CHAPTER 10

ISLAM

“There is no god but God”

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. Glimmers of appreciation for the faith are just beginning to appear outside Islam, partly as sincere Muslims attempt to counteract negative media portrayals of their religion.

The Prophet Muhammad

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, traces its ancestry to the patriarch Abraham. Isma’il (Ishmael) was said to be the son of Abraham and an Egyptian slave, Hagar. When Abraham’s wife, Sarah, also bore him a son (Isaac), Abraham took Isma’il and Hagar to the desert valley of Becca (Mecca) in Arabia to spare them Sarah’s jealousy.

The sacred book of Islam, the Holy Qur’an, received as a series of revelations to Muhammad, relates that Abraham and Ishmael 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. Then into a poor clan of the most powerful of the tribes in the area was born a child named Muhammad (“the praised one”). His father died before he was born, and after the death of his mother and then his grandfather, Muhammad became the ward of his uncle, who put him to work as a shepherd.

Allah (God) is the focus in Islam, the sole authority, not Muhammad. But
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CE</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>Birth of Prophet Muhammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600</td>
<td>Revelation of the Qur’an to Prophet Muhammad begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The hijrah (migration) from Mecca to Medina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prophet Muhammad’s triumphant return to Mecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of Prophet Muhammad; election of Abu Bakr as first caliph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written text of the Qur’an established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Umayyad dynasty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karbala massacre of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, and his relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>European advance of Islam stopped at Battle of Tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Islam reaches its cultural peak under Abbasid caliphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900</td>
<td>al-Hallaj killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Life of al-Ghazali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100</td>
<td>Salah-al-Din recaptures Jerusalem from Crusaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400</td>
<td>Turks conquer Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish Inquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1478</td>
<td>Surrender of Grenada, last foothold of Islam in Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Akbar becomes Mogul emperor in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1556</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1800s-1900s Muslim areas fall under European domination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>1947 Partition of Muslim Pakistan from Hindu India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Oil-rich Muslim states join OPEC and Muslim resurgence begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Muslim terrorists fly aircraft into US buildings; Muslims face counter-attacks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Muhammad's life story is important to Muslims, for his character is considered a model of the teachings in the Qur'an. The stories of Muhammad's life and his sayings are preserved in a vast, not fully authenticated literature called the Hadith, which reports on the Prophet's Sunnah (sayings and actions). When he was a teenager, on a trip to Syria with his uncle, Muhammad was noticed by a Christian monk who identified marks on his body indicating his status as a prophet. As a young man, Muhammad managed caravans for a beautiful, intelligent, and wealthy woman named Khadijah. When she was forty and Muhammad was twenty-five, she 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 were 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) dot
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 the freed slave, Zayd.

After three years, Muhammad was instructed by the revelations to preach publicly. He was ridiculed and stoned by the Qurayshites, the aristocrats of his tribe.
who operated the Ka'bah as a 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 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 in Mecca as a potential threat by the Qurayshites, 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 on its return journey. 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 the Islamic 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. Unable to press their attack, the Meccans were forced to retreat. Rather than continue hostilities, Muhammad negotiated a truce between the two warring cities.

The Qur'anic revelations to Muhammad emphasize the basic religious unity of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, members of the same monotheistic tradition of Abraham. But most of the Jews of Medina refused to accept Islam, because it recognized Jesus and claimed to complete the Torah. In addition, they were politically allied to those who opposed the Prophet. Eventually, their farms were appropriated by increasing numbers of Muslim converts, and some Jews were killed as political opponents. The Qur'an taught that the Jews and Christians had distorted the pure monotheism of Abraham; Muhammad had been sent to restore and supplement the teachings of the apostles and prophets. He was instructed to have the people face Mecca rather than Jerusalem during their prayers.

In 630 CE the Prophet returned triumphant to Mecca with such a large band of followers that the Meccans did not resist. The Ka'bah was purged of its idols, and from that time to the present 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, and his former opponents were reportedly treated leniently.

The Prophet then returned to Medina, which he kept as the spiritual and political center of Islam. From there, campaigns were undertaken to spread the faith. In addition to northern Africa, the Persian states of Yemen, Oman, and Bahrain came into the fold. As the multi-cultural, multi-racial 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 to demonstrate 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. He left no clear instructions as to who should succeed him. 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. 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,”6 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. 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.”7

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.”8 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.

---

**TEACHING STORY**

**The Humility of the Prophet**

The Prophet Muhammad’s followers had such reverence for him that they caught the very water dripping from his arms when he did his ablutions, in order to rub it on themselves as a blessing. But he himself was so humble that he asked for God’s forgiveness at least seventy times a day.

