



Peoples and
Cultures of the
**MIDDLE
EAST**

SECOND EDITION

Daniel G. Bates · Annal Rassam

2

Islam: The Prophet and the Religion

In a debate more than a little reminiscent of earlier ones in Europe, the specter of militant Islam, antithetical to Western civilization, has again been brought to the fore. Spurred in part by the challenge of a controversial thesis by the political scientist Samuel Huntington (1993), Western intellectuals and politicians alike have come to view Islam with apprehension. Huntington's thesis is that following the collapse of communism, a new phase of world politics is emerging in which culture will be the main source of great divisions and confrontations among people. In his view, "Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, and the separation of church and state often have little resonance in Islamic cultures." While he cites other so-called civilizations such as Hinduism and Confucianism as also alien to these values, it is Islam as the world's fastest growing religion that is the main target of his argument.¹

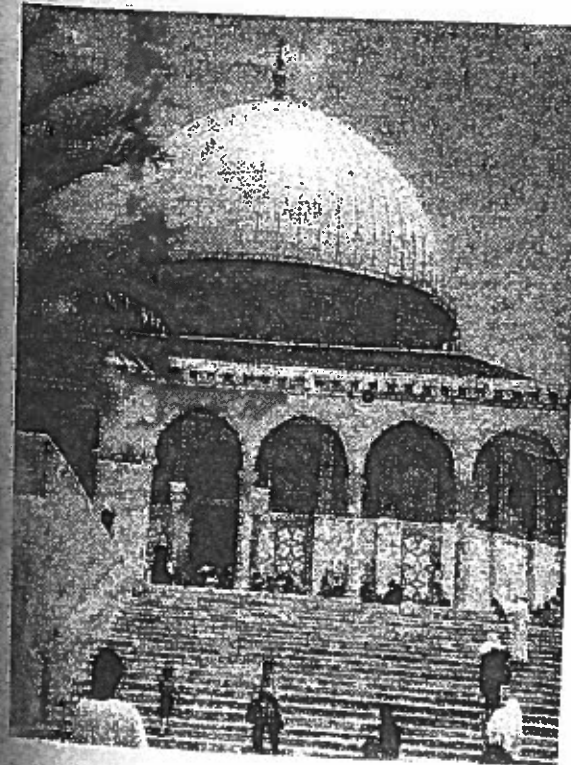
While we do not agree with the implications of Huntington's thesis, it is important to note that in various forms its main assumptions are reflected in popular perceptions and media representations of Islam and especially the Middle East. In fact, similarly distorted representations with their implied threats are often used by local politicians in the Middle East to justify political ends where the support of Western public opinion is desired. In order to understand any ideology and historical tradition as complex and diverse as Islam, one has to begin with some very basic knowledge of its history and tenets. This chapter will sketch the main beliefs and early history of Islam. In Chapter 3 we shall explore the diversity in belief and practice that is also Islam and that

¹ See Roy P. Mottahedeh (1995) for a thoughtful and measured academic response. A very interesting Islamic response was the 1996 Istanbul "Dialogue of Civilizations," organized by a prominent religious leader, Felhullah Gülen, to which representatives of all faiths were invited (Uğur Kömeçoğlu [personal communication]).

justifiably can be termed Islamic culture. One point to remember is that the origin and spiritual roots of Islam are in the Middle East and, more than any other factor, it defines the area culturally.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,
Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe,
The Merciful, the Compassionate,
Ruler on the Day of Judgement.
Thee alone we worship, Thee alone we ask for aid.
Guide us in the straight path,
The path of those whom thou has favored,
Not of those against whom thou art wrathful,
Nor of those who go astray.

This prayer, the *fatiha* or opening chapter of the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam, is one of the world's most often recited sacred verses. Of the billion or so people who profess Islam, a great number direct this praise to God four times before each of their five daily prayers, as well as before embarking on any important task or journey. Uttering these words, a traveler setting out from Fez in Morocco on a journey eastward to Afghanistan will pass through countries that differ in climate, language, and customs, but everywhere he or she will be



View of the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem, built in 691 A.D. It is considered the third holiest site to Muslims.

identified as a member of the universal community of the faithful, the *umma*. In each of the countries on the way the traveler will hear the public call to prayer chanted by the *muezzin* from the minarets of mosques, and nowadays almost always amplified through loudspeakers. The call that beckons the believers to prayer proclaims the central article of faith for all Muslim peoples: "I profess that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is his Messenger." This simple statement is regarded as the most fundamental part of the Islamic creed. Its threefold public recitation in Arabic is, for all intents and purposes, sufficient to make one a convert to Islam. Having spoken these words in seriousness, one becomes a member of the vast community of the *umma*, subject to its laws and recipient of its support.

THE SCOPE OF ISLAM

Despite evident diversity in both expressed belief and observed practice, those individuals who profess Islam thereby proclaim their membership in a community that transcends ethnic and national boundaries. The shared sense of one Islam, eternal and immutable, is itself a distinguishing and fundamental characteristic of the faith, for it irrevocably sets apart those who have accepted God's final prophecy from those who have not. Islam is a universalist religion like Christianity and Buddhism to which every person can belong. It is one of the great ideological movements in world history. It has created a community and endowed its members with a distinct identity; at the same time, it is an ideology projecting an ideal society and a utopian vision.

Viewed historically, it is evident that Islam draws on many sources of belief and practice. It is, of course, futile to attempt an acceptable universal definition of the beliefs and practices of any living religion, and Islam, like all religions that claim universal validity, is best viewed as an ongoing, ever-changing, living tradition. One aspect of this complex tradition in Islam is the set of beliefs and history recorded in scriptures that are passed on and reproduced from generation to generation. This aspect cannot be overstressed if one is to understand the role of Islam in Middle Eastern societies. This written repository of belief and history is, by and large, the domain of religious scholars who thus come to exercise considerable power and authority as well as providing a major source of cultural continuity. Islamic scripture and its scholarly interpretations might be thought of as constituting the formal expression of the Islamic tradition.²

In analyzing complex literate societies, it is often useful to distinguish the systems of belief and practice of the learned or the elite from the understandings of the common people. While the perceptions of Islam by the learned

² For a good introduction to Islam and Islamic institutions, see Fazlur Rahman (1979). See also John Esposito (1988) and Ahmed Akbar (1999).

and religious specialists will vary by region and sect, perhaps even making it impossible to establish a single shared dogma, still the Islam (or Islams, as some have said) of the learned displays less variation than do the beliefs and practices of the common people. This analytic distinction is often described as one between the Great or Universalistic Tradition and the Little or Local Tradition. Muslims themselves continue to debate orthodoxy and what constitutes true belief and practice, but the analytic fact remains that variation in practice and interpretation is inevitable in a living religion. How people understand, interpret, and act upon Islamic principles defines what Islam is at any given time for a particular community.³

Clearly, each of these two aspects or traditions of Islam informs the other. Formal or scriptural Islam can be seen at the same time as both the source of an ideal code and as a set of notions against which the reality of human behavior can be measured. It is, in fact, as we shall see later, a primary source for the establishment and exercise of law. Equally, this ideal code or formal system of belief itself reflects an ever-changing experience.

