disrespect the sacredness of every human life; it also inherently undermines the moral character and worthiness of those responsible for the death itself. If the United States seeks to place itself on a higher moral ground than those who commit immoral acts against our people, we must all conduct ourselves in a way that manifests our empathy and compassion for all of humanity, for every human person, and also manifest our awareness of the tragic distortions in human relations across the globe that still hurl human beings into the horrors of ongoing violence and war.61

Osama bin Laden, like fifteen of the nineteen airplane hijackers of 11 September, had been a citizen of Saudi Arabia. Since 1932, Saudi Arabia has been under the absolute monarchical control of the huge al-Sa’ud family. Friendly to the West and using its oil wealth lavishly, the regime is often criticized for exposing the populace to the corrupting influence of Western culture by allowing Western troops on its soil. Despite the plush modern lifestyles and technologies of the elite, the country is religiously conservative, with its legal system based on Shari’ah, harkening to the ideas of the eighteenth-century legal scholar and reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who urged the discarding of all practices not specifically approved by the Qur’an and Sunnah. Whereas *Wahhabism* has been recently blamed as a source of everything from fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur’an to violent terrorist movements, study of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s voluminous writings shows that he did not use the Qur’an as justification for holy war; rather, he was very careful to explore the historical context of all passages in the Qur’an relating to jihad and then interpret them only in that context, with an emphasis on limiting violence and preserving human lives and dignity. Wahhabism has also been blamed for severe oppression of women, including Saudi Arabia’s insistence that women be covered by a full burqa from head to toe and its ban on women’s driving cars or leaving home unless accompanied by a close male relative. But current scholarship suggests that such restrictions stem from local customs and laws rather than from Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s life and writings, which in fact reflect Muhammad’s own concern for women’s rights. In 2011, the Saudi king announced that women would at last be given the right to vote, and also to run in municipal elections and to help choose candidates, for “The Muslim woman must not be marginalized in opinion or advice.”62

In 2008, Saudi Arabia sponsored an interfaith conference in Mecca to showcase Islam’s message of tolerance and encouragement of peaceful coexistence. Peaceful coexistence, however, is still elusive for Muslims living in Palestine. In the continuing struggle of Palestinians to reclaim a secure homeland in the face of Israeli settlement, various Palestinian movements have developed, often with help from other countries who contribute to the confusion in West Asia. The two major factions are Fatah and Hamas. Fatah was founded in the 1950s to end Israeli control of Palestine. More recently, it has supported a “two-state” solution through a peace process. “Hamas” means “zeal” in Arabic. It was formed in 1987 as the Palestinian branch of
the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization based in Egypt. Its charter calls for the destruction of Israel, and it has supported suicide attacks against Israeli settlements. There is some movement toward reconciliation between the two factions, but around a hardline stance toward Israel.

Turkey, long home to Ataturk’s secular vision, is now engaged in power struggles between secularists, devout Muslims, and hardline Islamists. This conflict leads to paradoxical situations. For instance, women are prohibited from wearing traditional headscarves in universities. Religiously observant women who do not want to give up their headscarves and expose their hair publicly are now resorting to an unusual protest measure: Some students are wearing their headscarves and then jamming wigs over them when they attend classes.

As a result of civil wars such as the devastating internal fighting in Sudan, wars between nations, military attacks led by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, natural disasters, and climate change, millions of Muslims now live as refugees or internally displaced persons. Muslims account for almost half of all refugees and internally displaced persons in the world. The human misery is staggering.

There is increasing tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. Terrorist activities that have killed civilians have brought a backlash of anti-Muslim sentiments, with growing perception of Islam as a religion encouraging violence and fanaticism. The United States’ “war on terrorism” has brought an increase in acts of terrorism and made it more difficult for moderate Muslim leaders to hold their ground against critics within their countries. As Islamophobia grows among non-Muslims, many leading Muslims are trying to explain to them that Islam does not equal violence.

The Qur’an permits the jihad of violence only under very specific conditions. To fight, people must have been deprived of their right to live and support

Because they are involved in conflicts around the world, many Muslims are mourning the loss of their loved ones, becoming refugees, or being attacked or killed. This scene of grief occurred in Falluja, Iraq.
themselves. The action must be undertaken not by individuals but by the collective wisdom of the Muslim community. Jihadis are never allowed to harm women, children, or unarmed civilians. They cannot wilfully destroy property. The tactics of terrorists are therefore not permitted by the Qur’an. In general, relations with people of other religions are to be as tolerant as possible. It is written in the Qur’an:

Do not argue with the followers of the earlier revelations otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing—and say: We believe in that which has been bestowed on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we all surrender ourselves.63

Some people suspect that there has been a deliberate Western policy of portraying political conflicts as religion-based struggles in order to fan fear of a threat to the Western way of life from Islam, thus steering Western electorates to support a “war on terror,” with an underlying agenda of controlling oil-rich lands belonging to Muslims.

Islam for the future

Challenged to explain Islam to its critics, Muslim scholars and intellectuals are meeting at global conferences to formulate unified responses to current issues. There is a tendency toward rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi’as at some levels, with the understanding that their differences are not so much matters of religious doctrine as of historical conflicts over leadership. Religious modernists, Islamists, and secularists are all trying to understand the roots of extremism and to seek new ways of relating to and even shaping the rapidly changing world. They feel that extremism is undermining Islam by contradicting its principles and spreading hatred for the religion.