Once the Prophet asked his companions to prepare goat’s meat for the group as they were traveling. One said he would kill the goat; another said he would skin it; another volunteered to cook it. The Prophet said he would gather the wood for the fire. His companions immediately protested: “You are God’s Messenger. We will do everything.” “I know you would,” said the Prophet, “but that would be discrimination. God does not want His servants to behave as if they were superior to their companions.”

When the Prophet was the recognized head of Medina, he borrowed some money from Zaid ibn Sana’a. Several days before the repayment of the loan, Zaid came to the Prophet, grabbed his clothes, and roughly demanded his money, saying, “Your relatives are always late in paying their debts.” Umar, the Prophet’s supporter, voiced his outrage and prepared to manhandle the moneylender. The Prophet merely said to Zaid, “Three days remain for the fulfillment of my obligation.” He reserved his strong words for Umar: “You should have treated us both better. You should have told me to be better at repaying my debts, and you should have told him to be better at demanding payment. Pay him the amount due and give him 40 kilograms extra of dates as compensation for the alarm that you have caused him.”
The Qur’an

The heart of Islam is not the Prophet but the revelations he received. Collectively they are called the Qur’an ("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 hast 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. Translator and commentator Abdullah Yusuf Ali notes that in the mystical early passages there are often three layers: (1) a reference to a particular person or situation; (2) a spiritual lesson; and (3) a deeper mystical significance. He offers interpretation of these three levels in the first two verses of Sura 74 (“O thou wrapped up / [In a mantle]! / Arise and deliver thy warning!”):
As to 1, the Prophet was now past the stage of personal contemplation, lying down or sitting in his mantle; he was now to go forth boldly to deliver his Message and publicly proclaim the Lord ... As to 2, similar stages arise in a minor degree in the life of every good man, for which the Prophet's life is to be a universal pattern. As to 3, the Sufis understand, by the mantle and outward wrappings, the circumstances of our phenomenal existence, which are necessary to our physical comfort up to a certain stage, but we soon outgrow them, and our inner nature should then boldly proclaim itself.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 Allah. 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 J udeo-Christian-Islamic tradition: belief in one God and in our personal moral accountability before God on the Day of Judgment. In the Muslim view, the Qur'an was sent as a final corrective in the continuing monotheistic tradition. Muslims, citing John 14:16, 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 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.\textsuperscript{12}

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 \textit{Shahadah}—"La ilaha ill-Allah Muhammad-un Rasulu-llah" ("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,

\begin{quote}
Your God is One God: \\
There is no god but He, \\
Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
\end{quote}

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 Allah, 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."\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{quote}
"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\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Prophethood and the compass of Islam

Devout Muslims feel that Islam encompasses all religions. Islam honors all prophets as messengers from the one God:
Although Farid Esack is known as one of the world’s most brilliant young Muslim scholars, his life has not been spent only in poring through books and speaking to intellectuals. On the contrary, he grew up as a victim of apartheid in South Africa and was active in the resistance that has led to the liberation of South Africa’s oppressed peoples. Farid remembers running to school in bare feet to avoid frostbite, for often he had no shoes. His family was so poor that they had to beg for food and search through gutters for bits of food. Farid observes:

When you live in poverty and isolation, one of the things you hold on to is religion for your sanity, to keep you going. When you hear people crying in suffering and pain, instead of asking, “Where is God?”, this is God crying out to you, “Why are you allowing this?”

Thus it was not only poverty that drove Farid to risk his life again and again to build resistance to apartheid policies. It was also his deep commitment to Islam. He understands his religion as a mandate for struggling against injustice in society. He explains:

I was strangely and deeply religious as a child, with a deep concern for the suffering which I experienced and witnessed all around me. I dealt with these two impulses by holding on to an indomitable belief that for God to be God, God had to be just and on the side of the marginalized. More curious was a logic, based on a text in the Qur’an, “If you assist Allah then He will assist you and make your feet firm” (47:7). For me this meant that I had to participate in a struggle for freedom and justice and, if I wanted God’s help in this, then I had to assist Him.

Muslims constituted only 1.32 percent of the population of South Africa, and yet in 1984 Farid and three friends founded the Call of Islam as an affiliate of the United Democratic Front, the major liberation movement. The Call of Islam was very active in organizing resistance to apartheid, gender inequality, environmental destruction, and tensions between religions. At last, after years fraught with danger, Farid found himself in a queue of the rural poor, armed with a ballot and a pencil to cast his vote for a freely elected government. He mused:

I thought of the pain our country had endured in its long march to freedom, the lonelines of exile, of detention without trial, the political murders, the dispossession, the sighs of the tired and the exploited factory and farm workers, the months of living on the run like a fugitive, the attacks by police dogs, the clandestine pamphleteering . . . all for a single mark with a cheap little lead pencil!