THE RISE OF ISLAM

One of the three great monotheistic religions of the world, Islam arose in the full light of history. Developing six centuries after Christianity, it rapidly achieved astounding success. At the time of his death, in A.D. 632, its founder, the Prophet Muhammad, was the undisputed ruler of most of Arabia. In fact, a mere decade after his death, the state he had founded had met and defeated the armies of the two great empires in the region, the Byzantine and the Sassanian. The Arab Muslim and the Persian Sassanian armies first met in A.D. 626 in southern Iraq at the battle of Qadisiyya in which the Persian emperor was defeated and forced to retreat. A second and decisive battle took place in A.D. 651 which effectively put an end to the Sassanian Empire and opened up Persia and beyond to the Muslim Arabs. By A.D. 732, one hundred years after the death of Muhammad, the Muslim Empire of his successors extended from France to India.⁴ Continuing to gain adherents, Islam is still the most rapidly expanding religion in the world, especially on the African continent.

In order to understand and appreciate Islam as a religious, political, and social force, we turn our attention briefly to sixth-century Arabia, the birthplace of Muhammad. Like other ideological systems, religions evolve in specific economic and political contexts. They not only reflect the social tensions of the moment but also themselves shape ongoing processes of change. Islam has its

³ See D. F. Eickelman and J. Piscatori (1996); see also Reinhold Loeffler (1988).

⁴ For an interesting, if somewhat idiosyncratic, general historical treatment of the origins, spread, and development of Islam, see Marshall Hodgson (1974). Bernard Lewis (1993) is an invaluable concise handbook.

origins in the pervasive social and economic transformations that were taking place in Arabian society in the sixth century. At the same time, as a social and political force in its own right, it contributed to the transformation of Arabian society and eventually of societies beyond.

The Arabian Peninsula connects the lands of the Levant with the Indian Ocean, and from antiquity has served as the crossroads between the great empires of the Mediterranean and the Far East. Although little is known about the early inhabitants of central and northern Arabia, it appears that many were nomadic pastoralists and that they were organized in tribes and confederations that sometimes united nomad and oasis dweller together. Local resources alone were probably not sufficient to sustain the development of larger polities like the small-scale states and kingdoms that had developed earlier in southern Arabia.

The Romans, who dominated the Levant in an earlier period, never bothered to establish their direct rule over Arabia, but were generally content to exert their influence indirectly through control of the many small client states or chiefdoms that arose, prospered, and declined with regularity along the desert frontier of northern Arabia. Two of the more famous of these Arabian kingdoms were Petra and Palmyra, in today's Jordan and Syria, respectively.

The Romans were superseded by the Byzantines, but the general political pattern in the area remained much the same until the fourth century A.D. By this time a number of Arab tribes had converted to Monophysitic Christianity, although the majority retained their earlier polytheistic beliefs. In the next two centuries there appears to have been wide-scale economic deterioration and general political upheaval in the Arabian Peninsula. The exact causes remain obscure, but around this time the monarchies of southern Arabia collapsed and their agrarian economies fell into ruin. Some of these kingdoms succumbed to Persian invaders, and others to Abyssinian invasions. Southern Arabian tribes subsequently embarked on a series of migrations to the north that brought them into conflict with each other and with the northern tribes. As a result, the once-prosperous trans-Arabian trade languished, and the routes fell into disuse.

By the sixth century A.D., this long period of economic deterioration and intertribal warfare had worked itself out and a relatively stable pattern had emerged. Many of the Arabian nomads had settled down in oases, some founding new towns in the process. Other oases were inhabited by Arabic-speaking Jewish populations, and Christians were not uncommon among some of the nomadic tribes. Christian monasteries were scattered throughout the northern part of the peninsula, where some, such as St. Catherine's in the Sinai, remain today.

Trade was again becoming important, and the local populations played important roles as caravaners, middlemen, and merchants. Towns along the major caravan routes grew wealthy. Among the most prosperous of the new towns was Mecca, which had been founded around A.D. 100 by the Quraish, a northern Arabian tribe, around the well of Zamzam. By the fifth century, Mecca

had become the major trade town along the western coast of Arabia (a region known as the Hijaz), and its merchants maintained commercial relations with both the Byzantines and the Persians. The town itself seems to have been ruled by an oligarchy made up of the leading merchants, most of whom were members of the Quraish.

Besides long-distance trade, another source of revenue for the Meccans was the local shrine, a large, pan-tribal sanctuary that housed the images of the many gods and goddesses worshiped by the Arabs before Islam. It is said to have contained even some Christian and Jewish relics as well. The most sacred object in the shrine was the sanctuary of the Ka'ba, a cube-like structure that had in its center the sacred black stone (part of a meteorite) that was considered holy by the different tribes who came to Mecca to worship at the shrine and to attend the busy market nearby. The fame and success of this market, known as *suq 'ukaz*, was in no small measure due to the presence of the sanctuary. The sanctuary of Mecca, one of several in the peninsula, was considered a sacred place—*haram*, a consecrated area where no blood could be shed and where oaths could be taken. The sanctity of the shrine extended to the market area to ensure trust in business transactions and to guarantee a temporary truce among the chronically feuding tribes. The Quraish elders, in their capacity as the elite of Mecca, controlled and derived revenues from both the sanctuary and the market.

