



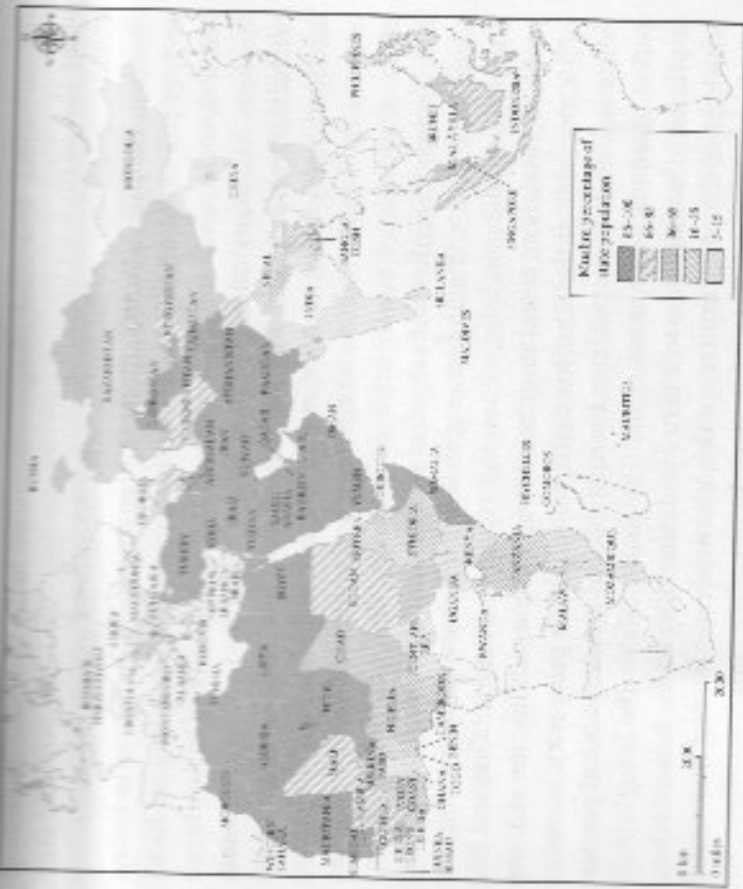
# Muhammad and the Quran: Messenger and Message

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate; praise belongs to God, the Lord of the Worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate; Master of the Day of Judgment, You do we worship and You do we call on for help; guide us on the Straight Path, the path of those whom You have blessed, not of those who earn your anger nor those who go astray.

(Quran 1:1-7)

Five times each day, hundreds of millions of Muslims face Mecca to pray. They are part of an Islamic community that spans the globe, numbers perhaps 1.6 billion adherents, and continues to spread its message successfully throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. The fifty-seven **Muslim** countries extend from Senegal to Indonesia, but the message of Islam and significant Muslim populations can be found in such diverse environments as the former Soviet republics, China, India, England, and the United States. Islam, the second largest of the world's religions, is indeed a world presence and force. If much of the Western world had missed that fact, events in the decades since the Iranian revolution have rectified this oversight. However, Muslim politics, from the Iranian revolution to the 9/11 attacks and subsequent terrorist attacks in the West and in Muslim countries, have often obscured or, at the very least, raised questions about the faith of Islam and its relationship to violence and terrorism.

Islam stands in a long line of Semitic, prophetic religious traditions that share an uncompromising monotheism and belief in God's revelation, His prophets, ethical responsibility and accountability, and the Day



The Muslim world.

of judgment. Indeed, Muslims, like Christians and Jews, are the Children of Abraham, because all trace their communities back to him: Islam's historic religious and political relationship to Christendom and Judaism has remained strong throughout history. This interaction has been the source of mutual benefit and borrowing as well as misunderstanding and conflict.

Although the followers of Islam belong to a single community of believers, there are two major historic divisions: **Sunni** and **Shii**. Sunni Muslims constitute 85 percent of the world's Muslims; Shii about 15 percent. Although this volume focuses on their common faith and belief, attention will also be given to differences in Muslim belief and practice. For although, as we shall see, all Muslims enjoy a unity of faith in **Allah**, the **Quran**, and the teachings of Muhammad, the interpretations and applications of Islam have varied in different cultural contexts and eras. Despite this recognition of diversity, the focus of this volume is the core of beliefs, practices, and institutions that unite and are integral to Muslim life, whatever the differences might be.

## MUHAMMAD AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

The Near East spawned and nurtured a rich variety of religious traditions: ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. However, given the nature of tribal society in seventh-century Arabia and the presence of the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian (Sasanid) empires as buffer states of the Arabian Peninsula, the rise of a new religious movement and the inauguration of a new stage in world history would have seemed unthinkable. Yet, this occurred with the revelation of the Quran and under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic religion and the activity of the Muslim community produced a new empire and a rich civilization that came to dominate much of Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Because Islam developed in central Arabia, its religious and social milieu provides the context for Muhammad's reformist message and mission.

### Arabia

Arabian religion and society reflected the tribal realities of the Peninsula. Arabia's 1 million square miles (nearly one third the size of the United States or Europe) were dominated by desert and steppe areas. Bedouin tribes pursuing a pastoral and nomadic lifestyle traveled from one area to another, seeking water and pasture for their flocks of sheep and camels. The landscape was dotted with oasis towns and cities. Among the

more prominent was Mecca, a center of trade and commerce, and Yathrib (**Medina**), an important agricultural settlement. The principal sources of livelihood were herding, agriculture, trade, and raiding. Intertribal warfare was a long-established activity governed by clear guidelines and rules. For example, raiding was illegal during the four sacred months of pilgrimage. Its object was to capture livestock from enemy Bedouin tribes with a minimum of casualties. Its ultimate goal was to weaken and eventually absorb other tribes by reducing them to a dependent or "client" status.

Whether nomadic or sedentary, the peoples of Arabia lived in a Bedouin tribal society and culture. Social organization and identity were rooted in membership in an extended family. A grouping of several related families comprised a clan. A cluster of several clans constituted a tribe. Tribes were led by a chief (*shaykh*) who was selected by a consensus of his peers—that is, the heads of leading clans or families. These tribal elders formed an advisory council within which the tribal chief exercised his leadership and authority as the first among equals. Muhammad belonged to the Banu Hashim (sons of Hashim), a lesser clan of the powerful Quraysh tribe that dominated Meccan society.

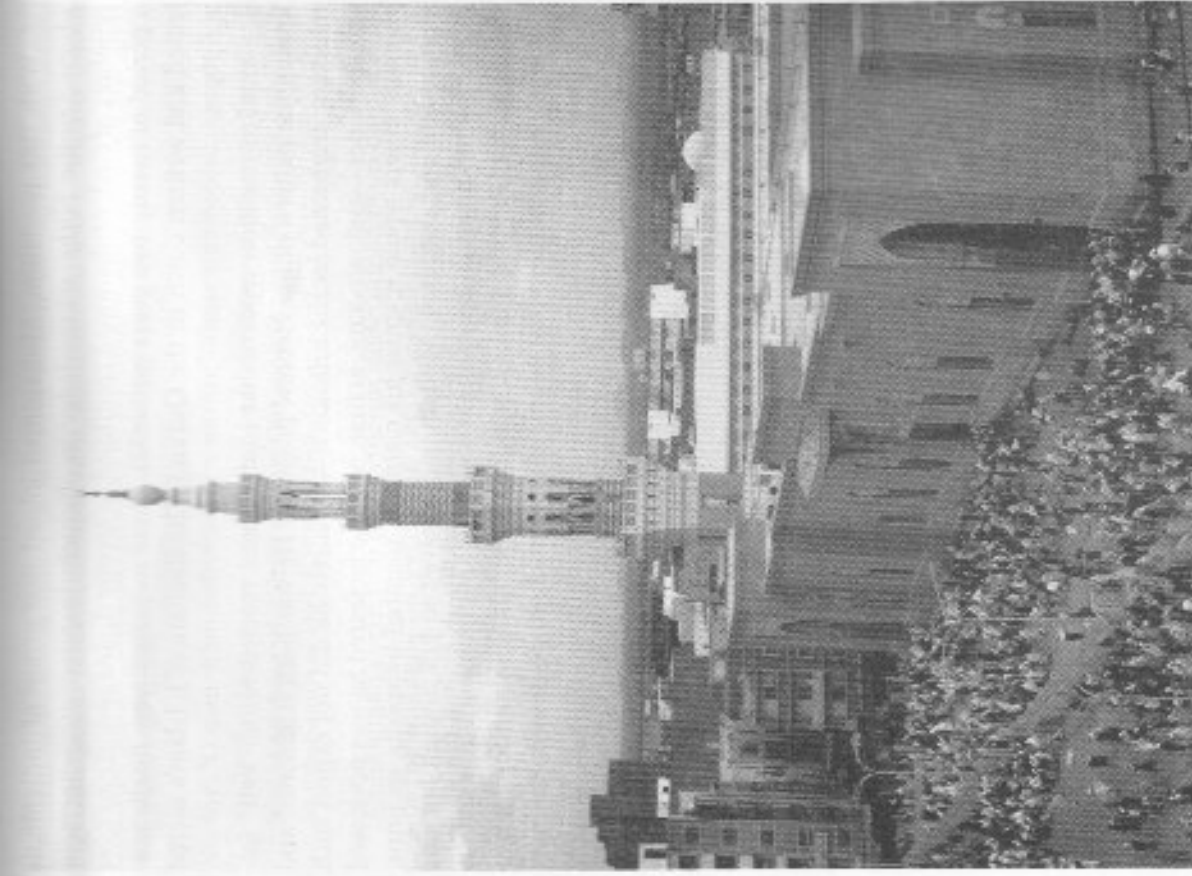
The Arabs placed great emphasis on tribal ties, group loyalty, or solidarity as the source of power for a clan or tribe. The celebrated rugged individualism of the Bedouin Arab ethos was counterbalanced by subordination to tribal authority and tribal customs, the unwritten oral law of society. Tribal affiliation and law were the basis not only for identity but also for protection. The threat of family or group vendetta, the law of retaliation, was of vital importance in a society lacking a central political authority or law.

The religion of Arabia reflected its tribal nature and social structure. Gods and goddesses served as protectors of individual tribes, and their spirits were associated with sacred objects—trees, stones, springs, and wells. Local tribal deities were feared and respected rather than loved, the objects of cultic rituals (sacrifice, pilgrimage, prayer) and of supplication and propitiation celebrated at local shrines. Mecca possessed a central shrine of the gods, the Kaba, a cube-shaped building that housed the 360 idols of tribal patron deities and was the site of a great annual pilgrimage and fair. These deities were primary religious actors and objects of worship, but beyond this tribal polytheism was a shared belief in Allah (God). Allah, the supreme high god, was the creator and sustainer of life but remote from everyday concerns and thus not the object of cult or ritual. Associated with Allah were three goddesses who were the daughters of Allah: al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza.

Muhammad Ibn Abdallah (the son of Abd Allah) was born in 570 C.E. Tradition tells us that he was orphaned at a young age. His father was a trader who died before Muhammad was born; his mother, Amina, died when he was only six years old. As a young man, Muhammad was employed in Mecca's thriving caravan trade. The city was at the crossroads of trade routes between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Central Arabia was emerging as a major commercial power, sitting astride important trade routes that extended from Africa across the Middle East to China and Malaysia. Muhammad became a steward or business manager for the caravans of a wealthy widow, **Khadija**, whom he subsequently married. Tradition tells us that at the time, Muhammad was twenty-five years old and Khadija was forty. During their fifteen years of marriage, they enjoyed a very close relationship and had three sons (who died in infancy) and four daughters. The most famous of Muhammad's surviving children was Fatima, who would marry **Ali**, the revered fourth **caliph** of Sunni Islam and the first legitimate **imam** (leader) of Shii Islam.

Mecca was a prosperous center of trade and commerce. Yet it was a society in which traditional tribal ways were strained by Mecca's transition from a semi-Bedouin to a commercial, urban society. This process was accompanied by serious economic and social cleavages. Muhammad, who had become a successful member of Meccan society, was apparently profoundly affected by these changes. He enjoyed great respect for his judgment and trustworthiness, as was reflected by his nickname al-Amin, the trusted one. This rectitude was complemented by a reflective nature that led him to retreat regularly to a cave on Mt. Hira, a few miles north of Mecca. Here, in long periods of solitude, he contemplated his life and the ills of his society, seeking greater meaning and insight. Here, at the age of forty during the month of **Ramadan**, Muhammad the caravan leader became Muhammad the messenger of God. On the night Muslims call "The **Night of Power** and Excellence," he received the first of many revelations from God. A heavenly intermediary, later identified by tradition as the angel Gabriel, commanded, "Recite." Muhammad responded that he had nothing to recite. Twice the angel repeated the command, and each time a frightened and bewildered Muhammad pleaded that he did not know what to say. Finally, the words came to him:

Recite in the name of your Lord who has created, Created man out of a germ-cell. Recite for your Lord is the Most Generous One Who has taught by the pen, Taught man what he did not know! (Quran, 96:1-5)



Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, Saudi Arabia, the first mosque in Islam, originally built by the Prophet Muhammad and the second-most sacred site in Islam.



With this revelation, Muhammad joined that group of individuals whom Semitic faiths acknowledge as divinely inspired messengers or prophets of God. Muhammad continued to receive divine revelations over a period of twenty-two years (610-632). These messages were finally collected and written down in the Quran ("The Recitation"), Islam's sacred scripture.

Muslim tradition reports that Muhammad reacted to his "call" following the pattern of the Hebrew prophets. He was both frightened and reluctant: frightened by the unknown—for surely he did not expect such an experience—and reluctant, at first, because he feared he was possessed and that others would dismiss his claims as inspired by spirits, or jinns. Despondent and confused, Muhammad resolved to kill himself but was stopped when he again heard the voice say, "O Muhammad! You are the messenger of God and I am Gabriel." Khadija, his wife, reinforced this message, reassuring him that he was neither mad nor possessed; the messenger was from God and not a demon. Interestingly, according to Muslim tradition a Christian played an important role as well. One of those to whom Khadija and Muhammad turned for advice was her Christian cousin, Waraqa ibn Qusayy. When he heard of Muhammad's experience, Waraqa reassured him:

Surely, by Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, thou art the prophet of this people. There hath come unto thee the greatest Namus (angel or Gabriel) who came unto Moses. Like the Hebrew prophets, Thou wilt be called a liar, and they will use thee despitefully and cast thee out; and fight against thee.<sup>7</sup>

For just such reasons, Muhammad, like many of the prophets before him, was initially reluctant to preach God's message. His fears were well founded.

The first ten years of Muhammad's preaching were difficult, marked by Meccan resistance and rejection. Although there was a trickle of converts, opposition to Muhammad was formidable. For the powerful and prosperous Meccan oligarchy, the monotheistic message of this would-be reformer, with its condemnation of Mecca's socioeconomic inequities, constituted a direct challenge not only to traditional polytheistic religion but also to the power and prestige of the establishment, threatening their economic, social, and political interests. The Prophet denounced false contracts, usury, and the neglect and exploitation of orphans and widows. He defended the rights of the poor and the oppressed, asserting that the rich had an obligation to the poor and dispossessed. This sense of social commitment and responsibility was institutionalized in

the form of religious tithes or taxes on wealth and agricultural lands. Like Amos and Jeremiah before him, Muhammad was a "warner" from God who admonished his hearers to repent and obey God, for the final judgment was near:

Say: "O men, I am only for you a warner." Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness—theirs shall be forgiveness and generous provision. And those who strive against Our signs to avoid them—they shall be inhabitants of Hell. (Quran 22:49-50)

Muhammad's rejection of polytheism undermined the religious prestige of the Meccans (in particular, the Umayyad clan) as keepers of the Kaba, the religious shrine that housed the tribal idols. It threatened the considerable revenues that accrued from the annual pilgrimage and festival to this central sanctuary of Arabian tribal religion. This potential economic loss was coupled with the undermining of Meccan tribal political authority by Muhammad's claim to prophetic authority and leadership and his insistence that all true believers belonged to a single universal community (*umma*) that transcended tribal bonds.