Earlier, he had said at public meetings,

“Can you imagine that we are the generation responsible for the death of apartheid; that we are going to slay the monster of racial arrogance; that we are going to be the first South Africans in 350 years who are going to live in a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic homeland?” Difficult as it was to sustain this belief at times, we did it.

Farid embodies and wrestles with the tensions between having full faith in one’s own religion and keeping one’s heart open to people of other faiths. During the freedom struggle and later in other struggles against “the madness of humankind in our day and age,” Farid has often found himself working side by side with people of different religions. He is trying to show through intense Muslim scholarship that if a person of another religion is righteous, just, and God-fearing, he or she should be accepted by Muslims as a mu’min (believer), not a kafir (non-believer). In this context, he cites the Qur’anic Sura 8:2–4:

Indeed, the mu’munun [believers] are those whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned; and whose iman [faith, belief] is strengthened whenever His ayat [signs] are conveyed unto them; and who place their trust in their Sustainer. Those who are constant in prayer and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance. It is they who are truly the mu’munun.

Having served as a member of South Africa’s Gender Equality Commission, Farid concludes:

In the Last Judgment, I will not be asked whether I succeeded or not. It is not our task to solve the problems of the world. We will only be asked what we did with the gifts He gave us. In Islam and in the Christian Gospels, it is said that God will ask you on the Day of Judgment, “When I was hungry, why did you not feed Me?”
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. Muhammad, however, received messages meant for all people, all times. The Qur'anic revelations declared him to be the “Seal of the Prophets,” the last and ultimate authority in the continuing prophetic tradition. The prophets are mere humans; 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 Allah. 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.22

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 non-believers and evil-doers 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,

> 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, a major human problem is forgetfulness of 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. For the orthodox, the appropriate stance is a combination of love and fear of God. 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 non-physical 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 worshipped, 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 non-submissive being called Satan. He was originally one of the *jinn*—immaterial 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.”

Hell is the grievous destiny of unrepentant non-believers—those who have rejected faith in and obedience to Allah and His Messenger, who are unjust and who do not forbid evil. Hell also awaits the hypocrites who even after making a covenant with Allah 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.

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. Our thoughts, actions, and moral qualities are turned into our outer reality. 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. Those who say, “Our Lord is God ... shall have all that your souls shall desire. ... A hospitable gift from One Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful!” (Sura 41:30–32). 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 non-believers 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 desires, 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 non-believers will be left there; the others will eventually be lifted to paradise, for God is far more merciful than wrathful.

The Sunni–Shi’a split

The preceding pages describe beliefs of all Muslims, although varying interpretations of these 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

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 Hadith and Sunnah. 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.

The Shari’ah consists of teachings and practices for everything in Muslim life, from how to conduct a war to how to pray. Like the Torah for Jews, the Shari’ah
sets the pattern for all individual actions and theoretically bonds them into a coherent, divinely regulated, peaceful community.

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. For example, the faithful are enjoined to be kind to their parents and kin, children and strangers, to protect orphans and women, to exercise justice and honesty in their relationships and business interactions, to stop killing infants, to manage their wealth carefully, and to avoid adultery and arrogance.

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 men and jurists. For example, a contemporary Muslim faces new ethical questions not specifically addressed in the Qur'an and Hadith, such as whether or not test-tube fertilization is acceptable (some think yes, on condition that the sperm is the father's and the egg the mother's). 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.

**Shi’a**

The Shi’a feel that ‘Ali was the rightful original successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Several weeks before the death of the Prophet Muhammad, 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. If you keep hold of both of them, you will never go astray after me. 28

“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 Isma’ilis and “Sevens,” recognize a different person as the seventh and last Imam, and believe that it is he who is hidden and still living. There must always be an Imam.

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.

Aside from the issue of succession to Muhammad, Sunnis and Shi’a are in general agreement on most issues of faith. The Shi’a follow the same essential practices as Sunnis, but, as discussed in a later section on spiritual practices, add several that express their ardent commitment to re-establishing what they see as the true spirit of Islam in a corrupt, unjust world.

Sufism

In addition to these two main groups within Islam, 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. He reportedly said that every verse of the Qur’an has both an outside and an inside. 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.” 29 Muhammad himself had lived in poverty, reportedly gladly so. Complete trust in and surrender to God became an essential step in the jour-
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 her 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.” Any other motivation is a veil between lover and Beloved. 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 Rumi

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,” 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, most of which traced their spiritual lineage back to Junayd of Baghdad (who died in 910 CE). He taught the need for constant purification, a continual serious examination of one’s motives and actions. He also 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 wrote of the greatness of the Prophet Muhammad, and 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.