MUHAMMAD: THE MAN AND THE PROPHECY

Muhammad was born around A.D. 570 into the Quraish tribe. His father had died before his birth, and his mother, who came from Medina, a town to the northeast of Mecca, died when he was six years old. He was brought up first by his grandfather and then by his paternal uncle, Abu Taleb, a wealthy merchant and a respected member of the Quraish oligarchy. Abu Taleb evidently discerned intelligence and initiative in the boy and employed him to accompany his caravans as they traded in the north. It was probably on these journeys that Muhammad came to meet the elders or scholars from the several Arabic-speaking Jewish and Christian communities in Syria and Arabia, and learned something about their beliefs.

There are few stories considered authentic by a majority of scholars about Muhammad's early years. One does tell of the encounter between Muhammad and a man named Zayd, who apparently was banished from Mecca for preaching some form of monotheistic belief. The story is related by Muhammad's first biographer, ibn-Ishaq:

I was told that the Apostle of Allah said as he was talking: "I had come from Al- Tu'if . . . when we passed Zayd son of Amr who was in the highland of Mecca. The Quraish had made a public example of him for abandoning their religion, so that he went out from their midst. I sat down with him. I had a bag containing meat which we had sacrificed to our

idols . . . and I offered it to Zayd—I was but a lad at the time—and I said 'Eat some of this food, my uncle.' He replied, 'Surely it is part of those sacrifices of theirs which they offer to their idols?' When I said that it was, he said, 'Nephew of mine, if you were to ask the daughters of 'Abd al-Muttalib they would tell you that I never eat of these sacrifices, and I have no desire to do so.' Then he upbraided me for idolatry and spoke disparagingly of those who worship idols and sacrifice to them, and said, 'They are worthless; they can neither harm nor profit anyone,' or words to that effect." The Apostle added, "After that I never knowingly stroked one of their idols nor did I sacrifice to them until God honored me with his apostleship." (in Guillaume, 1956, p. 26)

By the time he was 20, Muhammad had acquired a reputation for wisdom and trustworthiness. These qualities apparently brought him to the attention of a wealthy widow, Khadija, who hired him to manage her caravans and supervise her business. She eventually proposed marriage, and at age 25 Muhammad married Khadija, who was 15 years his senior. The marriage seems to have been a happy one; Khadija bore him a number of children, including a favorite daughter, Fatima, who later married Muhammad's first cousin 'Ali. The descendants of this latter marriage, called *sayyids*, are greatly revered by Muslims the world over today. After Khadija's death, Muhammad married a number of women, far exceeding, in fact, the four that came to be established in Islamic law, an exception granted him by divine dispensation. His last and favorite wife, 'Aisha, has a unique place in Muslim history in that she is believed to have passed on more than 2000 traditions (or sayings) attributable to the Prophet.

Although little is known about the period immediately preceding the apostleship of Muhammad, nevertheless scholars have attempted to understand the development of Muhammad's prophecy and career in terms of the socioeconomic transformations of his day. Of the early modern Western scholars, we single out W. Montgomery Watt (1961) and Maxime Rodinson (1971), who were concerned with showing the relationship between Muhammad's mission, the success he had in acquiring a following, and the prevailing social and economic conditions in western Arabia. In their view, once Islam was launched as a distinct religion, its transformation into a political movement was historically inevitable. Although it developed in the context of a tribal society rent by factions, Islam, as a universal movement, managed to transcend these cleavages and restructure the society along new lines.

In Rodinson's interpretation, Muhammad's early dissatisfaction with the pagan practices of his fellow Arabians and with the wide differences in wealth within Meccan society are closely related. At the time the population of Mecca included not only the wealthy merchant families of the Quraish but also their dependent clients, slaves, and the newly settled nomads who made up the majority of the inhabitants. The disintegration of tribal cohesion and the growth of social differentiation must have become particularly accelerated. As individuals became wealthy from trade, the traditional tribal norms of mutual aid and protection increasingly fell into disuse; the poor and the powerless began to be abandoned by the clan and were left out of its protective network. The old

values that operated in a fairly egalitarian, tribal group were being superseded by values that stressed individualism, material display, and competition. In fact, rich merchants in Mecca joined together to form commercial associations whose objectives were to monopolize trade and keep away rivals. Loosely organized along clan and tribal subdivisions, these mercantile associations also functioned as political factions as they competed for the right to manage and control the pilgrimages, fairs, and trading activities of the city.

Unhappy with the increasing social differentiation within Mecca and sensitive to the plight of its needy and neglected groups, Muhammad took to retreating from the city to the nearby mountains to meditate—not unusual behavior in Arabia, and his action seems to have aroused no curiosity or concern, at least not initially. It was in one of the caves on the nearby mountain of Hira that Muhammad first underwent a profound religious experience in which he believed he was called to become God's messenger, charged with revealing the truth to humanity. The year was A.D. 610, when Muhammad was already 40 years old. That experience marked the beginning of his prophetic career.

Tradition has preserved the details of this first experience. Alone in the cave, Muhammad began to hear voices and see visions. Later he saw an apparition that he identified as the Archangel Gabriel. The Heavenly Messenger commanded the frightened man to speak, but Muhammad refused. Gabriel repeated the command three times, and at the third command, Muhammad spontaneously recited the following verses:

Recite, (*iqra'*): In the name of Thy Lord who Created,
Who created man from a blood-clot,
Recite: And thy Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen
Taught man that he knew not.

Such was the beginning of Islam and the Quran, or Holy Book, which contains Muhammad's revelations spanning a period of approximately 22 years. The word *Quran* is derived from the first word of the first revelation, *iqra'*, which is from the Arabic root *qra'a*, meaning "to read or to recite." The early revelations were received by Muhammad in rhymed prose, a form of recitation widely used in Arabia by poets and soothsayers.

This religious or mystical experience was followed by others, and Muhammad slowly came to accept his role as God's apostle, the one chosen to receive and preach God's word. As both messenger, *rasul*, and prophet, *nabi*, Muhammad falls clearly in Max Weber's typology of an "emissary prophet." The emissary or messenger prophet transmits or reveals a divine message—in this case, codified in the verses of the Quran. At the same time, Muhammad's own life became a perfect model to be emulated by Muslims. As such, he also came to represent an "exemplary prophet."⁵

⁵For a discussion of these concepts, see Charles Lindholm (1996, pp. 36–40).