### Creation of the Islamic Community

For almost ten years, Muhammad struggled in Mecca, preaching God's message and gathering a small band of faithful followers. Among the early converts were Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, and Abu Bakr, his future father-in-law and the first caliph, or successor of the Prophet. The deaths of Khadija and his uncle and protector, Abu Talib, in 619 C.E. made life even more difficult. Meccan opposition escalated from derision and verbal attacks to active persecution. The core of the opposition came from the Umayyad clan of the Quraysh tribe. As we shall see, their descendants, even after their later conversion to Islam, would continue to challenge the family of the Prophet.

As conditions deteriorated in Mecca, Muhammad sent some of his followers to other areas, such as Christian Abyssinia, for safety. The situation changed significantly in 620. Muhammad was invited by a delegation from Yathrib (later called Medina), a city two hundred miles north of Mecca, to serve as a chief arbitrator or judge in a bitter feud between its Arab tribes. Muhammad and two hundred of his followers quietly emigrated, from July to September 622, to Medina. This migration (*hijra*) marked a turning point in Muhammad's fortunes and a new stage in the history of the Islamic movement. Islam took on political form with the establishment of an Islamic community-state at Medina. The importance



of the *hijra* is reflected in its adoption as the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Muslims chose to date their history from neither Muhammad's birth nor his reception of the first revelation in 610, but from the creation of the Islamic Community (*umma*). The community, as much as the individual, was to be the vehicle for realizing God's will on earth.

### Muhammad at Medina

At Medina, Muhammad had the opportunity to implement God's governance and message, for he was now the prophet-head of a religious-political community. He did this by establishing his leadership in Medina, subduing Mecca, and consolidating Muslim rule over the remainder of Arabia through diplomatic and military means.

Muhammad had come to Medina as the arbiter or judge for the entire community, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In addition, he was the leader of all the Muslims, the commander of the faithful, both those who had emigrated from Mecca and those raised in Medina. Although the majority of the Arab tribes came to embrace Islam, the Jewish tribes (that is, those Arabs who had previously converted to Judaism) remained an important minority. Muhammad promulgated a charter, sometimes called the Constitution of Medina, that set out the rights and duties of all citizens and the relationship of the Muslim community to other communities. Muslims constituted a community whose primary identity and bond were no longer to be tribal ties but a common religious faith and commitment. Jews were recognized as a separate community allied to the Muslim *umma*, but with religious and cultural autonomy.

As the Medinan state was taking shape, Muhammad turned his attention to Mecca. Mecca was the religious, political, economic, and intellectual center of Arabia. Its importance was not diminished by its hostility to Muhammad's preaching. If anything, further revelations to Muhammad, which designated Mecca as the direction (*qibla*) for prayer and the site for Muslim pilgrimage (*hajj*), increased its religious significance. Muslim religious fervor was matched by the power of Meccan tribal mores that branded the Muslims as secessionists and traitors. All the ingredients were there for a formidable battle. Muhammad initiated a series of raids against Meccan caravans, threatening both the political authority and the economic power of the Quraysh. Several important battles ensued. In 624 at Badr, near Medina, Muslim forces, although greatly outnumbered, defeated the Meccan army. For Muslims, then and now, the Battle of Badr has special significance. It was the first and a most decisive victory for the forces of monotheism over those of polytheism, for the army of God over the followers of ignorance and unbelief. God

had sanctioned and assisted His soldiers (Quran 3:123, 8:42ff) in victory. Quranic witness to divine guidance and intervention made Badr a sacred symbol, and it has been used throughout Muslim history, as evidenced most recently in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, for which the Egyptian code name was "Operation Badr."

The elation after Badr dissipated when the Meccans defeated the Muslims in the Battle of Uhud in 625, in which Muhammad himself was wounded. Finally, in 627, frustrated by the growing strength of Muhammad, the Meccans mounted an all-out siege of Medina to crush their opposition once and for all. At the Battle of the "Ditch" (so named because the Muslims dug a trench to neutralize the Meccan cavalry), the Muslims held out so successfully against a coalition of Meccans and mercenary Bedouins that the coalition disintegrated. The Meccans withdrew. The failure of the Quraysh enhanced Muhammad's prestige and leadership among the tribes of Arabia, placing him in the ascendant position. He had consolidated his leadership in Medina, extended his influence over other tribal areas in the Hijaz, and asserted his independence of the dominant tribe in central Arabia. The balance of power had shifted. Muhammad would now initiate, and Mecca would respond.

The final phase in the struggle between Medina and Mecca highlights the method and political genius of Muhammad. He employed both military and diplomatic means, often preferring the latter. Instead of seeking to rout his Meccan opponents, Muhammad sought to gain submission to God and His messenger by incorporating them within the Islamic community-state. A truce was struck in 628 at Hudaibiya to permit the Muslims to make their pilgrimage to Mecca the following year. In 629, Muhammad established Muslim control over the Hijaz and led the pilgrimage to Mecca, as had been scheduled. Then in 630, Muhammad accused the Quraysh of breaking the treaty, and the Muslims marched on Mecca, ten thousand strong. The Meccans capitulated. Eschewing vengeance and the plunder of conquest, the Prophet instead accepted a settlement, granting amnesty rather than wielding the sword toward his former enemies. For their part, the Meccans converted to Islam, accepted Muhammad's leadership, and were incorporated within the *umma*.

During the next two years, Muhammad established his authority over much of Arabia. The Bedouin who resisted were defeated militarily. At the same time, so many tribes in Arabia sent delegations to come to terms with the successor to the Quraysh that Muslim history remembers this period as the year of deputations. Alliances were forged. Although many converted to Islam, others did not. Representatives were sent from Medina

of sins, idolatry. For Muhammad, the majority of Arabs lived in ignorance (*jahlīyyā*) of Allah and His will as revealed to the prophets Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Moreover, he believed that both the Jewish and the Christian communities had distorted God's original revelation to Moses and later to Jesus.

Thus, Islam brought a reformation; it was the call once again to total surrender or submission (*islām*) to Allah and the implementation of His will as revealed in its complete form one final time to Muhammad, the last, or "seal," of the prophets. For Muhammad, Islam was not a new faith but the restoration of the true faith (*īmān*), a process that required the reformation of an ignorant, deviant society. Repentance, or the heeding of God's warning, required turning away from the path of unbelief and turning toward or returning to the straight path (*sharīʿa*) or law of God. This conversion required both individual and group submission to God. Muslims were not only individuals but also a community or brotherhood of believers. They were bound by a common faith and committed to the re-establishment of a socially just society through the implementation of God's will—the establishment of the rule or kingdom of God on earth.

The example of the Prophet offers a basis for the interdependence of religious and political authority and, in modern times, one that Islamic activist movements have interpreted as the basis for a paradigm or ideology for the fusion of religion and state. The early Islamic worldview provides a model both for the formation of a political community-state and for protest and revolution. The world is seen as divided between the believers or the friends of God, who represent the forces of good, and the Meccan unbelievers, who are the allies of evil, the followers of Satan:

God is the Protector of the believers; He brings them forth from darkness to the light. And the unbelievers—their protectors are the idols, that bring them forth from the light into the shadows; those are the inhabitants of the Fire, therein dwelling forever. (Quran 2:257–59)

The believers fight in the way of God, and the unbelievers fight in the idols' way. Fight you therefore against the friends of Satan. (4:76)

The Muslims in Mecca were the oppressed and disinherited, struggling in an unbelieving society. The Quran compares their plight with that of Moses and the Israelites before them (Quran 28:4–5). Muslims were reminded that God is their refuge and helper:

And remember when you were few and abused in the land, and were fearful that the people would snatch you away; but He gave you refuge, and confirmed you with His help. (Quran 8:26)

Faced with persecution, Muslims, like Muhammad at Mecca, had two choices: emigration (*hijra*) and armed resistance (*jihad*). First, the true believers were expected to leave a godless society and establish a community of believers under God and His Prophet. Second, Muslims were permitted, indeed exhorted, to struggle against the forces of evil and unbelief, and, if necessary, sacrifice their lives, to establish God's rule:

So let them fight in the way of God who sell the present life for the world to come; and whosoever fights in the way of God and is slain, or conquers, We shall bring him a mighty wage. (4:74)

God's preference is made even clearer a few verses later: "God has preferred in rank those who struggle [jihad] with their possessions and their selves over the ones who sit at home" (4:95).

Those who wage war engage in this armed struggle for God, engage in a religious-political act. The God who commands this struggle (*jihad*) against oppression and unbelief will assist His Muslim holy warriors as He did at the Battle of Badr, where, the Quran states, an unseen army of angels aided the Muslim army. These warriors (*mujāhidīn*, those who participate in the *jihad*) will be rewarded in this life with victory and the spoils of war. Those who fall in battle will be rewarded with eternal life as martyrs (*shāhid*, witness) for the faith. The Arabic term for martyr comes from the same root ("witness") as the word for the confession or profession of faith, indicating that willingness to sacrifice all, even life itself, is the ultimate profession or eternal witness of faith. In this way, early Islamic history provides Muslims with a model and ideology for protest, resistance, and revolutionary change.

The reformist spirit of Islam affected religious ritual as well as politics and society. This process of adaptation or Islamization would characterize much of the development of Islam. While Islam rejected some beliefs and institutions and introduced others, the more common method was to reformulate or adapt existing practices to Islamic norms and values. Rituals such as the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) and prayer (*ṣalat*) were reinterpreted. The Kaba remained the sacred center, but it was no longer associated with the tribal idols that had been destroyed when Muhammad conquered Mecca. Instead, he rededicated it to Allah, for whom, Muslims believe, Abraham and Ismail had originally built the Kaba. Similarly, Arab pagan and Jewish prayer practices were adapted rather than totally replaced. Muslims, too, were to pray at fixed times each day. However, they would pray facing Mecca and reciting the Quran. Initially, Muslims, like the Jews of Arabia, faced Jerusalem to pray. However, when the Jews did not accept Muhammad's prophetic



claims, a new revelation directed Muhammad to shift the center of prayer to Mecca.

Muhammad introduced a new moral order in which the origin and end of all actions was not self or tribal interest but God's will. Belief in the Day of Judgment and resurrection of the body added a dimension of human responsibility and accountability that had been absent in Arabian religion. Tribal vengeance and retaliation were subordinated to a belief in a just and merciful creator and judge. A religiously bonded community (*umma*) governed by God's law replaced a society based on tribal affiliation and tribal law or custom. Specific reforms addressed social injustices of Meccan society, such as banning female infanticide and usury, and encouraged the freeing of slaves; the empowerment of the poor, women, and other less privileged groups; and the institutionalization of charity.

### MUHAMMAD AND THE WEST

Talk of Islam's new moral order and the normative nature that Muhammad's life had for Muslims seems to clash with Western perceptions of Islam. If Muslim tradition exalted the Prophet, Western tradition too often has denigrated and vilified his memory. Two issues in particular—Muhammad's treatment of the Jews and his (polygynous) marriages—have proven popular stumbling blocks, or perhaps more accurately whipping posts, for Western critics and polemicists.

In his early preaching, Muhammad had looked to the Jews and Christians of Arabia as natural allies whose faiths had much in common with Islam. He anticipated their acceptance and approval. When the Islamic community was established at Medina, Muslims, like the Jews, had faced Jerusalem to pray. However, the Jewish tribes, which had long lived in Medina and had political ties with the Quraysh, tended to resist both religious and political cooperation with the Muslims. They denied Muhammad's prophethood and message and cooperated with his Meccan enemies. Although the constitution of Medina had granted them autonomy in internal religious affairs, political loyalty and allegiance were expected. Yet the Quran accuses the Jewish tribes of regularly breaking such pacts: "Why is it that whenever they make pacts, a group among them casts it aside unilaterally?" (2:100).

After each major battle, one of the Jewish tribes was accused and punished for such acts. Muslim perception of distrust, intrigue, and rejection on the part of the Jews led first to exile and later to warfare. After Badr, the Banu Qainuqa tribe and after the Battle of Uhud, the Banu Nadir, with their families and possessions, were expelled from Medina. After the

Battle of the Ditch in 627, the Jews of the Banu Qurayza were denounced as traitors who had consorted with the Meccans. As was common in Arab (and, indeed, Semitic) practice, the men were massacred; the women and children were spared but enslaved. However, it is important to note that the motivation for such actions was political rather than racial or theological. Although the Banu Qurayza had remained neutral, they had also negotiated with the Quraysh. Moreover, the exiled Jewish clans had actively supported the Meccans. Muhammad moved decisively to crush the Jews who remained in Medina, viewing them as a continued political threat to the consolidation of Muslim dominance and rule in Arabia.

One final point should be made. Muhammad's use of warfare in general was alien neither to Arab custom nor to that of the Hebrew prophets. Both believed that God had sanctioned battle with the enemies of the Lord. Biblical stories about the exploits of kings and prophets such as Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Samuel, Jehu, Saul, and David recount the struggles of a community called by God and the permissibility, indeed requirement, to take up arms when necessary against those who had defied God and to fight "in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in speaking of the Israelite conquests, Moses recalls: "And I commanded you at that time, saying, 'The Lord your God has given you this land to possess. You shall not fear them; for it is the Lord your God who fights for you'" (Deuteronomy 3:18–22).

Muhammad's marriages have long provided another source of Western criticism of the moral character of the Prophet. A noted British author has observed:

No great religious leader has been so maligned as Muhammad. Attacked in the past as a heretic, an imposter, or a sensualist, it is still possible to find him referred to as "the false prophet." A modern German writer accuses Muhammad of sensuality, surrounding himself with young women. This man was not married until he was twenty-five years of age; then he and his wife lived in happiness and fidelity for twenty-four years, until her death when he was forty-nine. Only between the age of fifty and his death at sixty-two did Muhammad take other wives, only one of whom was a virgin, and most of them were taken for dynastic and political reasons. Certainly the Prophet's record was better than that head of the Church of England, Henry VIII.<sup>35</sup>

In addressing the issue of Muhammad's polygynous marriages, it is important to remember several points. First, Semitic culture in general and Arab practice in particular permitted polygyny. It was common practice in Arabian society, especially among nobles and leaders. Although



extensively practiced.<sup>6</sup> Second, during the prime of his life, Muhammad remained married to one woman, Khadija. Third, it was only after her death that he took a number of wives; all with the exception of Aisha were widows. Fourth, Muhammad's use of the special dispensation from God to exceed the limit of four wives imposed by the Quran occurred only after the death of Khadija.

Most of the eleven marriages had political and social motives. As was customary for Arab chiefs, many were political marriages to cement alliances. Others were marriages to the widows of his companions who had fallen in combat and were in need of protection. Remarriage was difficult in a society that emphasized virgin marriages. Aisha was the only virgin that Muhammad married and the wife with whom he had the closest relationship. Fifth, as we shall see later, Muhammad's teachings and actions, as well as the Quranic message, improved the status of all women—wives, daughters, mothers, widows, and orphans.

Talk of the political and social motives behind many of the Prophet's marriages should not obscure the fact that Muhammad was attracted to women and enjoyed his wives. To deny this would contradict the Islamic outlook on marriage and sexuality, found in both revelation and Prophetic traditions, which emphasizes the importance of family and views sex as a gift from God to be enjoyed within the bonds of marriage. The many stories about Muhammad's concern and care for his wives reflect these values.