Political maneuverings made a possible spiritual revival a threat to authorities back home, and they 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,” al-Hallaj had already died to himself so that nothing remained but the One.

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 skepticism 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:

You do not normally sell two things for one; how can you give up an endless life for a limited number of days? . . . Suppose that death is near and say to yourself, “I shall endure the hardship today; perhaps I shall die tonight,” . . . for 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, three sciences of religion were generally accepted by the orthodoxy: jurisprudence, theology, and mysticism.

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 mysti-
cal 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 profoundness 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 Five Pillars and jihad

While Sufism carries the inner practice of Islam, the outer practice is set forth in the Shari’ah, the straight path of the Divine Law. It specifies patterns for worship (known as 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 (including pork, rodents, predatory animals, certain birds, and improperly slaughtered animals), 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, fourteen hundred 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 Shari'ah is said to have had a transformative effect on Muhammad’s community. Before Muhammad, the people’s highest loyalty was to their tribe. Tribes made war on each other with no restraints. Women were possessions like animals. 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.

A Muslim must do his or her best to fulfill the Five Pillars because they are considered God’s commandments.

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.” 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.38

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. Five times a day, the faithful are to perform ritual ablutions with water (or sand or dirt if necessary), 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 in separate groups, with the women in rows behind the men, to avoid sexually distracting the men. There may be an imam, or prayer-leader, but no priest stands between the worshipper and Allah. On Friday noon, there is usually a special prayer service in the mosque, but Muslims observe no Sabbath day. Remembrance of God is an everyday obligation; invoking the Name of Allah continually polishes the rust from the heart.

Repeating the prayers is thought to strengthen one’s belief in God’s existence
Trained as a doctor of pharmacy, Khaled aly Khaled of Egypt did not appreciate his Muslim heritage when he was a child. He explains that his faith grew slowly as he became aware of the scientific accuracy and literary genius of the Qur’an.

“For a very long time in Egypt, we had the idea that it is better for you not to stick to a religion. If you stuck to a religion, people looked at you as just a fool. They thought there is a correlation between the success in the real life and the religion. If you have success in the real world, you didn’t have to do these things that were religious. If you pray and fast and talk about Qur’an, the people start to think that you are not having any success.

“Ten years ago I could not even read Qur’an. So I started from the very end, very far from religion, but I am getting back to it. For me, maybe the most important thing is scientific interpretation of the Qur’an. I can just believe what I can see, what I can feel, and just try to make interpretation of what I can collect from data. I started to read about the planets and their movement, from the scientific point of view. It is hard to believe this kind of things come just from blind nature. But a Big Mind behind this system? I could not believe that. That’s against the science. But it cannot come as an accident. If you change one part out of one hundred million parts, the whole universe will collapse. So you cannot be accurate unless you have some mind or some knowledge to control the whole thing.

“Now I’m sure that someone is behind the universe, is creating it, is creating me. You cannot feel the miracle of the universe unless you work in science. The human body cannot come from a primary cell reacting to another primary cell to create a creature from two cells and construct the body. It is beyond probability. Some supreme power created everything.

“Some of the statements in the Qur’an had no scientific verification at that time, fourteen hundred years ago, but now they have meaning. For example, ‘We have created this universe and we have made it expanding.’ ‘We have made the earth look like an egg.’ Such statements cannot come from just an average person living fourteen hundred years ago. Among ancient Egyptians, ancient Syrians, we cannot find this information. I started to believe that someone was giving the knowledge to Muhammad. I’m not a very good believer—don’t ask me to believe just because there is a book. But this information cannot come from any source except One Source.

“As for the language of the Qur’an, scholars who speak Arabic have tried to write just one statement similar to this book in beauty. They could not. One computer scientist did a computer analysis of the Qur’an. He found that the number of chapters, the number of statements, and the number of times each letter is used are all multiples of nineteen (which is the number of angels in the Hellfire). Then he tried to see if he could write a book about any subject, using multiple numbers of any figure. No one could do it. The beauty of the Qur’an is pure, supreme.

“If you compare the speech of Muhammad to the Qur’an, there is a big difference in beauty. He himself cannot make even one statement like that. He cannot write, he doesn’t have knowledge, he just was taking care for the sheep. From this, I started to believe that there is a God.”
and goodness and to carry this belief into the depths of the heart and 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 in the believer the innate sense of higher morality
and higher aspirations. The words of praise and the bowing express continual
gratefulness and submission to the One. At the end, one turns to the two
guardian angels on one's shoulders to say the traditional Muslim greeting—
"Assalamu Alaykum" ("Peace be on you")—and another phrase adding the bless-
ing, “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.”

Zakat

The third pillar is zakat, or spiritual tithing and almsgiving. 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 puri-
ifies 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.”