The first to believe in his divine calling were members of his immediate family, notably his first wife, Khadija, and his first cousin, 'Ali. For three years Muhammad limited his preaching and conversions to a small group of intimates who met in secret. Then he decided to preach in public, and his group met daily to hold prayers, an activity that quickly brought them to the attention of the Meccan elite. By this time, Muhammad's followers included a number of young wealthy men, but the majority were from among the weak, the poor, and the powerless of the city. At first, the dominant Quraish simply mocked Muhammad and his followers, but when it became apparent that more and more people were joining his circle, they took steps to put an end to a movement that they perceived threatened their position as guardians of the holy sanctuaries and their political authority in the city. Their sanctions included harassment of the Muslims and the boycott of Muhammad's clan of Hashem, so that the other Quraish clans refused to intermarry with the Hashem or to have any business dealings with them.

In 619, Abu Taleb, Muhammad's uncle and protector, died and was succeeded as the clan's leader by another relative. This relative was not well disposed toward Muhammad and withdrew the clan's protection from him and his followers. This made it dangerous for them to stay in Mecca, and in 622, Muhammad with some 70 of his followers migrated to Yathrib (later, Medina), the birthplace of his mother, an oasis town some 200 miles to the northeast of Mecca.

UMMA: THE ORIGINS OF THE ISLAMIC POLITY

The migration, known as *Hijra*, marks a new phase in the evolution of the Islamic community. In Medina the religious movement was soon embodied in a political form, that of the *umma*, or community. In fact, the migration was considered so important by the Muslims that the first day of the year in which it took place, July 16, 622, marks the start of the Islamic calendar, in which a year is based on 12 lunar months.

Unlike Mecca, which depended on commerce for its livelihood, Medina was an agricultural town where dates and grains were grown. It was inhabited by a number of pagan Arab as well as Jewish tribes who lived in scattered settlements and maintained an uneasy accommodation among themselves. The Jews seem to have been dominant earlier, but their power had slipped away; and at the time of the migration, Medina was experiencing a difficult period of chronic feuding among the different groups. In fact, it was mainly in an effort to put an end to this anarchic and unstable state of affairs that a group of Medina notables invited Muhammad to their town. They wanted him to act as an arbiter and peacemaker, and in return promised him freedom to preach and asylum for his followers. Apparently, they were not greatly concerned with his prophecy and religious mission.

In Medina, the Islamic movement assumed a new shape—that of a community organized on political lines under the leadership of a single chief. Whereas in Mecca Muhammad and his followers had formed a new religious sect, in Medina they forged a polity. From this point on, to be a Muslim meant at once to adhere to a faith or religion *and* to be a member of a political community. The dual nature of Islam was thus established early, and is expressed in the saying, "*al-Islam din wadawla*," meaning "Islam is at once a religion and a state." As Talal Asad, among others, has noted, Islam has elaborated a tradition and discourse different from those of Europe, where secularism, both as an ideology and practice, evolved. In the Islamic tradition, the moral and political orders are intertwined and divinely rooted.⁶ In fact, one prominent scholar, the late Ernest Gellner, has written to the effect that Islam is impervious to secularization for just these reasons (1994, p. 14). In his view, Islamic institutions have no difficulty in accommodation with new forms of technology, communication, and production.⁷

Muhammad's first act was to regulate Medina's political life by drawing up an agreement in which the emigrants who came with him and the eight groups already in the town who accepted his teachings were defined as Muslims. These groups were all conceived as being coequal, their rights and duties were listed, and they were pledged to mutual defense. The pact outlawed bloodshed among Muslims and specified the status of the neighboring Jewish tribes in the area, who as non-Muslims were excluded from the *umma*. What emerges from this remarkable document is the image of a new confederation of unrelated groups, all primarily united in their common allegiance to Islam, with Muhammad acknowledged as their prophet and leader. This new polity, based on ties of religion rather than kinship, formed the nucleus of what later became the earliest state in Arabia. We should not, of course, lose sight of the fact that however novel this polity and its ideology was, it had of necessity links to earlier traditions. Obviously, one is with the tribal organization of early followers, but other links are most vividly evidenced in the continuity with Jewish and Old Testament prophecy and rules. For the Muslim, nevertheless, the stress is on the absolute nature of the break with preceding eras, represented as "*al jahiliyya*" or "Age of Ignorance." The metaphor of *jahiliyya*, meaning ignorance, confusion, and darkness, has over the centuries been repeatedly invoked to inveigh against perceived lapses and threats to the community and it features in current debates on "moral decay" and "social deviance."

Once established in Medina, Muhammad turned once more to winning Mecca over to his cause. Mecca was the undisputed trading and political center of western Arabia, and its capitulation would greatly enhance the status of

⁶ Talal Asad (1993); see also Charles Lindholm (1996) for an insightful discussion of this issue.

⁷ For a contrary viewpoint, see Ilkay Savaş (1997, pp. 9–16) and Saad Eddin Ibrahim (1997, pp. 33–44). We return to this subject in Chapter 11.

Islam as well as guarantee its survival. It took seven years of a skillful combination of military and economic pressures before the Prophet forced Mecca to capitulate. The armed struggle began as the emigrants to Medina started to finance their own trade caravans, which immediately brought them into conflict with the Quraish. In 624, over 300 Muslims led by Muhammad ambushed a large Meccan caravan coming back from Syria. The ensuing battle, the Battle of Badr, marked the first military operation by the Muslims. It signaled the transformation of the Muslim converts into a potent military force, and confirmed the political status of the new religious community.

The Battle of Badr was followed by a number of skirmishes and engagements with the forces of the Quraish. The consistent military success of the Muslims enhanced their reputation among the tribes of Arabia, whose delegations converged on Medina to offer their allegiance to Muhammad and to share in the growing wealth and influence of the Muslim community. By 630, Muhammad had become the de facto master of most of Arabia, and he was able to enter Mecca with 10,000 of his men. He proceeded to destroy all the idols at the sanctuary save for the black stone, the Ka'ba, which he incorporated into the pilgrimage ritual that makes Mecca the most important of the holy cities of Islam.

Muhammad devoted the remaining two years of his life to consolidating the community. It was a period of intense political activity, as he tried to extend his influence further in Arabia while mediating disputes and rivalries among his followers. He must have succeeded, however, in imparting to his followers his own religious fervor and moral commitment, because following his death, in 632, his closest companions quickly became the center of a committed movement that carried his message beyond the frontiers of Arabia and promoted Islam to one of the world's great religions. The *umma* that Muhammad created is today a global phenomenon truly viewed by its adherents as a universal community. A contemporary scholar of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, describes the modern notion of "nation" as an imagined community. Imagined not because it is not real but because its members feel as though they are intimately linked and interdependent, just as they would be in a real community based on face-to-face relationships. This sentiment is created by the manipulation of myths, history, symbols, education, and of course, the media. Islam is in effect a "transnational community" in much the same sense; its adherents have a sense of shared mutual responsibility that goes beyond mere ideology.