God's word, as revealed in the Quran, is the centerpiece of Muslim faith. Copying the Quran was the noblest of arts and luxury manuscripts were produced at all times. This copy, transcribed in 1491 by the noted Ottoman calligrapher Shaykh Hamdullah and lavishly decorated with arabesque designs, is a worthy testament to Muslim faith.

### THE QURAN: THE WORD OF GOD

For Muslims, God's revelation was not given only to Jews and Christians and then Muslims but, according to the Quran, given universally to all peoples: "For every community, there is a messenger" (10:47) and "We sent messengers before you; among them are those We have told you of, and those about whom we have not told you" (40:78). The Quran is the final and complete, eternal, uncreated, literal word of God, revealed one final time to the Prophet Muhammad as a guide for humankind (2:185). The Quran consists of 114 chapters of six thousand verses, originally revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years. It is approximately four-fifths the size of the New Testament, and its chapters are arranged according to length,



Page from an eleventh- to twelfth-century Quran manuscript on paper in stylized Kufic script with gold illumination, made in eastern Islamic lands (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York accession # 19.26.4).

less common, polygyny was also permitted in biblical and even in post-biblical Judaism. From Abraham, David, and Solomon down to comparatively modern times polygyny was practiced by some Jews. Jewish law changed after the Middle Ages due to the influence of Christian rule, but for Jews under Islamic rule, polygyny remained licit, although it was not

Christianity, whose scriptures were not only translated into Greek and Latin at an early date but also disseminated in vernacular languages, in Islam Arabic has remained the language of the Quran and of religious learning. Until modern times, the Quran was printed only in Arabic; it could not be translated in Muslim countries. Even now, translations are often accompanied by the Arabic text.

Because the Quran is God's book, the text of the Quran, like its author, is regarded as perfect, eternal, and unchangeable. This belief is the basis for the doctrine of the miracle of inimitability of the Quran, which asserts that the ideas, language, and style of the Quran cannot be reproduced. The Quran proclaims that even the combined efforts of human beings and jinns could not produce a comparable text (17:88). The Quran is regarded as the only miracle brought by the Prophet. Muslim tradition is replete with stories of those who converted to Islam on hearing its inimitable message and of those pagan poets who failed the Quranic challenge (10:37-38) to create verses comparable with those contained in the Quran. Indeed, throughout history, many Arab Christians as well have regarded it as the perfection of Arabic language and literature.

In addition to its place as a religious text, the Quran was central to the development of Arabic linguistics and provided the basis for the development of Arabic grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. As Philip K. Hitti observed:

In length the Koran is no more than four-fifths that of the New Testament, but in use it far exceeds it. Not only is it the basis of the religion, the canon of ethical and moral life, but also the textbook in which the Moslem begins his study of language, science, theology, and jurisprudence. Its literary influence has been incalculable and enduring. The first prose book in Arabic, it set the style for future products. It kept the language uniform. So that whereas today a Moroccan uses a dialect different from that used by an Arabian or an Iraqi, all write in the same style.<sup>7</sup>

Today, crowds fill stadiums and auditoriums throughout the Islamic world for public Quran recitation contests. Chanting of the Quran is an art form. Reciters or chanters are held in an esteem comparable to that of opera stars in the West. Memorization of the entire Quran brings great prestige as well as merit. Recordings of the Quran are enjoyed for their aesthetic as well as their religious value.

### Revelation and Prophecy

While sharing a belief in revelation and prophecy, Islam's doctrine of prophecy is broader than that of Judaism and Christianity. In addition to prophets, there are messengers from God. Both are divinely inspired,

sinless recipients of God's revelation. However, messengers are given a message for a community in book form and, unlike prophets, are assured success by God. Whereas all messengers are prophets, all prophets are not messengers. The word "prophet" is applied far more inclusively in Islam than in the Judeo-Christian traditions. It is applied to Abraham, Noah, Joseph, and John the Baptist as well as nonbiblical prophets of Arabia like Hud and Salih. "Messenger" is limited to men like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, who are both prophets and messengers.

The Quran, like the Bible, is a history of prophecy and God's revelation but with fundamental differences. Muslims trace their heritage back to Abraham, or Ibrahim. Thus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are not only "People of the Book," but also Children of Abraham. However, they belong to different branches of the same family. Whereas Jews and Christians are descendants of Abraham and his wife Sarah through their son Isaac, Muslims trace their lineage back to Ismail, Abraham's firstborn son by his Egyptian bondswoman, Hagar. Islamic tradition teaches that Abraham, pressured by Sarah who feared that Ismail, as firstborn, would overshadow Isaac, took Hagar and Ismail to the vicinity of Mecca, where he left them on their own. Ismail became the progenitor of the Arabs in northern Arabia. When Abraham later returned, Ismail helped his father build the Kaba as the first shrine to the one true God. Muslim tradition also holds that it was here at the Kaba that Abraham was to sacrifice his son. In contrast to the biblical tradition (Genesis 22), the Quran designates Ismail rather than Isaac as the intended victim, spared by divine intervention.

Islam's doctrine of revelation (*wahy*) also contrasts with that of modern biblical criticism. The form and the content, as well as the message and the actual words, of revelation are attributed to an external source, God. Muhammad is merely an instrument or a conduit. He is neither author nor editor of the Quran, but God's intermediary. Traditional teachings, emphasizing that the Prophet was illiterate, that he received the revelation from God through the angel Gabriel, and that even the order of the chapters of the Quran was revealed, can be seen as underscoring the belief that in every sense the Quran is the *literal* word of God with no input from Muhammad.

In Islam, God is transcendent. Revelation of His will or guidance occurs through the direct inspiration of prophets or through angelic intercession:

God speaks to no human except through: revelation [*wahy*] or from behind a veil or He sends a messenger [angel] and reveals whatever he wills a straight path, the path of God. (42:51-53)



Whoever disbelieves in God and His angels and His Books, and His messengers, and the Last Day, has surely gone astray into far error. (4:136)

Many Muslim theologians, and even more so, the Sufis, have often maintained that God does reveal Himself in a limited way through his signs (*ayat*) in the Quran, in nature, and in the souls and intellect of human beings. Moreover, the Quran not only reveals God's will but also details something of His nature, through repeated mention of His Attributes, which are not other than His Essence, according to Muslim theology, as well His Acts, which again reveal aspects of who He is. As Vincent Cornell argues, "the Qur'an is not only didactic but 'autobiographical,' because God is often depicted as speaking about God's own divine nature."<sup>5</sup>

The Quran was initially preserved in oral and written form during the lifetime of the Prophet. The companions of the Prophet committed to memory portions of the revelation as they were received, or they were written down by his secretaries. The entire text of the Quran was finally collected in an official authorized version during the rule of the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644-56). The Quran was collected, not edited or organized thematically. This format has long proved frustrating to many non-Muslims who find the text disjointed or disorganized, as the topic or theme often changes from one paragraph to the next. However, many Muslims believe that the ordering of the chapters and verses was itself divinely inspired. Moreover, this format enables a believer, however brief one's schedule, to simply open the text at random and start reciting at the beginning of any paragraph, as each bears a truth to be learned and remembered.

**Major Teachings of the Quran**

Whereas the Muslim sees but one divine source for the Quran, the non-Muslim will search out human sources and explanations. This is particularly true where parallels exist between Quranic and biblical stories. Christian and Jewish communities did exist in Arabia. Muhammad's travels as a caravan trader brought him into contact with other People of the Book. He would have known and been aware of these forms of monotheism. However, determining the movement from social and mercantile contacts to religious influences and causal connections is difficult. Muslims offer a simple and direct solution. Similarities in revelation and practice are due to their common divine source; differences occur where Judaism and Christianity departed from their original revelation.

If there is a statement of the core doctrines of Islam, it occurs in the fourth chapter of the Quran:

O believers, believe in God and His Messenger and the Book He has sent down on His Messenger and the Book which He sent down before.

**Allah**

At the center and foundation of Islam is Allah, the God, whose name appears more than 2,500 times in the Quran. In a polytheistic, pagan society Muhammad declared the sole existence of Allah, the transcendent, all-powerful and all-knowing Creator, Sustainer, Ordainer, and Judge of the universe. Although God is concerned about humanity, knows people intimately, and can act in history, He is and remains transcendent: "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things" (6:103).

The transcendence of God is a central theme in scholastic Islamic theology (*ilm al-kalam*), but the Quran as well as some theologians and many Sufis also emphasize God's "immanence" in that God is omnipresent and as the Quran reminds human beings, with God speaking in the first person, "We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16).

The transcendent God is the one God, and He is the only God: "And your God is One God. There is no god but He" (2:163). God is not a Trinity (5:76); He has not taken a son (2:116) nor daughters nor consorts (6:100-101); and finally, unlike the religion of pre-Islamic Arabia, God has no partners or associate deities (6:22-24).

When Muslims worship five times each day, they declare Islam's absolute or radical monotheism: "I witness that there is no god but the God (Allah)." Throughout the Quran, God reminds His people that He alone exists and is to be worshipped. This radical monotheism and the consequent iconoclasm of Islam were vividly demonstrated when Muhammad entered the Kaba on his triumphant return to Mecca and destroyed the tribal idols. Its central theological significance is underscored by the Quran's condemnation of associationism or idolatry (associating or allowing anything to usurp God's place) as the great sin (31:13). Indeed it is the one unforgivable sin: "God forgives not that aught should be associated with Him. . . . Whoso associates with God anything, has indeed forged a mighty sin" (4:48).

Culturally, this concern not to compromise the unity and transcendence of God led to an absolute ban on any image or representation of God and of Muhammad in many Muslim cultures. Many Arab Muslims extended this ban to any representation in art of the human form for fear that such statues and paintings might lead to idol worship. This attitude



resulted in the use of calligraphy (Arabic script) and arabesque (geometric and floral design) as dominant forms in Islamic art.

The absolute monotheism of Islam is preserved in the doctrine of the unity and sovereignty of God that dominates Islamic belief and practice. Allah is the one, true God. As God is one, His rule and will or law are comprehensive, extending to all creatures and to all aspects of life. As we shall see, this belief affected early Muslim conceptions and institutions so that religion was viewed as integral to state, law, and society.

The overwhelming sense of God's sovereignty and power is epitomized in the declaration "God is Most Great" (*Allahu Akbar*), which has served as a preface to the call to prayer and as the traditional battle cry of God's fighters or holy warriors throughout Islamic history, from Muhammad's early battles to contemporary struggles in Iran and Afghanistan.

If God is the Lord, then the Muslim is His servant before whom submission (*Islam*) or obedience is the most natural and appropriate response. The term "Muslim" means "one who submits" or surrenders to God; it includes everyone who follows His guidance and performs His will. All the great monotheistic prophets are regarded as true Muslims. Thus, Abraham is not a Jew or a Christian but a follower of the true religion, one who submitted (*muslim*) to God (3:67). Is this submission that of a slave before a powerful and fearsome master? Many non-Muslim commentators portray Allah in this way. A careful reading of the Quran and a look at Muslim practice indicate otherwise.

Although the Quran, like the Bible, underscores the awesome power and majesty of God and the Day of Judgment, the verses of the Quran reveal a merciful and just judge. Opening the Quran to its initial chapter, one reads, "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate." All but one of its chapters begins with this appellation, keeping before the believer a reminder of the nature of the God of this revelation. The terms "merciful" and "compassionate" are from the same Arabic root (*r-h-m*), which signifies beneficence. This quality or attribute includes the idea not only of forgiveness but also of a bounteous mercy that sustains, protects, and rewards people. "Mercy" includes such meanings as the beneficence, compassion, and graciousness of God.

God's mercy permeates the entire life and milieu of the believer. It is reflected in nature, which serves as the theater for the human realization of God's will in history and creation, and reaches its zenith in God's merciful gift to humankind, His revelation.

The Quran declares that everyone experiences the signs of God's mercy in the activities of nature:

It is He who sends the winds like heralds of glad tidings, going before His Mercy: when they have carried the heavy-laden clouds, We drive them to a land that is dead, make rain to descend thereon, and produce every kind of harvest therewith. (7:57)

The Quran teems with references to the many wonders of nature that God's mercy provides: "Night and Day that you may rest therein" (28:73); the "sun and moon follow courses [exactly] computed" (55:5); God provides animals such as cattle and "from them you derive warmth, and numerous benefits, and of them ye eat for your Lord is indeed Most Kind, Most Merciful" (16:5-7); and God created man and made all the earth subject to him (22:65).

Creation and God's dealings with His creatures reflect His Mercy, but His beneficence is supremely manifest in His revelation to humankind through the prophets, culminating in the final revelation of the Quran. Its author is the Most Merciful (36:5), in it is mercy (29:51), and its motivation is the mercy of God: "We sent it down during a blessed night for We (ever) wish to warn (against evil) . . . For We (ever) send (revelation) as a Mercy from your Lord: for He hears and knows (all things)" (44:3-6). Similarly, the sending of Muhammad was a sign of God's mercy: "We sent you not, but as a Mercy for all creatures" (21:107).

The lesson of God's mercy proclaimed by the Quran has been institutionalized and reinforced by the Muslim practice of beginning important matters such as a letter, public speech, lecture, article, or book with the phrase, "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate." No wonder Muslims take exception to those who describe Muslim faith as primarily based on fear of a terrible God.

Strong emphasis on God's mercy should not conjure up a permissive deity. God's mercy exists in dialectical tension with His justice. The Quran gives the sobering warning, "Your Lord is quick in retribution, but He is also oft forgiving, Most Merciful" (7:167). Even here, justice is tempered by mercy toward the repentant sinner. However, sinners, such as those who fall away from the faith, can expect "the curse of Allah and the angels and of men combined" (3:86-87). The absolute justice of God and the sinner's inability to escape His retribution (save for repentance) are declared time and again:

As to those who reject faith, if they had everything on earth, and twice repeated, to give as ransom for the penalty of the Day of Judgment, it would never be accepted of them. Theirs will be to get out therefrom: Their penalty will be one that endures. (5:39-40)

Yet, if the sinner repents of wrongdoing, the Quran assures that "Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" (5:42).

God's justice is based on the belief that He knows and sees all and that individuals are responsible for each and every action. Reward and punishment follow from individual, ethical responsibility and accountability before an all-knowing and just judge. Thus, Islamic ethics follow from mankind's special status and responsibility on earth.

### The Quranic Universe

The Quranic universe consists of three realms: heaven, earth, and hell. Governed by its creator-judge, the world is inhabited by human beings and spirits (angels, jinn, and devils) who are called to obedience to the one, true Allah, the Lord of the Universe. Angels serve as the link between God and human beings. Created out of light, immortal and sexless, they function as guardians, recorders, and messengers from God. They are transmitters of God's message, communicating divine revelation to the prophets. Thus, Gabriel (Jibril) brought down the Quran from heaven to Muhammad. Among the more prominent angels are Michael, Israfil, and Azrael. Somewhere between angels and humans are the invisible, intelligent spirits called jinn. In contrast to human beings, the jinn were created from fire instead of earth (7:12, 55:14-15). They have the ability to assume visible form and, like humans, can be good or bad, sin as well as be saved (46:29-31). They will be judged on the Last Day and consigned to paradise or hell.

Folktales such as *The Thousand and One Nights* ascribe magical powers to the jinn, who became known in the West as genies. Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum from God, the principle of good, is Satan (*shaytan*, adversary), the principle of evil. The origin of Satan goes back to the Garden, where, as will be discussed, one of the angels (Iblis or Satan, the devil), sometimes also referred to as a jinn, refused to pay homage to Adam. Satan is the leader of other fallen angels and jinn, disobedient servants of God who tempt human beings in their moral struggle on earth. It was Iblis who tempted Adam and Eve (20:116-22). Although permitted by God to engage in their evil ways, Iblis and his followers will be consigned to hell on Judgment Day.