In addition to zakat, the Shi'a are obligated to give one-fifth of their disposable
income to the Imam. Because the Imam is now hidden, half of this now goes to
the deputy of the Imam to be used however he thinks appropriate; the other half
goes to descendants of the Prophet to spare them the humiliation of poverty.
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 or sick or 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 expected to allow the body to burn up impurities and provide one with "a Transparent Soul to transcend, a Clear Mind to think and a Light Body to move and act." Many people feel that they are spiritually more sensitive and physically more healthy during Ramadan fasting, and they look forward eagerly to this period each year. It is believed that control of the body's desires also builds the mastery needed to control the lower emotions, such as anger and jealousy.

Hajj

The fifth pillar is **hajj**, the pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who can possibly 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 Allah.

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 he was allowed to substitute a ram 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...
The pilgrimage to Mecca.

symbolic acts at the holy well of Zam-Zam, the spring that God is said to have provided for Hagar when she and Ishmael were left alone in the desert.

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. During the month of the pilgrimage, over two million pilgrims converge upon Mecca. 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 still in recent years hundreds of hajjis have died in stampedes and fires. To lessen the danger of cooking fires, the government has made arrangements for 10,000 fireproof air-conditioned tents and 600 trucks selling sealed fast-food meals.

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.

Jihad

In addition to these Five Pillars of Islam, there is another important injunction: jihad. Commonly mistranslated as “holy war,” it means “striving”. The Greater Jihad, Muhammad is reported to have said, is the struggle against the 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.

On the external level, the Lesser Jihad is exerting 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 (They are) those who have
War is made, permission Been expelled from their homes
Is given (to fight), because In defiance of right,
They are wronged;— and verily, (For no cause) except
God is Most Powerful That they say, “Our Lord
For their aid; Is God.”

The Qur’an gives permission to fight back under such circumstances, but also gives detailed limitations on the conduct of war and the treatment of captives, to prevent atrocities.
Muhammad is 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, 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.44

The ultimate goal and meaning of Islam, and of jihad, is peace through devoted surrender to God. A peaceful society is like paradise. Sri Lankan Sufi Shaykh M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen observes:

If one knows the true meaning of Islam, there will be no wars. All that will be heard are the sounds of prayer and the greetings of peace. Only the resonance of God will be heard. That is the ocean of Islam. That is unity. That is our wealth and our true weapon. Not the sword in your hand.45

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. Non-Muslims have the impression that it was spread by the sword, but this was not typically the case. The Qur’an forbids coercion in religion, recommend-
ing 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, 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 non-violent takeover of Mecca occurred only two years before he died. It was under his successors that Islam spread through what is commonly known today as the Middle East 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 elegant 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 brilliant Byzantine Empire. Another wave of Islamization 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 a hundred years after

Only one hundred years after Muhammad’s death, Islam had spread around the Mediterranean. Its diffusion continued for centuries and the numbers of converts are still increasing, making Islam the fastest growing religion today. Of areas previously converted to Islam, all remain Muslim except Spain, Greece and the Mediterranean islands.
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. 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 Muslim 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.46

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 bloodsheder,” 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 cap-
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, a famous 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, Muslims built in 972 CE a great university and mosque, Al-Azhar, which still plays an important role in Muslim scholarship.

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 was 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, the sole 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 endowments 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. Cordoba, the capital, had seven hundred mosques, seventy libraries, three hundred public baths, and paved streets. Europe, by contrast, was in its Dark Ages; Paris and London were only mazes of muddy alleys.

Tunisia and Egypt comprised a third center of Islamic power: the Shi’ite Fatimid imamate (so named because they claimed to be descendants of Muhammad’s daughter Fatima). Under the deranged 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 a month-long siege in 1099. When the small Fatimid garrison surrendered, the crusaders slaughtered the inhabitants of the holy city. Eyewitnesses recount the beheading of seventy thousand captives at the el-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 thirteenth century, 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. It is noteworthy that 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 Muslims destroyed many 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. “The heart of a mystic is a blazing furnace of love which burns and destroys everything that comes into it because no fire is stronger than the fire of love,” declared Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti.

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 returned.