While media attention is centered on sensational manifestations of Islamism in present-day societies, these deeper currents of thought are forward-looking, exploring how Islam can help to shape a new social order in the world. Professor Asaf Hussain of the University of Leicester, England, points out that the goal of a just society inspires but still eludes Muslim resistance movements:

Today many Islamic fundamentalist movements have declared war on their own people and are trying to transform their states on the model of the First Islamic state. But the conditions of the seventh century do not obtain today. A new model of the Islamic state has to be devised. The dominating civilization of the present day is Western and its models control the Third World, including the Muslim world. Islamic movements have revolted against this but their strategies have not been well thought out. They do not have to dominate Western civilization but create a parallel which excels it. This will be a long, arduous task but the struggle has just begun.64

Mahmoon-al-Rasheed, founder of the Comprehensive Rural Educational, Social, Cultural and Economic Center in Bangladesh, maintains that there is violence within and between nations because people have not developed a sense of duty toward each other and have not recognized how inseparably all people of the earth are related to each other. He proposes that Islamic values are not aimed at creating a political state but rather a harmoniously integrated world society, for:
We cannot begin to realize our full potential until we have achieved a community which knows no limit but that of human society and renders all obedience to a Law common to all.\(^6\)

Omid Safi, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina, speaking on behalf of many contemporary progressive Muslims, expresses their desire to bring about positive social change in the fluid, globally hybrid, postmodern world by supporting social justice, gender equality, religious and ethnic pluralism, and nonviolent resistance. He explains:

*Progressive Muslims perceive themselves as the advocates of human beings all over the world who through no fault of their own live in situations of poverty, pollution, oppression, and marginalization. A prominent concern of progressive Muslims is the suffering and poverty, as well as the full humanity, of these marginalized and oppressed human beings of all backgrounds who are called mustad’ifun in the Qur’anic context. The task of progressives in this context is to give voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, and confront the “powers that be” who disregard the God-given human dignity of the mustad’ifun all over this Earth.\(^6\)*

Dr. Ahmad Kamal Abu’l Majd, a former Minister of Culture in Egypt, looks toward the future:

*I’m glad and proud I’m a Muslim. I carry on my shoulders a scale of values, a code of ethics that I genuinely believe is good for everybody. … I even venture sometimes to say that Islam was not meant to serve the early days of Islam when life was primitive and when social institutions were still stable and working. It was meant to be put in a freezer and to be taken out when it will be really needed. And I believe that time has come. But the challenge is great because not all Muslims are aware of this fact: That the mission of Islam lies not in the past but in the future.\(^6\)*

**Key terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allah</td>
<td>The one God, in Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caliph</td>
<td>In Sunni Islam, the successor to the Prophet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fatwa</td>
<td>A legal opinion issued by an authority according to a particular school of law; often erroneously defined as an edict against someone or something.</td>
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<tr>
<td>hajj</td>
<td>The holy pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hadith</td>
<td>Traditional report about the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijab</td>
<td>The veiling of women for the sake of modesty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>hijrah</td>
<td>Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imam</td>
<td>In Shi’ite Islam, the title for the person carrying the initiatic tradition of the Prophetic Light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>In its original meaning, complete, trusting surrender to God.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamist</td>
<td>A person seeking to establish Islamic states in which the rule of God is supreme.</td>
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<tr>
<td>jihad</td>
<td>The Muslim’s struggle against the inner forces that prevent God-realization and the outer barriers to establishment of the order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>madrasa</td>
<td>Traditional religious school teaching a narrow version of Islam.</td>
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<tr>
<td>muezzin</td>
<td>In Islam, one who calls the people to prayer from a high place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shahadah</td>
<td>The central Muslim expression of faith: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”</td>
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</table>
Shari’ah  The divine law in Islam.
Shi’a  The minority branch of Islam which tells that Muhammad's legitimate successors were 'Ali and a series of Imams; a follower of this branch.
Sufism  The mystical path in Islam.
Sunnah  The behavior of the Prophet Muhammad, used as a model in Islamic law.
Sunni  A follower of the majority branch of Islam which tells that successors to Muhammad are to be chosen by the Muslim community.
sura  A chapter of the Holy Qur'an.
ummah  The Muslim community.
zakat  Spiritual tithing.

Review questions
1. Outline Muhammad’s life story, and describe how his life influenced aspects of Islamic practice and belief.
2. Describe the role of the Qur'an, as well as Hadith and Sunnah in Islam.
3. Explain the Five Pillars of Islam, noting the purpose of each pillar and how each is put into practice.
4. Describe the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam.
5. Describe the practices and beliefs associated with Sufism.
6. Outline the expansion of Islam and the factors that contributed to it.

Discussion questions
1. What are the most important religious themes and people that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have in common?
2. Discuss aspects of Islamic tradition that relate to gender roles within society and the ways these aspects have been interpreted.
3. Describe and discuss issues of current concern for Muslims around the world, and the relationship between Islam and modernity.
4. Discuss the concept of jihad and how it has been interpreted throughout the history of Islam. Do you think that jihad has been oversimplified or stereotyped in the media?
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- Rationalism
- Two Truths
- Islam and the West