Of all creation, man enjoys a unique relationship with God, for after creating Adam, God breathed into him His spirit (15:29). Moreover, the Quran declares that God created human beings in "the best of molds or stature" (95:4) to be His representatives on earth. This special selection and status led to Satan's rebellion, a story that strikingly conveys the cosmic significance of humankind.

Informed by God of mankind's special status, the angels initially protested, "Will You set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while we proclaim your praise and call You Holy?" (2:30). Adam proved the uniqueness of humankind by demonstrating a God-given knowledge of creation that the angels did not possess. However, when God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, Satan or Iblis refused (2:34, 7:11ff). It was Satan's refusal to accept man's unique status in the hierarchy of the universe that caused his rebellion and expulsion from heaven and led to the Fall and to the age-long moral struggle of human beings, torn between the forces of good (God) and those of evil (Satan).

Then the angels bowed all together, except for Iblis who refused to be among those bowing. God said: Iblis, why are you not among those who bow down on their knees? He said: I am not going to kneel before a human being that you have made from clay, from molded mud. God said: Get out of here; you are an outcast. My curse will be on you until the Day of Judgment! He said: My Lord, let me wait until the Day of Resurrection. God said: You shall be allowed to wait until the appointed time. He said: My Lord, since you have led me astray, I shall make things on the earth attractive to them and lead them astray, except for your sincere servants. God said: This will be a straight path to me. You shall have no authority except over those who are perverse and follow you. Hell shall be their promised place. (15:30-42)

The essence of human uniqueness lies in one's vocation as God's representative on earth. God has given people the earth as a divine trust (33:72); they are thus His vicegerents or agents on earth (2:30, 35:39) to whom God has made all creation subservient (16:12-14). It is on the basis of how this vicegerency is executed, or how God's will in history is realized or actualized, that a person will be rewarded or punished:

It is He who had made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth. He hath raised you in ranks, some above others that He may try you. For thy Lord is quick in punishment, yet He is indeed Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful. (6:165)

It is here that we see the roots of Islamic ethics. God ordains; humankind is to implement His will. Human responsibility and mission are of cosmic proportion, and people will be judged on the cosmic consequences of their acts. As God's representatives, the measure of human actions, and indeed life, is the extent to which the Muslim contributes to the realization of God's will on earth. This responsibility lies squarely on each



individual's shoulders, as no one can bear another's responsibility or suffer for another:

Nor can a bearer of burdens bear another's burden. If one heavily laden should call another to (bear) his load, not the least portion of it can be carried (by the other), even though he be nearly related.... And whosoever purifies himself does so for the benefit of his own soul. (35:18)  
And whatever good you do, you shall not be denied the just reward of it.... As for the unbelievers, their riches shall not avail them, neither their children against God; those are the inhabitants of the Fire, dwelling therein forever. (3:115-16)

Although it is not a prominent theme in the Quran, Muslim tradition did come to accept the intercession of Muhammad on behalf of individuals. However, unlike Christianity, there is no vicarious suffering or atonement for humankind. Such actions are unnecessary, because Islam has no doctrine of original sin.

The story of the Fall in the Quran differs from that in the Bible in its teaching regarding personal responsibility. It is Adam, not Eve, who is tempted by the devil. Woman is not portrayed as the cause of the Fall, as in the Judeo-Christian traditions. Moreover, the sin of Adam and Eve is just that—their own personal sin. It is an act of disobedience for which they, and they alone, are responsible. Unlike Christianity, there is no notion of an inherited "original" sin, committed by the progenitors of the human race, for which all humanity suffers. Sin is not a state of being; it is the result of an act of disobedience, failure to do or not to do what God commands or prohibits. Human beings are not sinful by nature; as they are created or finite creatures, they are naturally limited, weak, and subject to temptation. Similarly, death follows from the human condition and is not due to sin or the Fall. The consequences of sin, like human responsibility, belong solely to those who commit sin.

The biblical and Quranic stories about the consequences of the Fall reveal the basis for the divergent doctrines of Christianity and Islam. The former views the Fall as the cause of man's flawed nature and existence; the latter finds here the story of sin, God's mercy, and repentance. In the Bible, the Fall brings a life of shame, disgrace, and hardship:

To the woman He said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." And to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground

because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you." (Genesis 3:16-18)

In sharp contrast, the Quran teaches that after Adam disobeys God but repents, God extends to Adam His mercy and guidance: "But his Lord chose him. He turned to him and gave him guidance" (20:122). Adam turned away from Satan and sin and turned back to God; Adam repented, and God forgave. This is the paradigm for sin and repentance in Islam. If the Muslim is one who is to submit to God by following His will, sin is disobedience or refusal to submit. It is the arrogance and ingratitude of creatures who forget or turn away from their creator and sustainer. Repentance is simply remembering or returning to God's path, the straight path of Islam. There is little or no emphasis on feelings of shame and disgrace or guilt. What God commands, and what His awesome character engenders, is fear of God (*taqwa*): "The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous or God fearing of you" (49:13).

*Taqwa* means self-protection or fear of God. This attitude or disposition follows from belief in an all-powerful, omnipresent God (an ever-present God who is as near as one's jugular vein; 50:16), who has commanded submission or obedience to His will and before whom the Muslim is morally responsible and accountable. It is the response of the believer who knows what he or she must do and who lives life ever mindful of the eternal consequences that await on the Last Day. The duties and obligations of Muslim life, as well as its rewards and punishments, fall equally on men and women:

The believers, men and women, are guardians of one another; they enjoin good and prohibit evil, perform the prayer, give alms, and obey God and His Prophet. (9:71) Whoever does a righteous deed, whether man or woman, and has faith, we will give a good life; and we shall reward them according to the best of their actions. (16:97)

### The Muslim Community

The Muslim mission to be servants of God and to spread God's rule is both an individual and a community obligation. The Quran emphasizes the social dimension of service to God, for it is on earth and in society that God's will is to govern and prevail. As humankind came from a single pair of parents, so, too, God "made you into nations and tribes" (49:13). Similarly, as God had sent His prophets and revelation to the Jews and then to the Christians, He declares in the Quran that the Muslims now



constitute the new community of believers who are to be an example to other nations: "Thus We made you an *umma* justly balanced, that ye might be witness over the nations" (2:143).

Guided by the word of God and the Prophet, the Muslim community has a mission to create a moral social order: "You are the best community evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" (3:110). This command has influenced Muslim practice throughout the centuries, providing a rationale for political and moral activism. Government regulations, Islamic laws, and the activities of piety-minded policers of public behavior have all been justified as expressions of this moral mission to command the good and prohibit evil. Again, Muhammad and the first Muslim community are seen as exemplifying this ideal, implementing the socially just society envisioned by the Quran.

While recognizing differences in status, wealth, and tribal origin, the Quran teaches the ultimate supratribal (transnational) unity and equality of all believers before God. Common faith, not tribal or family ties, binds the community together. The Quran envisions a society based on the unity and equality of believers, a society in which moral and social justice will counterbalance oppression of the weak and economic exploitation. Belief and action are to be joined; Muslims are not only to know and believe, but also to act and implement. Worship and devotion to God embrace both private and public life, affecting not only prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, but social behavior as well. Like his prophetic predecessors, Muhammad brought a revelation that challenged the established order. The message of the Quran was reformist, if not revolutionary. Quranic prescriptions would provide the basis for the later development of Islamic law to chart this new social order. The scope of Quranic concerns reflects the comprehensiveness of Islam. It includes rules concerning modesty, marriage, divorce, inheritance, feuding, intoxicants, gambling, diet, theft, murder, fornication, and adultery.

The socioeconomic reforms of the Quran are among its most striking features. Exploitation of the poor, weak, widows, women, orphans (4:2, 12), and slaves is vividly condemned:

Those who live off orphans' property without having any right to do so will only suck up fire into their bellies, and they will roast in the fires (of hell). (4:10)

False contracts, bribery, abuse of women, hoarding of wealth to the exclusion of its subordination to higher ends, and usury are denounced. The Quran demands that Muslims pursue a path of social justice, rooted in the recognition that the earth belongs ultimately to God and that human

beings are its caretakers. Although wealth is seen as good, a sign of hard work and God's pleasure, God's law limited its pursuit and accumulation. Its rewards are subject to social responsibility toward other members of the community, in particular the poor and needy:

The alms [*zakaat*] are for the poor and needy, those who work to collect them, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, the ransoming of slaves and debtors, and for the cause of God, and for travelers. (9:60)

Social justice was institutionalized by Quranic decrees that required the payment of an alms tax (*zakaat*) and a voluntary charity for the poor, stipulations of fixed shares of inheritance for women and children, and a host of regulations regarding the just treatment of debtors, widows, the poor, orphans (90:13-16), and slaves (24:33). Those who practice usury are sternly rebuked and warned that they face "war from God and His prophet" (2:279).

### The Last Day

Muslims are exhorted to follow God's will out of obedience and gratitude to their creator, but the specter of the Last Judgment, with its eternal reward and punishment, remains a constant reminder of the ultimate consequences of each life. It underscores the Quran's strong and repeated emphasis on the ultimate moral responsibility and accountability of each believer. At a moment known only to God, all will be called to judgment in a great cosmic cataclysmic event (81:114), also referred to as the Day of Decision or the Day of Reckoning. Each community will be judged by the standards brought by its prophets and Book. Humans and jinn (spirits) alike will stand before the throne of God. All are responsible for their own actions and will be judged according to the record found in the Book of Deeds (45:29-30).

As discussed previously, there is no redemption, atonement, or intercession through an intermediary. Allah, who is merciful but all-powerful judge, consigns all either to heaven or to hell as He wills (5:43). Although the Quran teaches that intercession belongs to God alone (39:44, 6:54, 70), belief in Muhammad's role as a divinely designated intercessor did develop and was justified by the text, "There is no intercessor [with God] unless He gives permission" (10:3).

The Quranic vision of the afterlife is both spiritual and physical. Because the Last Day will be accompanied by bodily resurrection (41:39-40), the pleasures of heaven and the pain of hell will be fully experienced. The Garden of Paradise is a heavenly mansion of perpetual

peace and bliss with flowing rivers, beautiful gardens, and the enjoyment of one's spouses and beautiful, dark-eyed female companions (*houris*). Descriptions of heavenly bliss follow from the general tenor of the Quran, which is life-affirming, emphasizing the beauty of creation and enjoyment of its pleasures within the limits set by God. This more integral, comprehensive view of life stands in sharp contrast to the Christian tendency to compartmentalize life into the sacred and the profane, body and soul, sensual and spiritual. In contrast to the "spiritual" images of a more sober, celibate Paradise predominant in Christianity, the Quran offers vivid descriptions of the delights and pleasures of Paradise, seeing no contradiction between enjoyment of both the beatific vision and the fruits of creation:

in gardens of bliss a multitude will be seated on couches set close together . . . Immortal youths will serve them with goblets, pitchers and cups filled with water from a spring which will not upset them or dull their senses; and they may choose fruit of any kind and whatever fowl they desire and chaste companions with eyes of a beauty like pearls hidden in shells . . . We formed them perfectly and made them spotless virgins, chaste and amorous and of the same age. (56:12-37)

In sharp contrast, the damned will be banished to hell, separated from God. Anguish and despair will be coupled with physical torment, for they will experience:

a fire whose sheets encompass them. If they should ask for relief, then water like molten copper shall be showered upon them to scald their faces. How awful is such a drink and how evil a resting place. (18:29)

## CONCLUSION

For Muslims throughout the centuries, the message of the Quran and example of the Prophet Muhammad constitute the formative and enduring foundation of faith and belief. They have served as the basic sources of Islamic law and the reference points for daily life. Muslims today, as in the past, continue to affirm that the Quran is the literal word of God, the Creator's immutable guidance for an otherwise transient world. This transhistorical significance is rooted in the belief that the Book and the Prophet provide eternal principles and norms on which Muslim life, both individual and collective, is to be patterned. The challenge for each generation of believers has been the continued formulation,

appropriation, and implementation of Islam in history. Islamic history and civilization provide the record of that struggle to interpret and to follow the straight path.

## KEY TERMS

Ali	Muslim
Allah	Night of Power
<i>Alabhu Akbar</i>	People of the Book
caliph	Quran
Children of Abraham	Ramadan
hadith	<i>salat</i>
<i>hajj</i>	<i>shaytan</i>
<i>hijra</i>	Shi
Medina	<i>shirk</i>
Iblis	Sufis
imam	Sunna
<i>iran</i>	Sunni
Ismail	<i>tawhid</i>
jihad	<i>umma</i>
Kaba	<i>zakat</i>
Khadija	

## QUESTIONS

1. Describe the environment in which historical Islam emerged relative to other "Semitic monotheisms."
2. How has the West typically understood Muhammad's involvements with violence and polygyny? How were they understood in his day and age?
3. What roles have the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad played in shaping the Islamic worldview?
4. Is Islam better described as a social system or an individual piety?
5. How do sin, the Last Day, and the afterlife function in the Islamic schema? Contrast this with Jewish or Christian notions.
6. Why can Islam be described as "the Straight Path"? What does this say about the Islamic approach to daily living?

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## The Muslim Community in History

The history of Islam has often been linked to the existence of an Islamic state, empire, or sultanate. From its beginnings, Islam existed and spread as a community-state; it was both a faith and a political order. Within centuries after his death, Muhammad's local Arabian polity became a vast empire, extending from North Africa to Southeast Asia. The development of Islam and Muslim institutions (the caliphate, law, education, the military, social services) were intertwined. Again, the Prophetic period provided the paradigm for later generations. For it was in Medina that the Quranic mandate took on form and substance under the guidance and direction of the Prophet.

The Medinan community formed a total framework for state, society, and culture. It epitomized the Quranic mandate for Muslims as individuals and as a community "to transform the world itself through action in the world."<sup>1</sup> This aspiration and ideal has constituted the challenge for the Islamic community throughout much of its history. It inspired Muhammad to transform a local sheikdom into a trans-tribal state.

### MUHAMMAD AND THE MEDINAN STATE

Two great empires, the Byzantine (Christian), or Eastern Roman, empire and the Sasanian Persian (Zoroastrian) empire, dominated seventh-century Arabia. In the middle was the Arabian Peninsula, composed of apparently weak and divided tribal societies. Within one hundred years, both empires would fall before the armies of Allah as Muhammad and his successors united Arabia under the umbrella of Islam, which provided a principle of organization and motivation. In time, a vast empire and a commonwealth of Islamic states would come to dominate much of the world. Its missions would be soldiers, merchants, and mystics. Islam would provide the basis of community identity and the rationale or legitimacy for rulers and their policies of expansion and conquest. Thus, for example, the wars of expansion were termed *fath*, "opening" or "conquest" of the way for Islam.