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 end the enmity between the two faiths. In 1947, West and East Pakistan (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. Millions lost their lives trying to cross the borders, and the strife between the two faiths continues. 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.
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. About ninety percent of the people are now Muslim, but despite recent violence between Hindus and Muslims the government refuses to establish Islam as the state religion. In 1989, then-President Suharto stated: “We want each and all religions existing and developing in our country to achieve progress in an atmosphere of unity and mutual respect.” 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-worshipper, an anti-Christ, the Prince of Darkness. Islam was falsely portrayed as a religion of many deities, in which Muhammad himself was worshipped as a god (thus the inaccurate label “Muhammadanism”). Europeans watched in horror as the Holy Lands became Muslim and the “infidel” advanced into Spain. 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. Western cartoonists, for instance, have inevitably drawn Muslims as wild-eyed radicals dressed in desert robes and brandishing scimitars. Annemarie Schimmel, Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture, Harvard University, explains:

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.\textsuperscript{50}

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.
\begin{flushright}
Jalal al-Din Rumi\textsuperscript{51}
\end{flushright}

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 five hundred years. Some Muslims today feel that spiritual laxness was the
primary reason that some of the previously glorious civilizations became impov-
erished Third World countries. Another theory is that Muslim culture was no
longer dynamic. As it rigidified and stagnated, it was overwhelmed by cultures
both less civilized than itself (the Monguls) and more civilized (the Europeans,
who were becoming major world powers on the strength of their industrializa-
tion and colonizing navies).

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 had 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 had replaced the Shari’ah in social organization. But yet they were
not totally Westernized, and they resumed local rule with little training for
twentieth-century self-government and participation in a world economy domi-
nated by industrial nations.

Societies that had been structured along traditional lines fragmented from the
mid-nineteenth century onward, as wide-ranging programs of reforms and mod-
ernization 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 the midst of the Middle East. After long and terrible
persecution in many countries, Jewish Zionists sought resettlement in what 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 trans-
planted 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.
Islam in the United States

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. The Christianity espoused by the dominant white population was interpreted as part of the pattern of oppression, and 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, eventually called the Moorish Science Temple of America, 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. The Holy Prophet Noble Drew Ali declared that it was his “Divine Mission” to “uplift fallen humanity.”

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. By the end of the twentieth century, the Ahmadiyyah Movement had established branches in thirty-eight cities in the United States as part of its global family of ten million members, complete with social service programs.

Other movements had a strong nation-building character. In particular, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, who proclaimed himself a messenger of Allah, 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 non-racism. However, politicization of Islamic identity is probably not the main aspect of the growth of Islam. Many American Muslims embrace their religion as a bulwark of discipline and faith against the degradations of materialism. The Nation of Islam, for instance, has played a strong role in combating violence and drug abuse in some inner cities, and members are encouraged to observe a disciplined “December Fast” in contrast to the commercial frenzy of the Christmas season.
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 head scarves, 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.

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; 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 social ideal has perhaps never been fully realized anywhere, but it continues to inspire committed Muslims today as the best defense against social decadence and, perhaps, 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**.

In the past few centuries, modern industrial societies separated religion from politics. Social, political, and economic issues have been 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. By contrast, a re-emerging ideal among contemporary Muslim social reformers is that, as Professor Muhammad Mashuq ibn Ally explains:

The human being, the servant, is the trustee of creation under the sovereignty of God, capable of transforming it within the framework of the divine will. Humankind’s obedience to, and fulfillment of, the divine command results in happiness and thus unites worldly and cosmic justice. This visionary paradigm in the unity of religious and cultural consciousness enables the assembly of a formidable force to spearhead a new world order, where the consensus is salam—peace.52

**Tradition and modern life**

The resurgence of Islam 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. For example, Egypt has made it illegal for its Muslim citizens to drink alcoholic beverages in public. In Saudi Arabia, morality squads actively enforce the obligatory prayers, and women are not allowed to leave home unless they are accompanied by a close male relative. In Iran, 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, despite a national constitution that prohibits the adoption of any religion by the state, 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 begun covering their bodies except for hands, face, and feet, as they have 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 view them as persons, not as sex objects. Others feel that men are simply treating women as slaves.

In Afghanistan, veiling of women was part of a larger pattern of extreme oppression. Under five years of Taliban restrictions women had to wear head-to-toe burqas. Military removal of the Taliban from the capital of Kabul quickly brought a shedding of burqas by hundreds of women, who came out publicly to demand the right to work, education for their daughters, and a voice in politics. The tenacious Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan has long
been fighting against the anti-women regimes of both the Taliban and other ruling factions and has maintained a website detailing the raping, killing, and kidnapping of women by militia members, as well as attacking religious fanaticism and male oppression.

Under less oppressive circumstances in some largely Muslim countries, such as Egypt, it is the possibility of employment that motivates women to adopt **hijab** (veiling for the sake of modesty). 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. Not only in Iran but internationally, concludes Professor Anouar Majid, “the scope of the Islamic feminist movement is so large and thoroughly revolutionary that it may well be one of the best platforms from which to resist the effects of global capitalism and contribute to a rich, egalitarian polycentric world.”