THE REALM OF ISLAM AFTER MUHAMMAD

Muhammad died without naming a successor. His closest associates met in council and decided, following tribal custom, to choose one among them to be his deputy, or *khalifa* (caliph). The majority (now referred to as Sunni) chose Abu Bakr, an old and trusted companion of the Prophet and one of his first converts.

But a minority, supporting 'Ali, Muhammad's first cousin and son-in-law, insisted that the leadership of the community must remain within Muhammad's family. This group became known as *shii'at* 'Ali, or the partisans of 'Ali. The episode heralded the beginning of disunity and factionalism that came to plague Islam and only a few years later precipitated its first civil war.

The schism also reflects a fundamental tension between two competing principles of political legitimacy in Islam. On the one hand, legitimacy is believed to reside in the will of the community; on the other, it is seen as inherent in rights of descent. In time the minority group of the Shi'a, as they came to be known, evolved into the major schismatic division within Islam (discussed in Chapter 3).

Abu Bakr's first challenge as caliph was to deal with the wave of apostasy that followed the death of the Prophet. Some of the Arab tribes felt that their allegiance to Islam ended with Muhammad's death, and they reneged on their pledges and ceased to observe rituals or to pay taxes. There is also evidence to suggest that following Muhammad's death, a number of so-called false prophets appeared in Arabia claiming the right to lead the Muslim community. The best known was Musaylima, who with an army of about 40,000 men succeeded in defeating the orthodox Muslim armies on a number of occasions before being himself finally defeated.

Abu Bakr was succeeded in 634 by the second caliph, Omar, who presided over the successful expeditions that took the Muslim armies beyond the Arabian frontiers and into battle with Persian and Byzantine armies. Omar was an extremely able administrator, and is generally credited with the formation of the system of government that became a model for later Islamic dynasties. Once a Byzantine or a Persian province was conquered, Arab military commanders took over existing governmental institutions, which were kept relatively intact. New cities were founded at some distance from existing population centers to serve as garrisons. This was done in order to consolidate Arab influence in the newly conquered lands, a problem because the Muslim rulers and armies initially were a small minority.

The new Arab state appropriated Byzantine and Persian crown lands and the property of important enemy leaders, while explicitly recognizing the property and personal rights of most non-Muslim subjects. In so doing they quickly obtained the acquiescence, if not the active support, of the populace for their new rule. These non-Muslims were, however, required to pay special taxes. This payment evolved into a system of differential taxation for Muslims and non-Muslims that persisted until quite recently in some countries. Thus, although the Muslim state recognized the rights of non-Muslims (*dhimmis*), the system of taxation greatly encouraged conversion, which proceeded rapidly in most of the conquered areas. One early question that had to be resolved was that of the status of converts to Islam following the conquests. Were they to be recognized as obtaining equal status with the original warriors or not? While the universalistic tendency prevailed, the distinction between the original conquerors'

followers and subsequent converts is used today in Iraq to justify continued Sunni domination.

Omar was assassinated in 644, and a council he appointed chose an unlikely successor, 'Uthman, a member of the Quraish ruling oligarchy. 'Uthman, a man of pious reputation, is recognized today by Muslim historians as responsible for reestablishing the influence of the Meccan aristocracy. He regularly placed his relatives in positions of power and ignored the resentment that resulted within the Muslim community at large. 'Uthman was murdered in 656 and was immediately succeeded by 'Ali, the Prophet's first cousin and son-in-law. 'Ali's reign as the fourth caliph marks the end of the caliphate as the expression of consensual leadership of the *umma*; he is, in fact, the last caliph recognized by most Muslims as justly elected. His three-year rule (656-659) was marked by intercommunal dissension and tribal and civil war. One important consequence of this conflict and 'Ali's ultimate defeat was that the caliphate became dynastic and political power moved out of Arabia.

Mu'awiya, a nephew of 'Uthman and a longtime political opponent of 'Ali, became the first Muslim ruler to found a dynasty: the Umayyads. By 661, two years after the military defeat of 'Ali, the center of power shifted from Medina to Damascus, which became the new capital of the Umayyad Empire, the first successor state to the early caliphate. With this shift, Islam ceased to be a purely Arab phenomenon limited to the peninsula; it established itself in Damascus at the heart of the Mediterranean world, becoming a successor to the classical Roman empires of the West and East. The religion founded by Muhammad in a remote corner of the Middle East had now become the guiding principle and *raison d'être* of a vast, ethnically heterogeneous and urban-dominated empire. Greatly diminished and practically limited to the city of Constantinople and its immediate environs, the Byzantine Empire managed to linger on until its final defeat by the Muslim Ottomans in 1453.

We have dwelt on Muhammad's biography and the historical events following his death because these particulars form the basis for contemporary sectarian divisions in Islam, a topic we take up shortly. Moreover these events of early Islam, differently interpreted, are continually invoked to explain and legitimize behavior. In Iraq, for example, the term *shu'ubiyya* has been used by the ruling regime to cast doubt on the loyalty of the Shi'ite Iraqis toward the Arab Sunni-dominated state. The term *shu'ubiyya* dates back to the eighth century, when groups of Persian converts to Islam who had become influential at the court in Baghdad demanded equal rights and the same status as the more privileged Arab groups in the Muslim Empire (Jawad, 1997).

In the same vein, the late Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran referred to his opponent, the late Shah of Iran, as the "Yazid" of his day, a most powerful Shi'a idiom for expressing tyranny and deceit. The caliph Yazid was the Umayyad ruler charged by the Shi'a with having ordered the murder of Hussein, son of 'Ali and perhaps the most revered martyr of the Shi'a sect. Pageants and passion plays, as well as many of the basic rituals of Islam,

including pilgrimages, tend to reproduce these early historical events, giving them great symbolic importance to the believer as part of the living tradition of Islam.

Against the backdrop of Muhammad's life history and the political developments thereafter, we can now turn to some of the major beliefs and rituals that distinguish Islam.