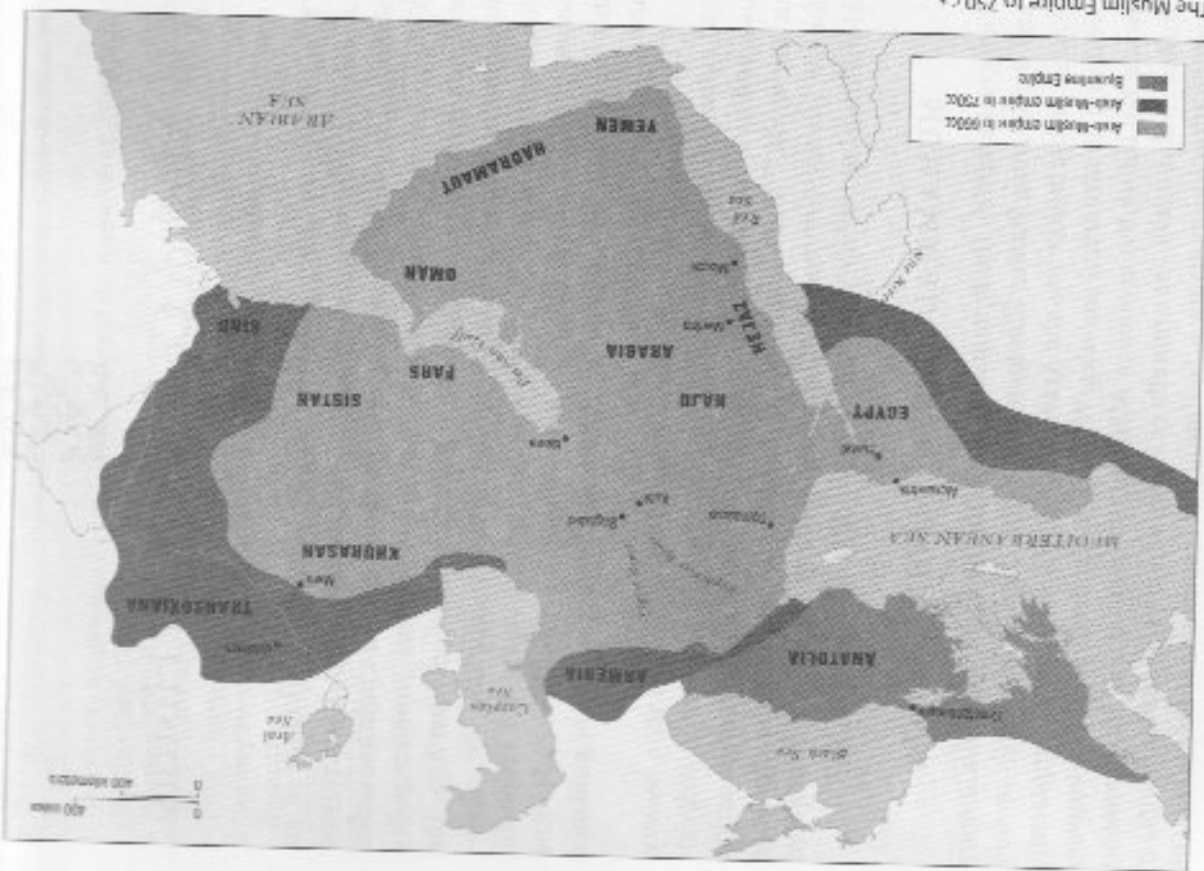
As Muhammad governed a trans-tribal state in the name of Islam, so, too, the Islamic community became associated with an expansive empire. Why and how did this come to pass?

Shortly after the surrender of Mecca, Muhammad turned his attention to the extension and consolidation of his authority over Arabia. Envoys were sent and alliances were forged with surrounding tribes and rulers. The fiercely independent Bedouin tribes of Arabia were united behind the Prophet of Islam through a combination of force and diplomacy. As Muhammad was both head of state and messenger of God, so, too, were the envoys and soldiers of the state the envoys and soldiers of Islam, its first missionaries. Along with their treaties and armies, they brought the Quran and the teachings of their faith. They spread a way of life that affected the political and social order as well as individual life and worship. Islam encompassed both a faith and a sociopolitical system. Ideally, this new order was to be a community of believers, acknowledging the ultimate sovereignty of God, living according to His law, obeying His Prophet, and dedicating their lives to spreading God's rule and law. This was the message and vision that accompanied Arab armies as they burst out of Arabia and established their supremacy throughout the Middle East.

### The Muslim Empire to 750 c.e.

What is most striking about the early expansion of Islam is its rapidity and success. Western scholars have marveled at it. Muslim tradition has viewed the conquests as a miraculous proof or historic validation of the truth of Islam's claims and a sign of God's guidance. Within a decade, Arab forces overran the Byzantine and Persian armies, exhausted by years of warfare, and conquered Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Persia, and Egypt.

The momentum of these early victories was extended to a series of brilliant battles under great generals like Khalid ibn al-Walid and Amr ibn al-As, which extended the boundaries of the Muslim empire to Morocco and Spain in the west and across Central Asia to India in the east. Driven by the economic rewards from conquest of richer, more developed areas and united and inspired by their new faith, Muslim armies proved to be formidable conquerors and effective rulers, builders rather than destroyers. They replaced the indigenous rulers and armies of the conquered countries but preserved much of their government, bureaucracy, and culture. For many in the conquered territories, it was no more than an exchange of masters, one that brought peace to peoples demoralized and disaffected by the casualties and heavy taxation that resulted



The Muslim Empire to 750 c.e.

## JIHAD: THE STRUGGLE FOR GOD

Jihad, "to strive or struggle," is sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam, although it has no such official status. In its most general meaning, jihad refers to the obligation incumbent on all Muslims, as individuals and as a community, to exert (jihad) themselves to realize God's will, to lead a virtuous life, to fulfill the universal mission of Islam, and to spread the Islamic community through preaching Islam to convert others or writing religious tracts ("jihad of the tongue" and "jihad of the pen"). Thus, today it can be used to describe the personal struggle to keep the fast of Ramadan, to lead a good life, and to fulfill family responsibilities. Popularly, it is used to describe the struggle for educational or social reform—to establish good schools, to clean up a neighborhood, to fight drugs, or to work for social justice. However, it also includes the struggle for or defense of Islam, holy war. Although jihad is not supposed to include aggressive warfare, this tactic has been invoked by early extremists such as the Kharajites, by rulers to justify their wars of conquest and expansion, and by contemporary extremists such as Osama bin Laden and his jihad against America as well as jihadi organizations in Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, and Indonesia.

spread the faith through forced conversion but to spread Muslim rule. In fact, Islamic empires were inhabited by large numbers of Christians, Jews, and members of other religions; many contributed significantly to their administration and cultural development. Moreover, as Richard Bulliet notes in his *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*,<sup>1</sup> it took centuries for some major areas to become majority Muslim.

Many early Muslims regarded Islam solely as an Arab religion. Moreover, from an economic perspective, increase in the size of the community through conversion diminished Arab Muslims' share in the spoils of conquest. As Islam penetrated new areas, people were offered three options: (1) conversion, that is, full membership in the Muslim community, with its rights and duties; (2) acceptance of Muslim rule as "protected" people and payment of a poll tax; (3) battle or the sword if neither the first nor the second option was accepted. The astonishing expansion of Islam resulted not only from armed conquest but also from these two peaceful options. In later centuries, in many areas of Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia, the effective spread of Islam would be due primarily to Muslim traders and Sufi (mystic) missionaries who won converts by their example and their preaching.

from the years of Byzantine-Persian warfare. Local communities were free to continue to follow their own way of life in internal, domestic affairs. In many ways, local populations found Muslim rule more flexible and tolerant than that of Byzantium and Persia. Religious communities were free to practice their faith—to worship and be governed by their religious leaders and laws in such areas as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In exchange, they were required to pay tribute, a poll tax (*jizya*) that entitled them to Muslim protection from outside aggression and exempted them from military service. They were therefore called the "protected ones" (*dhimmi*). In effect, this often meant lower taxes, greater local autonomy, rule by fellow Semites with closer linguistic and cultural ties than the Hellenized, Greco-Roman elites of Byzantium, and greater religious freedom for Jews and indigenous Christians. Most of the Christian churches, such as the Nestorians, Monophysites, Jacobites, and Copts, had been persecuted as heretics and schismatics by Christian orthodoxy. For these reasons, some Jewish and Christian communities aided the invading armies, regarding them as less oppressive than their imperial masters. In many ways, the conquests brought a Pax Islamica to an embattled area:

The conquests destroyed little: what they did suppress were imperial rivalries and sectarian bloodletting among the newly subjected population. The Muslims tolerated Christianity, but they disestablished it; henceforward Christian life and liturgy, its endowments, politics and theology, would be a private and not a public affair. By an exquisite irony, Islam reduced the status of Christians to that which the Christians had earlier thrust upon the Jews, with one difference. The reduction in Christian status was merely judicial; it was unaccompanied by either systematic persecution or a blood lust, and generally, though not everywhere and at all times, unmarred by vexatious behavior.<sup>2</sup>

A common issue associated with the spread of Islam is the role of jihad, or so-called holy war. Whereas Westerners are quick to characterize Islam as a religion spread by the sword, modern Muslim apolo-gists sometimes explain jihad as simply defensive in nature. In its most general sense, jihad in the Quran and in Muslim practice refers to the obligation of all Muslims to strive (jihad, self-exertion) or struggle to follow God's will. This includes both the struggle to lead a virtuous life and the universal mission of the Muslim community to spread God's rule and law through teaching, preaching, and, where necessary, armed struggle. Contrary to popular belief, the early conquests sought not to

Given Muhammad's formative and pivotal role, his death (632) threatened to radically destabilize the community. Who was to lead? What was to happen to the community? The companions of the Prophet moved quickly to steady and reassure the community. Abu Bakr, an early follower of Muhammad, announced the death of the Prophet to the assembled faithful: "Muslims! If any of you has worshipped Muhammad, let me tell you that Muhammad is dead. But if you worship God, then know that God is living and will never die!" Nevertheless, the Prophet's death did plunge the Islamic community into a series of political crises revolving around leadership and authority. Issues of succession and secession were to plague the early community.

The caliphate period (632-1258) traditionally has been divided into three periods: the "Rightly Guided Caliphs" (632-661), the Umayyad empire (661-750), and the Abbasid empire (750-1258). During these eras, a vast empire was created with successive capitals in Medina, Kufa, Damascus, and Baghdad. Stunning political success was complemented by a cultural florescence in law, theology, philosophy, literature, medicine, mathematics, science, and art.

### The Rightly Guided Caliphs

The caliphate began in 632 with the selection of Muhammad's successor. The first four caliphs were all companions of the Prophet: Abu Bakr (r. 632-634), Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644), Uthman ibn Affan (644-656), and Ali ibn Abi Talib (656-661). Their rule is especially significant not only for what they actually did but also because the period of Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs came to be regarded in Sunni Islam as the normative period. It provides the idealized past to which Muslims have looked back for inspiration and guidance, a time to be remembered and emulated.

The vast majority of Muslims (Sunni) believe that Muhammad died without designating his replacement or establishing a system for the selection of his successor. After an initial period of uncertainty, the Prophet's companions, the elders or leaders of Medina, selected or acknowledged Abu Bakr, an early convert and the Prophet's father-in-law, as caliph (*khalifa*, successor or deputy). Abu Bakr's designation as leader was symbolized by the offering of *baya* (oath), a handclasp used by the Arabs to seal a contract. In this case an oath of obedience and allegiance. Abu Bakr had been a close companion and a trusted adviser of Muhammad; he was a man respected for his sagacity and piety. Muhammad had appointed

him to lead the Friday community prayer in his absence. As caliph, Abu Bakr was the political and military leader of the community. Although not a prophet, the caliph enjoyed religious prestige as head of the community of believers. This was symbolized in later history by the caliph's right to lead the Friday prayer and the inclusion of his name in its prayers.

Having resolved the question of political leadership and succession, Abu Bakr turned to the consolidation of Muslim rule in Arabia. Muhammad's death had precipitated a series of tribal rebellions. Many tribal chiefs claimed that their allegiance had been based on a political pact with Medina that ceased with the Prophet's death. Tribal independence and factionalism, long a part of Arab history, once more threatened the unity and identity of the new Islamic state. Abu Bakr countered that the unity of the community was based on the interconnectedness of faith and politics and undertook a series of battles that later Muslim historians would call the wars of apostasy. Relying on Khalid ibn al-Walid, whom Muhammad had dubbed "the sword of Allah," he crushed the tribal revolt, consolidating Muslim rule over the entire Arabian Peninsula, and thus preserved the unity and solidarity of the Islamic community-state.

Abu Bakr's successor, Umar, initiated the great period of expansion and conquest. One of the great military leaders of his time, he added the title "Commander of the Faithful" to that of "Successor" or "Deputy" of the Prophet of God. He also introduced a new method for the selection of his successor. On his deathbed, Umar appointed an "election committee" to select the next caliph. After due consultation, the council of electors chose Uthman ibn Affan from the Umayyad clan, a leading Meccan family, using the traditional sign or oath of allegiance, the clasping of hands. Thus, based on the practice of the first three caliphs, a pattern was established for selecting the caliph from the Quraysh tribe through a process characterized by consultation and an oath of allegiance.

Before long, tribal factionalism and the threat of rebellion resurfaced in the community. Uthman's family had been among the strongest foes of the Prophet. Many of the Medinan elite, who had been among the early supporters of Muhammad, resented Uthman's accession to power and the increased prominence and wealth of his family. Although personally pious, Uthman lacked the presence and leadership skills of his predecessors. Accusations that the caliph was weak and guilty of nepotism fueled political intrigue. In 656, Uthman was assassinated by a group of mutineers from Egypt. The caliph's murder was the first in a series of Muslim rebellions and tribal fratricides that would plague the Islamic community's political development.



Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, succeeded Uthman as the fourth caliph. Ali was devoted to Muhammad and among the first to embrace Islam. He had married Fatima, the only surviving child of Muhammad and Khadija, with whom he had two sons, Hasan and Husayn. Ali was a charismatic figure who inspired fierce loyalty and commitment. Many of Ali's supporters (Alids) believed that leadership of the Islamic community should remain within the family of the Prophet and that, indeed, Muhammad had designated Ali as his rightful successor and heir. For these partisans of Ali, later to be called Shii (*shiat-u-Ali*, party of Ali), the first three caliphs were interlopers who had denied Ali his rightful inheritance. However, their satisfaction and expectations were to be short-lived. Within the few short years that Ali ruled, the caliphate was racked by two civil wars. Ali's authority was challenged by two opposition movements: first, by a coalition headed by Muhammad's widow, Aisha (the daughter of Abu Bakr), and second, by the forces of Muawiyah, the governor of Syria and a relative of Uthman. Ali's failure to find and prosecute Uthman's murderers became the pretext for both revolts. In the first, Ali crushed a triumvirate led by Aisha, the youngest wife of Muhammad. The "Battle of the Camel," so named because it took place around the camel on which Aisha was mounted, marked the first time a caliph had led his army against another Muslim army.

Of greater long-range significance was Muawiyah's challenge to Ali's authority. Securely established in Damascus with a strong army, Muawiyah, the nephew of Uthman, had refused to step down and accept Ali's appointment of a replacement. In 657, at Siffin (in modern-day Syria), Ali led his army against his rebellious governor. Faced with defeat, Muawiyah's men raised Qurans on the tips of their spears and called for arbitration according to the Quran, crying out, "Let God decide." Although the arbitration proved inconclusive, it yielded two results that would have lasting effects. A splinter group of Alids, the Kharijites or "seceders," broke with Ali for having failed to subdue Muawiyah. Muawiyah walked away from Siffin and continued to govern Syria, extending his rule to Egypt as well. When the Kharijites assassinated Ali in 661, Muawiyah laid successful claim to the caliphate, moving its capital to Damascus and frustrating the belief of Ali's followers that leadership of the Muslim community should be restricted to Ali's descendants. With the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty, the "golden age" of Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs came to an end and the caliphate became an absolute monarchy.

Despite the turmoil during the early caliphal years, Muslims regard the period of Muhammad and the first generation of companions or

elders as normative for a variety of reasons. First, God sent down His final and complete revelation in the Quran and the last of His prophets, Muhammad. Second, the Islamic community-state was created, bonded by a common religious identity and purpose. Third, the sources of Islamic law, the Quran and the example of the Prophet, originated at this time. Fourth, this period of the early companions serves as the reference point for all Islamic revival and reform, both traditionalist and modernist. Fifth, the success and power that resulted from the near-miraculous victories and geographic expansion of Islam constitute, in the eyes of believers, historical validation of the message of Islam.