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; to attempt to restore its original form designed for Muhammad's time or any other form from another period is to deny the usefulness of its flexibility. Some 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 the 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, unfettered by centuries of historical androcentric reading and Arabo-Islamic cultural predilections, 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]. ... In the area of gender, 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. A comprehensive just social order not only emphasizes fair treatment of women, but also includes women as agents, responsible for contributing to all matters of relevance to human society.”
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 of Muhammad or were not specifically addressed by the Qur’an or Hadith. Artificial birth control methods, for example, were not available then. However, infanticide and abortion were 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 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 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 Nasr

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 almost 1,200 million followers. New mosques are going up everywhere, including one thousand new mosques each year in Turkey alone, and a grand Islamic Cultural Center in the heart of Manhattan. Muslims who constitute a minority in their countries are beginning to assert their rights to practice their religion. They no longer feel they have to be secretive about praying five times a day or apologetic about leaving work to attend Friday congregational prayer at noon. 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 Iqra, 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.”

A third sign of Muslim resurgence is the increasing attention being given to developing educational systems modeled on Islamic thought. Islam is not antiscientific 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 full-
ness of human potential. Western education has omitted the spiritual aspects of life, so Muslims consider it incomplete and imbalanced. The 1977 First World Conference on Muslim Education defined the goals of education thus:

Education should aim at the balanced growth of the total personality of Man through the training of Man’s spirit, intellect, his rational self, feelings and bodily senses. Education should cater therefore for the growth of Man in all its aspects: spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific, linguistic, both individually and collectively and motivate all aspects toward goodness and the attainment of perfection. The ultimate aim of Muslim education lies in the realisation of complete submission to Allah on the level of the individual, the community and humanity at large.57

Islam in politics

In addition to return to Shari‘ah, numerical growth, and Muslim-based education, governments are becoming Islamicized. There are more frequent references to Islam and Qur’anic statements by political leaders. Some use it 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 tied to the West. However, in contemporary nationalistic struggles, Muslims have often been the losers, to such an extent that some eighty percent of the world’s huge refugee population is Muslim. There is as yet no political unity among Muslim states, despite appeals from some Muslims that they should unite in order to advance the Islamization of society.

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. Once in power, however, the ulama had no clear program for reorganizing society according to Muslim principles. Shari‘ah has never specified a single political or economic system as best. Khomeini made some drastic changes in 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. He conducted a war against “atheist” Iraq (where the fifty percent of citizens who are Shi‘a are ruled by the forty-five percent who are Sunni), denounced predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia for its ties to the West, and inspired some Lebanese Shi‘a to see their political struggle against Christians and Jews as part of a great world battle between Islam and the satanic forces of Western imperialism and Zionism. He issued a legal opinion that Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie could be sentenced to death under Islamic law, because his novel, The Satanic Verses, seemed to defame the Prophet and his wives. Many people died in resultant riots over the still-controversial book.

Khomeini’s call for governmental change was not heeded, so radicals resorted to sabotage and terrorism as their most powerful weapons. Their surprise attacks on civilians tended to turn world opinion against Islam, rather than promoting its
ideals. More moderate leadership is now in power in Iran. Islamist reformers 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.

Iraq is another Muslim nation that has used Islam as a rallying point for political power. When Saddam Hussein of Iraq tried to annex Kuwait, Islam was cast as a political football by both sides in the Gulf War. Hussein, an Arab nationalist, resorted to Islam as a means of mass mobilization against what he saw as a foreign Western intrusion in the Gulf. Even after the Gulf War, years of economic sanctions by the United Nations against Iraq over continuing suspicion of its military intentions have created such hardships for the populace that the Iraqis refer to the sanctions as a means of genocide.

In the five years of Taliban control over most of Afghanistan, all secular laws were discarded; the Sunni Shari’ah was law. The orthodox Sunni Taliban Islamists claimed to be trying to create what they regarded as a pure Muslim state. In accordance with their interpretation of Shari’ah, the Taliban government organized public spectacles to deter crime by amputating the hands of thieves and whipping adulterers.

The Taliban government provoked an anguished international protest when it destroyed huge ancient cliff-hewn statues of the Buddha on the grounds that they were idolatrous. This protest came from within as well as from outside Islam. Law professor Azizah Y. al-Hibri asserted that this action by the Taliban violated central principles of Islam. For instance:

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.