ISLAM AS FAITH

The word *Islam* means "submission," that is, the submission of the self to the will of God; it was adopted by Muhammad himself to refer to the distinctive faith he preached, and it appears repeatedly in the Quran. A believer in that faith is a Muslim. Needless to say, the ideological system that was initially laid down by Muhammad and later interpreted and elaborated by Muslim theologians is too vast and complex to treat in this summary presentation. What follows, therefore, is simply a sketch of the basic principles of Islamic religion, particularly those that distinguish it from the other two monotheistic religions of the area, Christianity and Judaism. At the same time, it must be remembered that Islam draws upon a common Semitic tradition that had earlier produced and nurtured these two predecessors.

Islam has as its central tenet the Oneness of God, *al-Tawhid*:

*Say . . . He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
Who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
And equal to Him is not anyone.
(Sura 112, Quran)*

Over and over the Quran preaches strict monotheism; in fact, the worst sin in Islam is to associate other deities or partners with God. God is conceived as being eternal, omnipresent, and inscrutable; however, this omnipotence is believed to be tempered with justice and compassion. The two basic and most frequent attributes of God in the Quran are the Merciful, *al-Rahman*, and the Compassionate, *al-Raheem*.

While espousing a strict monotheism, Islamic scriptures also acknowledge the presence of angels; these are pure, sexless beings who dwell in Heaven and who sometimes act as God's messengers transmitting the Divine Message to humans. The devil, *al-Sheitan*, is believed to have been an angel who was banished from heaven for refusing to obey God's commands. Ranking below the angels and separating them from humanity are a group of male and female spirits, *jinn*, who were created by God from "smokeless fire." These inhabitants of deserts and dark lonely places are mischievous creatures who delight in causing trouble; various charms are employed to ward them off.

Muslims believe that God makes his will known to humans through the agency of the prophets who have revealed his commands. He gave the Jews the Torah, the Christians the Gospels, and Muhammad the Quran. The first of the prophets was Abraham and the last Muhammad, one of whose titles is "the Seal of the Prophets." Muslims consider Muhammad to be the Messenger and Prophet of God and the most perfect of all people, but they do not attribute any divinity to him. However, some mystics consider the Prophet to be saintlike and practically divine, a line of reasoning generally more pronounced among the Shi'a.

Another basic belief is in the Day of Judgment, *yawm al-qiyama*, when God will appear on his throne to judge the deeds of humanity. The Quran reminds the faithful that "those who believe and who do good works and establish worship and pay the poor their due, their reward is with their Lord and there shall be no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve." These beliefs enjoin a number of specific duties or obligations that are incumbent upon all adherents.

DUTIES AND RITUAL IN ISLAM

Islam tends to classify most human activities into two categories: those that are permissible or "lawful," *halal*, and those that are forbidden, *harām*. In a general sense this contrast can be likened to the distinction between acts that contribute to a state of spiritual grace or purity as opposed to those that pollute or taint. The context of the act is all important in determining whether it is *halal* or *harām*. For example, an animal slaughtered in accordance with certain prescriptions is considered *halal* and fit for consumption; if not, it is *harām* and should not be eaten by a believer. For the practicing Muslim, all actions should be performed in obedience to God's law as revealed to his Prophet Muhammad. This makes it almost meaningless to distinguish between the moral and legal aspects of an action; a sin is at once a crime.

Although it is recognized that no believer can completely achieve the full demands of the code of *halal* in behavior, among Muslims, dress, the manner in which food is prepared and presented, attention to such details of physical appearance as beards, nails, and so on—all carry considerable symbolic importance. Minimally, they announce the membership of individuals in the Islamic community; their more careful observance signifies a deeper commitment. In this sense even daily and mundane activities take on the significance of ritual.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The most important duties of a believer are the following acts, which together express the Muslim creed. They are often referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam (*arkan*):

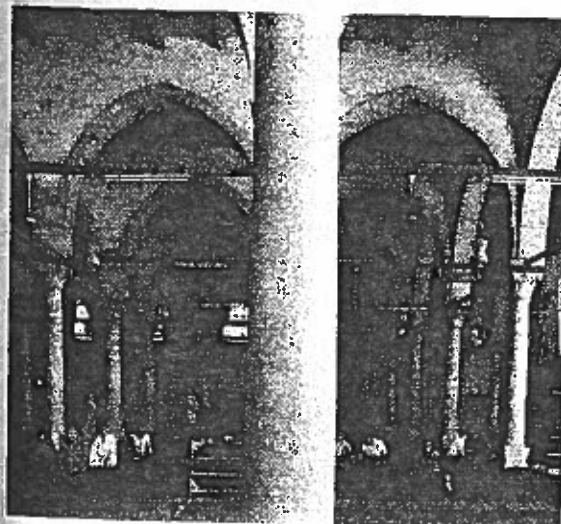
The shahada, or profession of faith. As mentioned earlier, the recitation of the simple formula "I profess that there is no god but God; Muhammad is his

messenger" constitutes the formal conversion of the reciter to Islam. The phrase usually constitutes the first words spoken into the ears of a newborn baby and should be the last on the lips of the dying.

The simplicity of the *shahada* makes conversion an easy matter, a process that readily accommodates great variations in local custom and heritage. Dogma and catechism are secondary, and in many areas of the world new converts to Islam appear to know little about the faith beyond these few words. Once a convert to Islam, however, it becomes incumbent on the individual to learn its precepts and rituals; instruction thus usually follows rather than precedes the adoption of the faith.

The salat, or prayer. The *salat* is enjoined on the Muslim five times a day: at dawn, midday, midafternoon, sunset, and nightfall. Worshipers face the direction of Mecca and go through the prescribed positions of the prayers, which they may perform anywhere after undergoing ritual ablutions. The Quran mentions two morning and two evening prayers; the noon one was added later by jurists in emulation of the practice of the Prophet. Muslims are also encouraged to attend the Friday communal prayers, which take place at midday. "O you who believe! When the call is proclaimed for *salat al jumm'a* (Friday prayer), come to the remembrance of Allah and leave off business (and every other thing). That is better if you did but know" (Quran 62:9).