### **Muslim Organization and Institutions**

The early caliphate established the pattern for the organization and administration of the government. Islam provided the basic identity and ideology of the state, a source of unity and solidarity. The caliph's authority and leadership were rooted in his claim to be the successor of the Prophet as head of the community. Muhammad's practice provided the model for governance. The caliph exercised direct political, military, judicial, and fiscal control of the Muslim community. He was chosen through a process of consultation, nomination, and selection by a small group of electors who, after pledging their allegiance, presented the caliph to the people for acceptance by public acclamation. The caliph was the protector and defender of the faith; he was to assure the following of God's law and spread the rule of God through expansion and conquest. The community was a brotherhood of believers, a society based on religious rather than tribal solidarity.

In general, the Arabs did not occupy conquered cities but established garrison towns nearby, such as Basra and Kufa in Iraq, Fustat (Cairo) in Egypt, and Qairawan in North Africa. From these towns, conquered territories were governed and expeditions launched. They were centered around a mosque, which served as the religious and public focal point of the towns. Conquered territories were divided into provinces, each of which was administered by a governor, who was usually a military commander. The internal civil and religious administration remained in the hands of local officials. An agent of the caliph oversaw the collection of taxes and other administrative activities. Revenue for the state came from the captured lands and taxes.

The Islamic system of taxes took several forms: the tithe or wealth tax to benefit the poor and a land tax paid by Muslims; and the poll tax and tribute, later a land tax, paid by non-Muslims. All revenue was owned, collected, and administered by the state. The distribution of revenue was

penions based on priority in accepting Islam. The Muslims at Medina and the family of the Prophet enjoyed a special place of honor because of their closeness to Muhammad and their fidelity to God's call.

Muslim society was divided into four major social classes. The elites of society were the Arab Muslims, with special status given to the companions of the Prophet because of their early support and role in establishing the community. Next came the non-Arab converts to Islam. Although in theory all Muslims were equal before God, in fact, practice varied. Under the Umayyads, non-Arab Muslims were clearly second-class citizens. They continued to pay those taxes levied on non-Muslims even after their conversion. The *dhimmi*, or non-Muslim People of the Book (those who possessed a revealed scripture, Jews and Christians), constituted communities within and subject to the wider Islamic community-state. In time, this protected status was extended to Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists. Finally, there were the slaves. As in much of the Near East, slavery had long existed among the Arabs. Although the Quran commanded the just and humane treatment of slaves (16:71) and regarded their emancipation as a meritorious act (90:13, 58:3), the system of slavery was adopted in a modified form. Only captives in battle could be taken as slaves. Neither Muslims nor Jews and Christians could be enslaved in early Islam. Thus, religion played an important role in the government, law, taxation, and social organization of society.

### **The Umayyad Empire: Creation of an Arab Kingdom**

The advent of Umayyad rule set in motion a process of continued expansion and centralization of authority that would transform the Islamic community from an Arab shaykhdom into an Islamic empire with rulers who were dependent on religion for legitimacy and the military for power and stability.

In 661, Muawiyah (r. 661–80) laid claim to the caliphate and ushered in the Umayyad era (661–750): imperial, dynastic, and dominated by an Arab military aristocracy. The capital was moved to Damascus. This permanent shift from the less sophisticated Arabian heartland to the established, cosmopolitan Greco-Roman Byzantine city symbolized the new imperial age. From this new center, the Umayyads completed the conquest of the entire Persian and half the Roman (Byzantine) empire. When Muawiyah seized power, Islam had already spread to Egypt, Libya, the Fertile Crescent, Syria, Iraq, and Persia across Armenia to the borders of Afghanistan. Under the Umayyads, Muslims captured the Maghreb (North Africa), Spain, and Portugal, marched across Europe (before being halted in the heart of France

by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732), and extended the empire's borders to the Indian subcontinent. The accomplishments of the Umayyads were indeed remarkable. Damascus became an even greater imperial capital than it had been under Byzantine rule. Umayyad rulers developed a strong centralized dynastic kingdom, an Arab empire. The more advanced government, institutions, and bureaucracy of Byzantium were adopted and adapted to Arab Muslim needs. Civil servants and ministers were retained to guide and train their Muslim masters. In time, through a process of conversion and assimilation, language and culture, state and society were Arabized and Islamized. Arabic became the language of government as well as the lingua franca of what today constitutes North Africa and much of the Middle East. Islamic belief and values constituted the official norm and reference point for personal and public life.

Umayyad rulers relied on Islam for legitimacy and as a rationale for their conquests. Caliphs were the protectors and defenders of the faith charged with extending the rule of Islam. The basis of Umayyad unity and stability was the establishment of an Arab monarchy and reliance on Arab, in particular Syrian, warriors. Contrary to previous practice, hereditary succession, not selection or election, restricted the caliphate to the Umayyad house. This innovation, or departure from early Islamic practice, became the pretext for later Muslim historians, writing with Abbasid patronage, to denounce Umayyad rule as kingship and thus un-Islamic. In fact, a form of hereditary succession and dynastic rule became standard practice for the remainder of the caliphal period. Centralization and militarization of the state resulted in an increasingly autocratic and absolutist government supported and protected by its military.

Umayyad society was based on the creation and perpetuation of an Arab military aristocracy that constituted a hereditary social caste. Syrian troops were the heart of the caliphs' powerful military. As the source of caliphal power and security, they were amply rewarded from the booty and tribute that poured into Damascus as a result of the conquests. Arab Muslims enjoyed special tax privileges, exempted from the more substantial taxes levied on non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslims. This preferential treatment became a source of contention, especially among non-Arab Muslims, who regarded their lesser status as a violation of Islamic egalitarianism. Their alienation contributed to the eventual downfall of the Umayyad dynasty.

### **Divisions within the Islamic Community**

As had been done from the time of the Prophet, critics and opponents used an "Islamic yardstick" to judge or condemn the Umayyads and



legitimate their own actions and aspirations. Political, social, economic, and religious grievances were viewed through the prism of an Islamic ideal relevant to all areas of life. Thus, Umayyad practice incurred an opposition that ranged from Kharijites, Alids (Shii), and disgruntled non-Arab Muslims to the early legal scholars and mystics of Islam.

### **The Kharijites**

The Kharijites originated in the time of the caliphs Uthman and Ali. They were radical revolutionaries who combined a rigorous puritanism and religious fundamentalism with an "exclusivist egalitarianism." As previously noted, the occasion for the Kharijite secession from the main body of the community was Ali's submission to arbitration in his struggle with Muawiyah. For the Kharijites the situation was simple. Muawiyah had challenged the legitimate authority of the caliph; this grave sin rendered him an apostate or infidel, and thus Ali, and all true Muslims, had an obligation to wage jihad until Muawiyah desisted or was subdued. When the arbitration was announced, the Kharijites shouted, "Only God can decide." It was not the job of human beings to counter God's command and sit as judge. As a result, the Kharijites believed that Ali too was now guilty of a grave sin and no longer the legitimate head of the community. This early incident illustrates the basic Kharijite beliefs. They were very pious believers who interpreted the Quran and Sunna (example) of the Prophet literally and absolutely. Therefore, they believed that the Quranic mandate to "command the good and prohibit evil" must be applied rigorously and without compromise. Acts were either good or bad, permitted or forbidden. Similarly, their world was divided sharply into the realms of belief and unbelief, Muslim (followers of God) and non-Muslim (enemies of God), peace and warfare. Faith must be informed by action; public behavior must rigorously conform to their version of Islamic principles if one was to be a Muslim. Therefore, any action contrary to the letter of the law constituted a grave sin that rendered a person a non-Muslim, subject to excommunication (exclusion), warfare, and death unless the person repented. Sinners were not simply backsliders but apostates who were guilty of treason against the community-state. All true believers were obliged to fight and subdue these nominal or self-styled Muslims.

Within their exclusivist view of the world and the nature of the Muslim community, the Kharijites incorporated an egalitarian spirit that maintained that any good Muslim, even a slave, could be the leader, or imam, of the community, provided he had community support. Their puritan absolutism demanded that a leader guilty of sin be deposed.

When the Kharijites broke with Ali, they went about establishing their vision of the true charismatic community based strictly and literally on the Quran and Sunna. Modeling themselves on the example of the Prophet, they first withdrew (hijra) to live together in a bonded community. From their encampments, they waged battle (jihad) against their enemies, seeing themselves as the instruments of God's justice. They were the people of God (paradise) fighting against the people of evil (hell). Because they were God's army struggling in a heavenly crusade against the forces of evil, violence, guerrilla warfare, and revolution were not only legitimate but obligatory in their battle against the sinful usurpers of God's rule. Defeated by Ali at Nahrawan in 658, they continued to lead uprisings and join in revolts against Muawiyah's Umayyad descendants and engaged in guerrilla warfare against subsequent Abbasid caliphs. A moderate branch of the Kharijites, known as the Ibadiyah, followers of Abd Allah ibn Ibad, founded Ibadī imams in North (Tripolitania and Tahert) and East (Zanzibar) Africa, Yemen, and Oman. Their descendants still exist in small numbers in North Africa and are a plurality in Oman. Despite their seeming lack of success in their own times, their outlook has informed contemporary radical groups from Egypt's Takfir wal Hijra and Jamaat al-Jihad to al-Qaeda and ISIS.

### **Shii Islam**

The first civil war between Ali and Muawiyah, which had resulted in the secession of the Kharijites and the alienation of Ali's supporters, came back to haunt the Umayyads. During the reign of Muawiyah's son, Yazid, a second round of civil wars broke out. One of these, the revolt of Ali's son Husayn, would lead to the division of the Islamic community into its two major branches, Sunni and Shii, and shape the worldview of Shii Islam.

When Yazid came to power in 680, Husayn, the son of Ali, was persuaded by a group of Alids in Kufa (Iraq) to lead a rebellion. However, when popular support failed to materialize, Husayn and his small band of followers were slaughtered by an Umayyad army at Karbala. The memory of this tragedy, the "martyrdom" of Alid forces, provided the paradigm of suffering and protest that has guided and inspired Shii Islam. For these partisans (*shia*) of Ali, the original injustice that had denied Ali his succession to Muhammad had been repeated, thwarting the rightful rule of the Prophet's family. Thus, the Shii developed their own distinctive vision of leadership and of history, centered on the martyred family of the Prophet and based on a belief that leadership of the Muslim community belonged to the descendants of Muhammad.



to gain independence when Hasan ibn Zayd founded a Zaydi dynasty in Tabaristan, on the Caspian, in 864. Another Zaydi state was established in Yemen in 893, where it continued to exist until 1963.

In the eighth century, the majority of the Shii community split again into its two major branches in a dispute over succession to the sixth imam, Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 765). Most accepted his younger son, Musa al-Kazim, but some followed Ismail, the elder son. This resulted in the two major Shii communities, the Ithna Asharis, or Twelvers, and the Ismailis (sometimes called the Seveners). The numerical designation of each group stems from a crisis caused by the death or disappearance of their imam and thus the disruption of hereditary succession. For the Twelvers, or Ithna Asharis, the end of imamate succession occurred in 874 with the disappearance of the twelfth imam, the child Muhammad al-Muntazar (Muhammad, the awaited one). Shii theology resolved this dilemma with its doctrines of the absence or **occultation of the imam** and his return in the future as the **Mahdi** (the expected one).

For these Shii, the imam had not died but had disappeared and gone into hiding or seclusion. He would return as a messianic figure, the Mahdi, at the end of the world to vindicate his loyal followers, restore the community to its rightful place, and usher in a perfect Islamic society in which truth and justice will prevail. During the absence of the **hidden imam**, the community was to await his return and be guided by its religious experts, *muftahids*, *ulama* (religious scholars) who interpret God's will, Islamic law, for the community. The Ismaili split into a number of subdivisions. For a major group of Ismailis, the line of imams ended in 760 when Ismail, the designated seventh imam, died before his father. Another group believed that Ismail had not died but was in seclusion and would return as the Mahdi. Others accepted Ismail's son, Muhammad, as imam.

### The Ismailis

The image of the Ismaili today as a prosperous merchant community, led by the Aga Khan, belies their early revolutionary origins.<sup>4</sup> The early Ismaili were a revolutionary missionary movement. They attacked and assassinated Sunni political and religious leaders, seized power, and at their peak, ruled an area that extended from Egypt to the Sind province of India. For the Ismaili, as for Shii in general, the Quran had two meanings, an exoteric, literal meaning and an esoteric, inner teaching. This secret knowledge was given to the Imam and through a process of initiation to his representatives and missionaries. The followers of the imam, as distinguished from the majority of Muslims, constituted a religious elite

The fundamental difference between Sunni and Shii Muslims is the Shii doctrine of the imamate as distinct from the Sunni caliphate. As we have seen, the caliph was the selected or elected successor of the Prophet. He succeeded to political and military leadership but not to Muhammad's religious authority. By contrast, for the Shii, leadership of the Muslim community is vested in the imam (leader), who, although not a prophet, is the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, religious-political leader of the community. He must be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali, the first imam. He is both political leader and religious guide, the final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law. Whereas after the death of Muhammad, Sunni Islam came to place final religious authority for interpreting Islam in the consensus (*iima*) or collective judgment of the community (the consensus of the *ulama*, the traditional religious scholars), the Shii believe in continued divine guidance through their divinely inspired guide, the imam.

Sunni and Shii Muslims also developed differing doctrines concerning the meaning of history. For Sunni historians, early Islamic success and power were signs of God's guidance and rewards to a faithful community as well as validation of Muslim belief and claims. For the Shii, history was the theater for the struggle of an oppressed and disinherited minority community to restore God's rule on earth over the entire community under the imam. A righteous remnant was to persist in God's way against the forces of evil (Satan), as had Ali against Muawiyah and Husayn against the army of Yazid, to reestablish the righteous rule of the imam. The lives of the suffering imams, like that of Husayn, were seen as embodying the oppression and injustice experienced by a persecuted minority community. Realization of a just social order under the imam was to remain a frustrated hope and expectation for centuries as the Islamic community remained under Sunni caliphal governments.

The imam's rule over the entire Muslim community was frustrated not only by "usurper" Sunni caliphs but also by disagreements within the Shii community over succession. This led to three major divisions: Zaydi, Ismaili, and Ithna Ashari or Imami. The Zaydis claimed that Zayd ibn Ali, a grandson of Husayn, was the fifth imam. The majority of the Shii recognized Muhammad al-Baqir and his son Jafar al-Sadiq as rightful heirs to the imamate. Unlike other Shii, who restricted the imamate to the descendants of Ali by his wife Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, Zaydis believed that any descendant of Ali could become imam. They were political activists who, like the Kharijites, believed that the duty to enjoy the good and prohibit evil was incumbent on all Muslims at all times. They, too, rebelled against both Umayyad and Abbasid rule. The Zaydis were the first Shii

The Druze call themselves the unitarians, followers of al-Hakim who embodied and revealed the one true God. Forming a distinct religion, the Druze possess their own scripture, the *Rasail al-Hikma* (the Books of Wisdom), and law. The Books of Wisdom are a collection of letters from al-Muktana, al-Hamza, and al-Hakim. Druze law, places of prayer, and religious leadership replace the Sharia, mosque, and *ulama*. The community is hierarchically organized. The two major divisions are the majority of ordinary members, the so-called ignorant, and the wise, those men and women who are initiated and as such can read the scriptures and are expected to lead an exemplary life of regular prayer and abstinence from wine, tobacco, and other stimulants. They can be recognized by the quality of their lives and their special dress or white turbans. Among the wise are a group of religious leaders called *shaykhs*, noted for their learning and piety, who preside over meetings, weddings, and funerals. The *rais* (chief), who is selected from one of the leading families, is the head of the community.