For centuries, Islam has preserved and even maintained all prior cultural expressions. . . . [To destroy the Bamiyan statues, which have been protected under Muslim rule for fourteen centuries] is to consider oneself to be a better Muslim than all of one’s predecessors. That is truly hubris and is contrary to the fundamental Islamic principles of humility, tolerance, freedom of thought, consultative democracy, and preservation of public maslaha.58

Despite their background in a form of Islamic purism and their success at bringing a certain orderliness into Afghani society, the Taliban—as well as other factions within Afghanistan—have been accused of brutalities that are in direct opposition to the instructions of the Qur’an regarding humane treatment of political opponents even during armed conflict. At training camps in Afghanistan, militants from many Muslim countries were taught to mix religion and politics.
The best known of these militant groups, Al Qaeda, under the leadership of Saudi Arabian exile Osama bin Laden, is reportedly responsible for many acts of global terrorism, including the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States and perhaps also chemical terrorism. Bin Laden's agenda was to strike back at the United States for its support for Israel and its intrusive presence in the Arabian peninsula, which he and others interpreted as non-Muslim control over Muslim lands. He has stirred up strong sentiments, which threaten to divide the world into Muslims and non-Muslims. But there are efforts to avoid reversion to this medieval dichotomy, in which both are calling each other "infidels," and to deal with the underlying situations as political rather than religious. Anwar Ibrahim, for instance, former deputy prime minister of Malaysia, asserts:

One wonders how, in the 21st century, the Muslim world could have produced a Bin Laden. In the centuries when Islam created civilizations, men of wealth created pious foundations supporting universities and hospitals. Princes competed with one another to patronize scientists, philosophers and men of letters. But Bin Laden uses his personal fortune to sponsor terror and murder, not learning or creativity, and to wreak destruction rather than promote creation. Osama bin Laden and his protégés are the children of desperation; they come from countries where political struggle through peaceful means is futile.

Muslim intellectuals and elites carry the enormous moral responsibility of stamping out terrorism in their midst, unless they want Islam to be demonized everywhere because of the outrageous acts of a small band of misguided faithfuls.

There have indeed been hate crimes against Muslims as a result of a renewed idea among non-Muslims that Islam breeds violence and fanaticism. But, alongside this reaction, there are also attempts at deeper understanding of the complex factors that support terrorism. John Esposito, American Professor of Religion and International Affairs and Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, writes:

The fallout has again been a tendency to equate violence with Islam, to fail to distinguish between illegitimate use of religion by individuals and the faith and practice of the majority of the world's Muslims who, like their fellow believers in other religious traditions, believe in a religion of peace.

The specter of attacks by terrorists motivated by ethnic, religious, or ideological beliefs and grievances is real. The challenge today, as in the past, is to avoid the easy answers yielded by stereotyping or the projection of a monolithic threat, to distinguish between the beliefs of the majority (whether they be Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, Christians and Jews, Arabs and Israelis, Tamils and Buddhists) and a minority of extremists who justify their aggression and violence in the name of religion, ethnicity, or political ideology. It is equally important to distinguish between the aspirations and demands of legitimate political opposition groups and those of extremist groups.

If we are to understand and respond to the challenge of political Islam, its diverse manifestations must be seen within the multiplicity of intellectual and political contexts in which it occurs. While the threats of extremism and violence must be countered forcefully and effectively, the long-term relations of the West with
the Muslim world—like the legitimacy of governments within the Muslim world—will hinge on its response to the emergence of new social and political forces and its respect for their legitimate aspirations for greater political participation, social justice, and human rights.60

Islam for the future

An unusual side-effect of the negative publicity about Muslim militancy has been a widespread attempt by moderate Muslims to share positive information about their faith. Interest has grown rapidly: Muslim speakers are now in great demand by non-Muslim communities who want to understand and appreciate Islam, rather than remain ignorant about it. Jews are surprised to discover how closely it parallels their own faith; Christians are gradually undoing centuries of sensationalist misinformation about Islam bred by fear.

Until recently, Muslims tended to point to their glorious past as proof of the value of their tradition. But the newest thought is forward-looking, exploring how Islam can help to shape a new social order in the world. At present, Muslim resistance movements are trying to tear down existing social structures in many parts of the world in order to replace them with something presumably better. 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:

In the Qur’an all Muslims are part of the Ummah (community of Islam) because of their belief in one Allah but the social reality prevailing in the Muslim world divides the Ummah on the basis of class, ethnicity, nationality and even sect. . . . Islamic fundamentalists have been very critical of traditional Islamic thought and theology that created an Iman (faith) bereft of Amal (action), so the strategy of Islamic resistance has been to deconstruct the traditional and colonial structures that dominated Muslim cultures and created pseudo Islamic societies. The instrument of social change is jihad (struggle). . . .

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.61

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.62
Dr. Ahmad Kamal Abu'l Majd, an ex-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.63

Suggested reading


Pinault, David, The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992. Sensitive discussions of Shi‘ite interpretations of Muslim history and how these inform communal life and action.

Rashid, Ahmed, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. A Pakistani journalist chronicles the Taliban’s rise to power, including global politics and economics as well as religion.


Webb, Gisela, Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000. Articles revealing the depth of feminist scholarship within Islam, particularly with reference to the ideal of social justice as seen from the point of view of women of faith.