Historically, the Druze have been a secretive and closed community. They have steadfastly kept their texts, beliefs, and practices secret, carefully guarding them from outsiders. Regarded by both Sunni and Shii as heretics and living in a Sunni-dominated world, they too have followed the Shii doctrine of *taqiyya*, with its double meaning of caution and dissimulation for survival in a hostile world. Thus, although they do not observe the fast of Ramadan or pilgrimage to Mecca, when necessary they have outwardly followed the prevailing Sunni faith and a modified form of Hanafi (Islamic) law. Druze beliefs and practices emphasize solidarity; they neither accept converts nor marry outside the faith. They practice monogamy and endogamy (marrying within their group) and discourage divorce. The seven pillars or basic religious obligations reinforce a strong sense of community. They include speaking the truth to other members (although not necessarily to nonbelievers), mutual defense, and living separately from unbelievers. Unlike other monotheistic faiths, the Druze believe in the transmigration of souls until perfected souls cease to be reborn and ascend to the stars. At the end of time, when Hakim and Hamza return to establish a reign of justice, God will reward the faithful by being placed close to Him. The Druze have survived in Syria, Israel, and especially Lebanon, where they number several hundred thousand.

#### **Law and Mysticism**

Dissatisfaction with Umayyad rule also resulted in the development of nonrevolutionary reform movements within society. The rapid geographic expansion and conquests brought the rise of new centers of power and

wealth, an influx of "foreign" ways, and greater social stratification. The very success of the Umayyad empire contained the seeds of its downfall. With wealth and power came corruption and abuse of power, symbolized by the new lifestyle of its flourishing, cosmopolitan capital and the growth of new cities. This was accompanied by the infiltration of new ideas and practices. The strengths that came with acculturation were offset, in the eyes of some, by innovations that were seen as undermining the older Arab way of life. In addition to the disaffected Kharijites and Alids, a host of other critics sprang up who contrasted an idealized Medinan Islamic community with the realities of Umayyad life. This gave rise, in particular, to the growth of two Islamic movements or institutions, the *ulama* (religious scholars) and the Sufis (mystics).

For a growing number of pious Muslims, who would become a religious and social class in the Muslim community known as the *ulama* (plural of *alim*, "learned" or scholar), Arab power and wealth, not Islamic commitment and ideals, inspired and unified the empire. The behavior of many caliphs, the intrigues of court life, and the privileged status of new elites were regarded as having little to do with Islam. What the Umayyads had done was pragmatically necessary, because the Arabs had not had the institutions and trained personnel required for empire building.

Their critics, however, believed that the Umayyad system produced a society based more on the command of the caliph than the command of God. They emphasized the need to understand and consolidate a life and society informed by revelation. God's law, they argued, should provide the blueprint or pattern for an Islamic society. Believing that Umayyad institutions and law should be brought into line with Islamic principles, they wanted to consolidate Islamic law and make it the central guiding principle of Islamic society.

The outcome of this movement was a burst of activity that would result in the development of Islamic religious sciences. Pious Muslims from all walks of life devoted themselves to the study of the Quran, Arabic language and linguistics, and the collection and examination of Prophetic traditions. In particular, to safeguard their beliefs and limit the power of the caliph, many devoted themselves to the formulation and explication of Islamic law. They also incorporated local customs or customary laws; non-Arab customs or precedents not in conflict with Islamic norms were considered normative. In this way, elements from Roman Byzantine (including Roman provincial) law, Talmudic law, the canon law of the Eastern churches, and Persian Sasanian law entered Islamic law during its formative period. By the late Umayyad period, centers of law could be found in many cities of the empire.



Reaction to the worldly excesses of empire contributed to the development of mysticism as well as law. Luxury, the pursuit of conquest and wealth, the transformation of the caliphate into a dynastic monarchy with the trappings of imperial court life, and the doubtful moral character of some of the Umayyad caliphs struck some pious Muslims as standing in sharp contrast to the early example of Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the relative simplicity of life in Medina. They believed that Umayyad goals of power and wealth conflicted with and distracted from the true center and goal of Muslim life, Allah. Therefore, the early mystics preached a message stressing renunciation and detachment from worldly concerns and attachments for the pursuit of the "real" God. As we shall see, mysticism or Sufism became a major popular force within Islam that swept across the Muslim world, spreading its spirit of love and devotion.

### **Growth of "Islamic" Revolt**

Despite the accomplishments of Umayyad rule, by the eighth century (720) anti-Umayyad sentiment had spread and intensified. It encompassed a variety of disaffected factions: non-Arab Muslims who denounced their second-class status vis-à-vis Arab Muslims as contrary to Islamic egalitarianism; Kharijites and Shii who continued to regard the Umayyads as usurpers; Arab Muslims in Mecca, Medina, and Iraq who resented the privileged status of Syrian families; and, finally, pious Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike, who viewed the new cosmopolitan lifestyle of luxury and social privilege as foreign and an unwarranted innovation or departure from their established, Islamic way of life.

Opposition forces shared a discontent with Umayyad rule as well as a tendency to legitimate their own claims and agenda Islamically; they condemned Umayyad practice and policies as un-Islamic innovations and called for a return to the Quran and the practices of the Prophet and the early Medinan community:

The ideology of a restoration of primitive Islam, with variants reflecting different trends, had conquered the masses, and, with the support of the majority of the learned men, became part of the programme of all, or nearly all, the leaders of parties. It triumphed when the Abbasids adopted it as their slogan.<sup>2</sup>

By 747, an opposition movement, with substantial Shii support, rallied behind a Persian named Abu Muslim. In 750, the Umayyads fell, and Abu al-Abbas, a descendant of the Prophet's uncle al-Abbas, was proclaimed caliph. Islam's capital was moved from Damascus to the newly created Baghdad, known in Arabic as the City of Peace. Under Abbasid rule, the

Islamic community would become an empire remembered not only for its wealth and political power but also for its extraordinary cultural activity and accomplishments.

### **The Abbasid Caliphate: The Flowering of Islamic Civilization**

Abbasid rule of the Islamic community ushered in an era of strong centralized government, great economic prosperity, and a remarkable civilization. Abbasid caliphs could be as autocratic and ruthless as many of their Umayyad predecessors. Indeed, Abu al-Abbas did not hesitate to take the title "the blood shedder" (*al-saffah*); he came to be remembered as Abu Abbas al-Saffah. The Abbasid caliphs consolidated their power by crushing their Shii supporters as well as their opponents. This betrayal further alienated the Shii from the Sunni majority. The name "Sunni" comes from their self-designation as *ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamaa*, those who follow the Prophet's example and thus belong to his society or community.

The Abbasids came to power under the banner of Islam, legitimating their seizure of power and dynastic reign Islamically. They became the great patrons of an emerging religious class, the *ulama* (religious scholars). They supported the development of Islamic scholarship and disciplines, built mosques, and established schools.

The Abbasids refined Umayyad practice, borrowing heavily from Persian culture, with its divinely ordained system of government. The caliph's claim to rule by divine mandate was symbolized by the trans-formation of his title from Successor or Deputy of the Prophet to Deputy of God and by the appropriation of the Persian-inspired title, Shadow of God on Earth. The ruler's exalted status was further reinforced by his magnificent palace, his retinue of attendants, and the introduction of a court etiquette appropriate for an emperor. Thus, subjects were required to bow before the caliph, kissing the ground, a symbol of the caliph's absolute power. Persian influence was especially evident in the government and military. Preempting critics of the previous regime, the Arab Syrian-dominated military aristocracy was replaced by a salaried army and bureaucracy in which non-Arab Muslims, especially Persians, played a major role. The Abbasids explained this change in terms of Islamic egalitarianism. More often than not, however, it was royal favor and fear, symbolized by the royal executioner who stood by the side of the caliph that brought him prestige and motivated obedience.

The early centuries of Abbasid rule were marked by an unparalleled splendor and economic prosperity whose magnificence came to be immortalized in the *Arabian Nights* (*The Thousand and One Nights*), with its legendary exploits of the exemplary caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809).



a departure from the past, Abbasid success was based not on conquest but on trade, commerce, industry, and agriculture. The enormous wealth and resources of the caliphs enabled them to become great patrons of art and culture and thus create the more significant and lasting legacy of the Abbasid period, Islamic civilization. The development of Islamic law, the Sharia, constitutes their greatest contribution to Islam. Because part of the indictment of the Umayyads had been their failure to implement an effective Islamic legal system, the Abbasids gave substantial support to legal development. The early law schools, which had begun only during the late Umayyad period (c. 720), flourished under caliphal patronage of the *ulama*. Although Islam has no clergy or priesthood, by the eighth century the *ulama* had become a professional elite of religious leaders, a distinct social class within Muslim society. Their prestige and authority rested on a reputation for learning in Islamic studies: the Quran, traditions of the Prophet, law. Because of their expertise, they became the jurists, theologians, and educators in Muslim society, the interpreters and guardians of Islamic law and tradition. The judge (*qadi*) administered the law, as it was developed by the early jurists, firmly establishing the Islamic court system.

In addition to law, the Abbasids were also committed patrons of culture and the arts. The process of Arabization, begun during the late Umayyad period, was completed by the end of the ninth century. Arabic language and tradition penetrated and modified the cultures of conquered territories. Arabic displaced local languages—Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic, and Greek—becoming the language of common discourse, government, and culture throughout much of the empire. Arabic was no longer solely the language of Muslims from Arabia but the language of literature and public discourse for the multiethnic group of new Arabic-speaking peoples, especially the large number of non-Arab converts, many of whom were Persian. Translation centers were created. From the seventh to the ninth centuries, manuscripts were obtained from the far reaches of the empire and beyond and translated from their original languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Persian) into Arabic. Thus, the best works of Hellenistic literature, philosophy, and the sciences were made accessible: Aristotle, Plato, Galen, Hippocrates, Euclid, and Ptolemy. The genesis of Islamic civilization was indeed a collaborative effort, incorporating the learning and wisdom of many cultures and languages.

As in government administration, Christians and Jews, who had been the intellectual and bureaucratic backbone of the Persian and Byzantine empires, participated in the process as well as Muslims. This "ecumenical"

effort was evident at the Caliph al-Mamun's (r. 813–33) House of Wisdom and at the translation center headed by the renowned scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq, a Nestorian Christian. This period of translation and assimilation was followed by one of Muslim intellectual and artistic creativity. Muslims ceased to be merely disciples and became masters, in the process producing Islamic civilization, dominated by the Arabic language and Islam's view of life: "It was these two things, their language and their faith, which were the great contribution of the Arab invaders to the new and original civilization which developed under their aegis."<sup>77</sup> Major contributions were made in many fields: literature and philosophy, algebra and geometry, science and medicine, art and architecture. Towering intellectual giants dominated this period: al-Razi (865–925), al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna, 980–1037), Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes, d. 1198), al-Biruni (973–1048), and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Islam had challenged the world politically; it now did so culturally. Great urban cultural centers in Cordoba, Baghdad, Cairo, Nishapur, and Palermo emerged and eclipsed Christian Europe, mired in the Dark Ages. The activities of these centers are reflected in the development of philosophy and science.

Islamic philosophy was the product of a successful transplant from Greek to Islamic soil, where it flourished from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Muslim philosophers appropriated Hellenistic thought (Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus), wrote commentaries, and extended the teachings and insights of Greek philosophy within an Islamic context and worldview. The result was Islamic philosophy, indebted to Hellenism but with its own Islamic character. Its contribution was of equal importance to the West. Islamic philosophy became the primary vehicle for the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Europe. The West reappropriated its lost heritage as European scholars traveled to major centers of Islamic learning, retranslating the Greek philosophers and learning from the writings of their great Muslim disciples: men like al-Farabi, who had come to be known as "the second teacher or master" (the first being Aristotle), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), remembered as "the great commentator" on Aristotle. Thus we find many of the great medieval Christian philosophers and theologians (Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard, Roger Bacon, John Duns Scotus) acknowledging their intellectual debt to their Muslim predecessors.

The enormous accomplishments of Islamic philosophy and science were the product of men of genius, multitalented intellectuals (who often mastered the major disciplines of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy). They were the "renaissance" men of classical Islam. Avicenna's

reflections on his own training typify the backgrounds of many of the great intellectuals of this period:

I busied myself with the study of the *Fusus al-Hikam* [a treatise by al-Farabi] and other commentaries on physics and mathematics, and the doors of knowledge opened before me. Then I took up medicine. Medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and in a very short time I undoubtedly excelled in it, so that physicians of merit studied under me. I also attended the sick, and the doors of medical treatments based on experience opened before me to an extent that cannot be described. At the same time I carried on debates and controversies in jurisprudence. At this point I was sixteen years old.

Then, for a year and a half, I devoted myself to study. I resumed the study of logic and all parts of philosophy. During this time I never slept the whole night through and did nothing but study all day long. Whenever I was puzzled by a problem I would go to the mosque, pray, and beg the Creator of All to reveal to me that which was hidden from me and to make easy for me that which was difficult. Then at night I would return home, put a lamp in front of me, and set to work reading and writing.... I went on like this until I was firmly grounded in all sciences and mastered them as far as was humanly possible.... Thus I mastered logic, physics, and mathematics.

The Sultan of Bukhara was stricken by an illness which baffled the physicians.... I appeared before him and joined them in treating him and distinguished myself in his service.

One day I asked his permission to go into their library, look at their books, and read the medical ones.... I went into a palace of many rooms, each with trunks full of books, back-to-back. In one room there were books on Arabic and poetry, in another books on jurisprudence, and similarly in each room books on a single subject. I asked for those I needed read these books, made use of them, and thus knew the rank of every author in its own subject.... When I reached the age of eighteen, I had completed the study of all these sciences. At that point my memory was better, whereas today my learning is riper.<sup>7</sup>

Islamic science was an integrated and synthetic area of knowledge. It was integrated in that Muslim scientists, who were often philosophers or mystics as well, viewed the physical universe from within their Islamic worldview and context as a manifestation of the presence of God, the Creator and source of unity and harmony in nature.<sup>8</sup> Islamic science was also a grand synthesis informed by indigenous and foreign sources (Arab, Persian, Hellenistic, Indian) and transformed by scholars and scientists in urban centers throughout the world of Islam. Thus, it constituted a major component of Islamic civilization and, in the eyes of many Muslims, a

worthy complement to Islam's international political order. As one Muslim intellectual observed:

Islamic science came into being from a wedding between the spirit that issued from the Quranic revelation and the existing sciences of various civilizations which Islam inherited and which it transmuted through its spiritual power into a new substance, at once different from and continuous with what had existed before it. The international and cosmopolitan nature of Islamic civilization, derived from the universal character of the Islamic revelation and reflected in the geographical spread of the Islamic world, enabled it to create the first science of a truly international nature in human history.<sup>10</sup>

The legacy of Islamic civilization was that of a brilliant, rich culture. Its contributions proved to be as significant for the West, which in subsequent centuries appropriated and incorporated its knowledge and wisdom.

Thus during the Abbasid period, the comprehensiveness of Islam was clearly manifested and delineated:

Islam—the offspring of Arabia and the Arabian Prophet—was not only a system of belief and cult. It was also a system of state, society, laws, thought and art—a civilization with religion as its unifying, eventually dominating factor.<sup>11</sup>

For Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the political and cultural life of a vast empire, consisting of many tribal, ethnic, and religious groups, was brought within the framework of the Arabic language and Islamic faith.<sup>12</sup> Islamic civilization was the result of a dynamic, creative process as Muslims borrowed freely from other cultures. It proceeded from a sense of mission, power, and superiority. Muslims were the dominant force—masters not victims, colonizers not the colonized. The new ideas and practices were Arabized and Islamized. It was a process of change characterized by continuity with the faith and practice of Muhammad. Unlike the modern period, Muslims controlled the process of assimilation and acculturation. Their autonomy and identity were not seriously threatened by the specter of political and cultural domination. As with the early conquests and expansion of Islam, Muslims then (and now) regarded this brilliant period as a sign of God's favor and a validation of Islam's message and the Muslim community's universal mission.

The extraordinary spread and development of Islam was not without its religious conflicts. The same concern that had motivated the attempt by the *ulama* to preserve Islam in the face of caliphal whim and uncritical adoption of foreign, un-Islamic practices led to conflicts between the



*al-Imama* and those whom they sometimes regarded as their competitors, the Sufis, philosophers, Shites, and political establishment. The *al-Imama* delineation of law as the embodiment of the straight path of Islam set the criteria for belief and behavior in intellectual, social, and moral life and the pattern for orthodoxy (correct belief) or, perhaps more accurately, orthopraxy (correct practice). This vision of Muslim life as the observance of God's law did not always coincide comfortably with the Sufi emphasis on the interior path of contemplation and personal religious experience or the tendency of philosophy to give primacy to reason over the unquestioned acceptance of revelation. The tension between religious scholars on the one hand and philosophers and Sufis on the other was reflected in the life and work of a towering giant in the history of Islam, indeed in the history of religions, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.

Ironically, the golden age of Islamic civilization paralleled the progressive political fragmentation of the universal caliphate. The relative peace, prosperity, and unity of the Islamic community, epitomized during the rule of Harun al-Rashid, was challenged internally by competing groups and externally by the Fatimids and the Crusades.

Governing a vast empire extending from the Atlantic to central Asia proved impossible. Abbasid political unity deteriorated rapidly from 861 to 945 as religious (Kharji and Shi'i) and regional differences, and particularly competing political aspirations, precipitated a series of revolts and secessionist movements. In Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq itself, local governors, who were often army commanders, asserted their independence as heads of semiautonomous states. These regional rulers (amirs, or commanders), while continuing to give formal, nominal allegiance to the caliph, exercised actual rule over their territories, establishing their own hereditary dynasties. By 945, the disintegration of the universal caliphate was evident when the Buyids (Buyayhids), a Shi'i dynasty from western Persia, invaded Baghdad and seized power, and their leader assumed the title commander-in-chief or commander of the commanders. Although Shi'i, they did not change the Sunni orientation of the empire and left the caliph on his throne as a titular leader of a fictionally unified empire. The Abbasids continued to reign but not rule. With an Abbasid on the throne as a symbol of legitimate government and Muslim unity, real power passed to a series of Persian (Buyid) and Turkic (Seljuq) military dynasties or sultanates. The sultan ("power," ruler), as chief of the commanders, governed a politically fragmented empire as the caliph helplessly stood by.

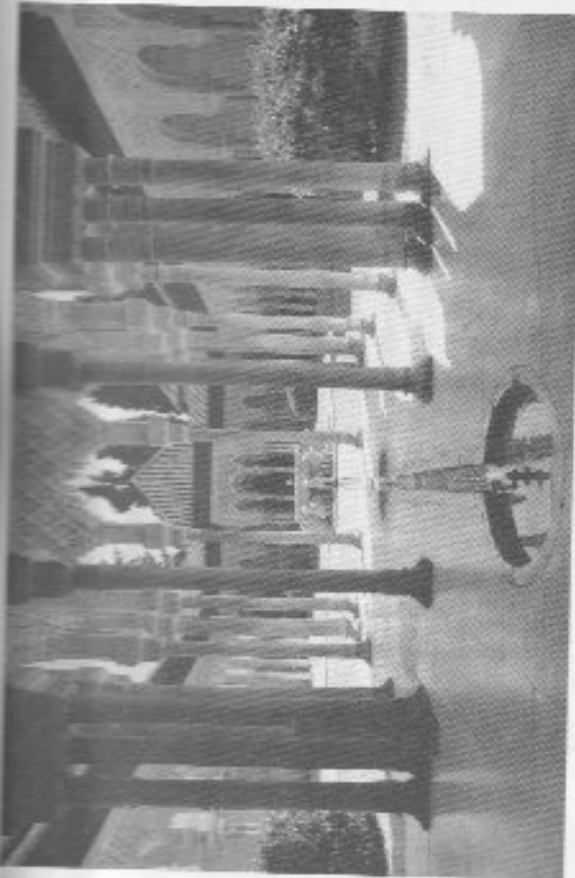
Sunni Islam was also threatened by two other developments during the Abbasid caliphate—the rise of the Fatimid dynasty and the Crusades. The Ismaili rebellion in Tunisia and subsequent establishment of a Shi'i

imamate in Egypt constituted a serious religio-political challenge. The Fatimid rulers claimed to be Imams and were not content to simply govern Egypt but, as we have seen, followed other Ismaili groups in sending their missionaries to spread their Shi'i doctrine. This Shi'i challenge elicited a religious as well as a military response as Sunni *al-Imama* moved to protect their version of orthodoxy in the face of Shi'i innovations. They were supported in their endeavors by the royal court, which wished to counter Shi'i anticaliphal sentiments. This contributed to a growing tendency among the Sunni *al-Imama* to preserve the unity of Islam through greater self-definition and standardization. In the face of the internal breakup of the central empire, this meant achieving a consensus on the corpus of Islamic law to protect and maintain the sociopolitical order.

## ISLAM AND THE WEST: THE CRUSADES AND MUSLIM RESPONSE TO MILITANT CHRISTIANITY

Despite their common monotheistic roots, the history of Christianity and Islam has more often than not been marked by confrontation rather than peaceful coexistence and dialogue. For the Christian West, Islam is the religion of the sword; for Muslims, the Christian West is epitomized by the armies of the Crusades. From the earliest decades of Islamic history, Christianity and Islam have been locked in a political and theological struggle, because Islam, unlike other world religions, has threatened the political and religious ascendancy of Christianity. Muslim armies overran the Eastern Roman empire, Spain, and the Mediterranean from Sicily to Anatolia. At the same time, Islam challenged Christian religious claims and authority. Coming after Christianity, Islam claimed to supersede Christian revelation. Although acknowledging God's revelation and revering God's messengers, from Adam through Jesus, as prophets, Islam rejected the doctrine of Christ's divinity, the finality of Christian revelation, and the authority of the church. Instead, it called on all, Jews and Christians as well, to accept the finality of revelation and prophecy in Islam, to join the Islamic community, and to live under Islamic rule. Islam's universal mission had resulted in the spread of Muslim rule over Christian territories and Christian hearts. Conversions were initially slow, but by the eleventh century large numbers of Christians living under Muslim rule were converting to Islam. Even those who had remained Christian were becoming Arabized, adopting Arabic language and manners. The European Christian response was, with few exceptions, hostile, intolerant, and belligerent. Muhammad was vilified as an imposter and



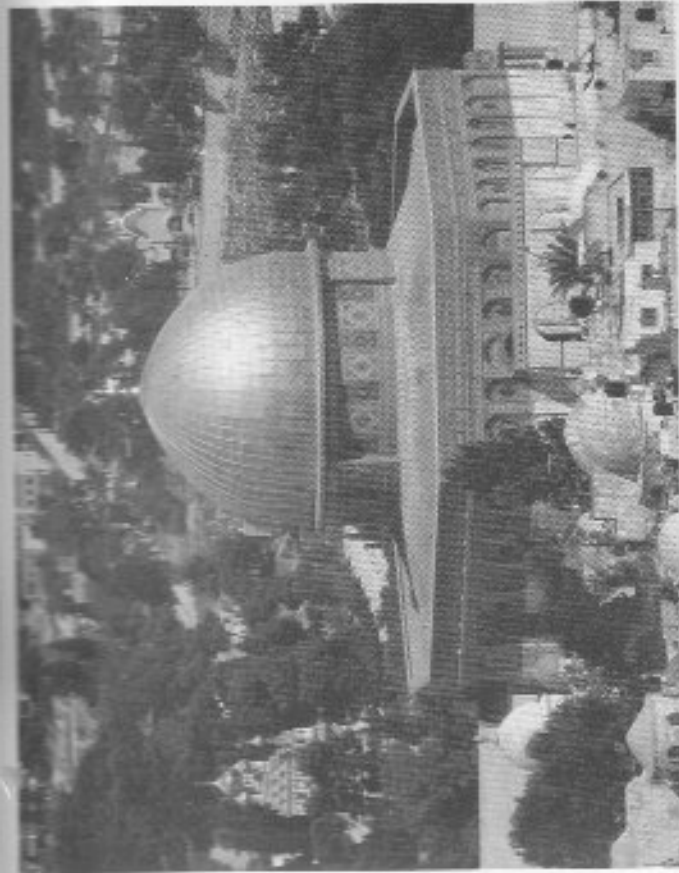


Courtyard of the Lions, Alhambra Palace, the fourteenth-century residence of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada, Spain, one of the remarkable monuments remaining from the several centuries of Muslim rule in Andalusia, when Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and produced a high culture.

identified as the anti-Christ. Islam was dismissed as a religion of the sword led by an infidel driven by a lust for power and women. This attitude was preserved and perpetuated in literature such as the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante consigned Muhammad to the lowest level of hell. Christian fears were fully realized as Islam became a world power and civilization while Christianity staggered and stagnated in its Dark Ages.

By the eleventh century, Christendom's response to Islam took two forms: the struggle to reconquer (the *Reconquista*) Spain (1000–1492) and Italy and Sicily (1061), and the undertaking of another series of Christian holy wars—the Crusades (1095–1453). Two myths pervade Western perceptions of the Crusades: first, that the Crusades were simply motivated by a religious desire to liberate **Jerusalem**, and second, that Christendom ultimately triumphed.

Jerusalem was a sacred city for all three Abrahamic faiths. When the Arab armies took Jerusalem in 638, they occupied a center whose shrines had made it a major pilgrimage site in Christendom. Churches and the Christian population were left unmolested. Jews, long banned from living there by Christian rulers, were permitted to return, live, and worship in the city of David and Solomon. Muslims proceeded to build a shrine, the **Dome of the Rock**, and a mosque, the al-Aqsa, near the area formerly



The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is part of a complex that includes the Masjid al-Aqsa, or Farthest Mosque, in the third holiest city for Muslims. Built in the Umayyad period, the shrine encloses the rock said to be the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven during the miraculous Night Journey.

occupied by Herod's Temple and close by the Wailing Wall, the last remnant of Solomon's temple.

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a major holy site and a place of pilgrimage erected by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, was completed in 692. The famous shrine is built on the spot from which Muslims believe Muhammad ascended to God and then returned to the world. In this story, one of the grand themes of Islamic scholarship and popular piety, the Prophet, in the company of the angel Gabriel, was transported at night from the Kaba in Mecca to Jerusalem. From there, he ascended to the heavens and the presence of God.

Five centuries of peaceful coexistence elapsed before political events and an imperial-papal power play led to centuries-long series of so-called holy wars that pitted Christendom against Islam and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and distrust.

In 1071, a Seljuq (Abbasid) army decisively defeated the Byzantine army. The Byzantine emperor, Alexius I, fearing that all Asia Minor would be overrun, called on fellow Christian rulers and the pope to come to the

and of Constantinople by undertaking a "pilgrimage" or crusade to free Jerusalem and its environs from Muslim rule. For Pope Urban II, the "defense" of Jerusalem provided an opportunity to gain recognition for papal authority and its role in legitimating the actions of temporal rulers. A divided Christendom rallied as warriors from France and other parts of Western Europe (called "Franks" by Muslims) united against the "infidel" in a holy war whose ostensible goal was the holy city. This was ironic because, as one scholar has observed, "God may indeed have wished it, but there is certainly no evidence that the Christians of Jerusalem did, or that anything extraordinary was occurring to pilgrims there to prompt such a response at that moment in history."<sup>3</sup> In fact, Christian rulers, knights, and merchants were driven primarily by political and military ambitions and the promise of the economic and commercial (trade and banking) rewards that would accompany the establishment of a Latin kingdom in the Middle East. However, the appeal to religion captured the popular mind and gained its support.

The contrast between the behavior of the Christian and Muslim armies in the First Crusade has been etched deeply in the collective memory of Muslims. In 1099, the Crusaders stormed Jerusalem and established Christian sovereignty over the Holy Land. They left no Muslim survivors; women and children were massacred. The Noble Sanctuary, the Haram al-Sharif, was desecrated as the Dome of the Rock was converted into a church and the al-Aqsa mosque, renamed the Temple of Solomon, became a residence for the king. Latin principalities were established in Antioch, Edessa, Tripoli, and Tyre. The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted less than a century. In 1187, Salah al-Din (Saladin), having reestablished Abbasid rule over Fatimid Egypt, led his army in a fierce battle and recaptured Jerusalem. The Muslim army was as magnanimous in victory as it had been tenacious in battle. Civilians were spared; churches and shrines were generally left untouched. The striking differences in military conduct were epitomized by the two dominant figures of the Crusades: Saladin and Richard the Lion-Hearted. The chivalrous Saladin was faithful to his word and compassionate toward noncombatants. Richard accepted the surrender of Acre and then proceeded to massacre all its inhabitants, including women and children, despite promises to the contrary.

By the thirteenth century the Crusades degenerated into intra-Christian wars, papal wars against its Christian enemies who were denounced as heretics and schismatics. The result was a weakening, rather than a strengthening, of Christendom. As Roger Savory has observed:

An ironical but undeniable result of the Crusades was the deterioration of the position of Christian minorities in the Holy Land. Formerly

these minorities had been accorded rights and privileges under Muslim rule, but, after the establishment of the Latin Kingdom, they found themselves treated as "louthsome schismatics." In an effort to obtain relief from persecution by their fellow Christians, many abandoned their Nestorian or Monophysite beliefs, and adopted either Roman Catholicism, or—the supreme irony—Islam.<sup>4</sup>

By the fifteenth century, the Crusades had spent their force. Although they were initially launched to unite Christendom and turn back the Muslim armies, the opposite had occurred. Amid a bitterly divided Christendom, Constantinople fell in 1453 before Turkish Muslim conquerors. This Byzantine capital was renamed Istanbul and became the seat of the Ottoman empire.

### THE SULTANATE PERIOD: MEDIEVAL MUSLIM EMPIRES

By the thirteenth century, the Abbasid empire was a sprawling, fragmented, deteriorating commonwealth of semiautonomous states, sultanates, governed by military commanders. It was an empire in name only. The fictional unity of a united Islamic community symbolized by the caliph in Baghdad stood in sharp contrast to the underlying reality of its political and religious divisions. Invaded and ruled successively by the Buyids and then the Seljuks, Baghdad was completely overrun in the thirteenth century by the Mongols. Pouring out of Central Asia, the armies of Genghis Khan had subjugated much of Central Asia, China, Russia, and the Near East. In 1258, the Mongol army under Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, captured Baghdad, burned and pillaged the city, slaughtered its Muslim inhabitants, and executed the caliph and his family. Only Egypt and Syria escaped the Mongol conquest of the Muslim empire. In Egypt, the Mamluks ("the owned ones"), Turkish slave soldiers who served as a sort of praetorian guard, seized power from their Ayyubid masters. The Mamluk sultanate successfully resisted the Mongols and ruled until 1517.

Although the destruction of Baghdad and the abolition of the Abbasid caliphate brought an end to the caliphal period and seemed to many an irreversible blow to Muslim power, by the fifteenth century Muslim fortunes had been reversed. The central caliphate was replaced by a chain of dynamic Muslim sultanates or states, each ruled by a sultan, which eventually extended from Africa to Southeast Asia, from Timbuktu to Mindanao, as Islam penetrated Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. Among the principal missionaries of Islam were traders and Sufi brotherhoods.