Many Muslims do not observe the obligatory daily prayers. However, once an adult undertakes to pray daily, it is considered derelict for him or her to stop. Prayers should be offered wherever one finds oneself at the appropriate hours. Thus, intercity buses and trucks may stop by the roadside and passengers may get out to pray, with men and women in separate clusters. Farmers halt their plowing to pray in the fields. The ostentatiously pious may carry a



Interior view of a seventh-century mosque in Cairo, Egypt.

prayer rug, but most simply place a clean handkerchief on the ground before them to which they touch their foreheads during the prayers. A number of men may pray together, but they do not coordinate their prayers unless they are in sufficient numbers to form a congregation with a prayer leader. The formal prayer, although ritually fixed, does not preclude the individual from offering personal beseechments or prayers of thanksgiving.

The main communal prayers take place at the mosque at midday on Friday. The men of a congregation stand in straight lines facing a semicircular recess called the *mihrab*, which indicates the direction of Mecca. The *imam*, or prayer leader, stands in front with his back to the group. At the time of Muhammad, women attended the Friday prayers but stood behind the men; later, they prayed behind a screen. Today, women do not generally participate in the public prayers.

Many men who do not pray daily nevertheless may regularly attend the Friday mosque services. In many small towns or villages not to attend would be to withdraw from the public life of the community. Although the mosque and its congregation are thought by many to exemplify the unity of Islam and equality before God, in practice the congregations of urban mosques, and sometimes even those of small towns and villages, reflect social and economic divisions within the society. In heterogeneous communities, members of different ethnic groups, tribes, and even occupations may well have their own mosques. Furthermore, within any one congregation, an implicit social hierarchy is expressed because men of prominence and power tend to pray in the front rows along with the learned of the community.

The Friday prayers are significant for other reasons. Following the prayers, the leading religious functionary or scholar present usually delivers a sermon, *khutba*, which frequently goes beyond simple moral exhortation. The sermon is likely to deal with those topical issues that affect the community. At times, sermons may also serve as the vehicles for political announcements; they may even call for insurrection against rulers perceived to be unjust. This has occurred frequently in history, most recently and notably in Iran and in Egypt.

The zakat and the sadaqat, or almsgiving. The Quran asks believers to give alms as an expression of piety and as an aid to salvation. The *zakat* began as a voluntary act of piety and sharing within the small Muslim community. After the emigration to Medina, it became obligatory, a tax levied on all Muslims that was regularly collected by appointed agents and administered by the state. Today, in most Muslim countries, the *zakat* has again become voluntary.

Almsgiving is an important means by which even those who do not closely adhere to other Islamic observances emphasize their identification with the community. In most communities, the *zakat* is calculated at the rate of 2.5 percent of a believer's annual net worth. In addition to the *zakat*, the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet also encourage the believer to give the *sadaqat*, a voluntary charitable contribution to help the community in building hospitals,

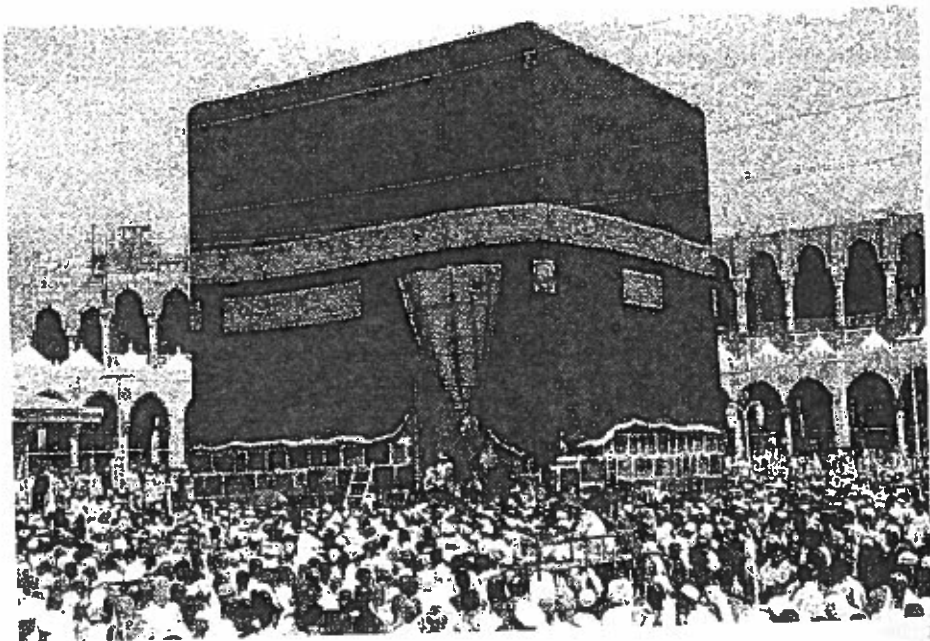
schools, and orphanages. Today, *zakat* contributions, where collected by governments, are regularly channeled to Islamic relief agencies, both state-sponsored, as in the case of the International Islamic Relief Organization headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and those operated by Islamist groups that provide local welfare services (see Benthall, 1998, p. 13).

The sawm, or fasting. Muslims are enjoined to fast during Ramadan, the month in which the Quran was first revealed to Muhammad; Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. In the years when Ramadan falls in summer, its observance may entail a great deal of strain and self-discipline, especially in very hot regions like the Gulf area and Arabia. Even though some individual Muslims may choose not to fast, there exists strong public sentiment, even overt pressure, to observe Ramadan. The strength of this sentiment to conform publicly varies from one community to the other and from one country to the next. In Turkey, restaurants remain open throughout Ramadan, and many Turks continue to eat, drink, and smoke in public without fear of censure; in the Gulf states, all restaurants are closed.

The fast is observed from dawn until sunset, during which time one may not eat or drink. Everyone is enjoined to observe the fast except children under the age of puberty. Pregnant women, the sick, military personnel on active duty, and those on a journey are exempt, but they should make up the missed days later. Those fasting, however, are free to eat anytime after sunset, and Ramadan nights usually turn into happy social occasions, with much visiting and exchanges of hospitality. The end of the Ramadan fast is celebrated by a feast, *'id al-fitr*, which lasts for three days. People celebrate by buying new clothes, mutual entertaining, and visiting their dead at the cemeteries.

Ramadan is also a time for reaffirmation of the faith; readings from the Quran and religious sermons are broadcast daily over radio and television, and people are exhorted to pray and to renew their faith. The shared experience of community members in observing the discipline of the fast further enhances the feeling of solidarity. Ramadan, as a time of renewal of faith and as a uniquely Muslim celebration, acquires a special significance in countries under secular or non-Muslim rule. Under such circumstances, fasting becomes an expression of cultural pride and, implicitly, a statement of opposition to foreign rule. When unpopular colonial or native secularist regimes are in power, Ramadan is similarly of potential political significance, as it proclaims at once Islamic unity and strength of belief, which could serve as vehicles for political opposition.

The hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca. A pilgrimage to Mecca is required of every adult Muslim once in his or her lifetime, provided the person is capable of doing so. It takes place during the first half of the twelfth lunar month, when pilgrims from all over the world converge on Mecca to join in the complex ritual that includes circumambulating the Ka'ba seven times. Women undertake the pilgrimage provided they can be accompanied by their husbands or some other



View of the Ka'ba surrounded by pilgrims during the annual *hajj*.

adult male who could serve as their protector. Under certain conditions, individuals may delegate a substitute to undertake the *hajj* for them.

In the past, great caravans would form in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq for the difficult desert passage to Mecca.⁸ Way stations stocked with food were placed along the routes, but the trip was often hazardous anyway. Today most pilgrims arrive by jet, stay in clean accommodations, and benefit from the modern facilities provided by the Saudi government, which is responsible for handling over a million pilgrims a year.

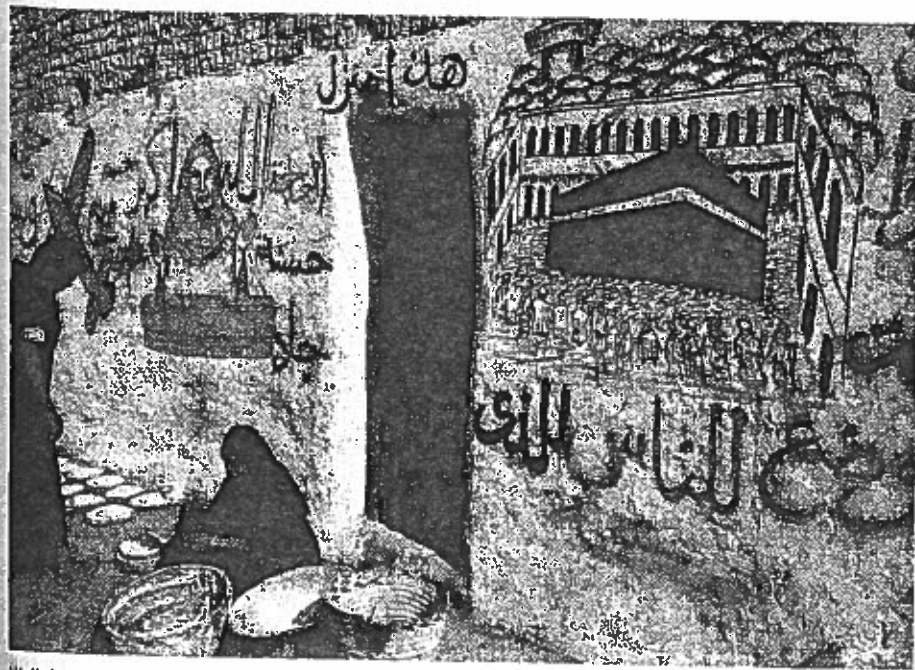
Those who would be pilgrims temporarily withdraw from their own society and routine activities; they embark on a journey of the spirit as much as a trip abroad. Even before leaving home, they undergo purification and consecration as they suspend their everyday roles and acquire the special status of a departing pilgrim. The ceremonies that begin the *hajj* are performed in a personal state of ritual purity achieved by the observance of certain taboos and restraints, including sexual abstinence. The pilgrims wash ritually, are shaved, and have their beards trimmed and nails cut. Each one then puts on a special robe that consists of two seamless white sheets, known as the *ihram*. This simple

⁸ For a fascinating personal account of a pilgrimage undertaken in the mid-nineteenth century by the famous British explorer-scholar Richard Burton, see his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah* (New York: Dover, 1964).

garb is considered by Muslims today to exemplify the unity of Islam and the equality of all believers before God.

Upon entering Mecca, the pilgrims may take local guides who lead them through the ritual of the pilgrimage and otherwise assist them, particularly when the pilgrims know no Arabic. The first duty consists of circumambulating the shrine; later, following attendance at instructional sermons in the Great Mosque, pilgrims leave Mecca for Mount 'Arafa, where Muhammad received his prophecy. The next several days are filled with prescribed ceremonies, sermons, and prayers that recapitulate events in Muhammad's life.

The pilgrimage ritual culminates on the tenth day of the month, when the pilgrim sacrifices an animal (usually a sheep or a goat) that he or she had consecrated. This ceremony of the sacrifice is reenacted on the same day throughout the Muslim world as the head of each family sacrifices an animal. The feast is known in the Middle East as *qurban bayram*, 'id al-kabir, or 'id al-adha, the Feast of Sacrifice. All who can afford an animal, including women who own property in their own name, are expected to make the sacrifice. Part of the meat is consumed in family feasting, but some is given to the poor of the community. In this manner, even those who are not in the most sacred site of Islam participate in this major ritual associated with the annual *hajj*. Muslims may also perform the pilgrimage out of cycle, if their circumstances permit it. This form of *hajj* is referred to as the 'umra.



Wall drawings depicting the pilgrimage to Mecca adorn a house in an Egyptian village.

The *hajj* has always had practical economic significance, as did its pre-Islamic predecessor, which was closely associated with trade. Traditionally, many pilgrims brought with them goods for trade, and a fair-like atmosphere attended the city of Mecca. Today, although few bring trade goods, many avail themselves of the numerous shops that sell all manner of imported luxury goods. More important, however, is the fact that the pilgrimage has always served to bring individual Muslims in touch with the fountainhead of their religion and to expose them to the theologians and savants who live and teach in Mecca. Inspired by the *hajj* experience, many pilgrims from Africa and Asia as well as the Middle East have launched political careers as Islamic reformists.

Having fulfilled the required ritual in Mecca and its environs, the pilgrim returns home bearing a new, respected title, *hajj* or *hajji* (feminine: *hajjiyya*). In Egypt, and elsewhere, a village *hajji* might well hire a painter to depict in colorful pictures on the white wall of his house the various places he visited, his mode of travel, and, above all, the Great Mosque and the Ka'ba. For some time after the pilgrimage, the *hajji's* house becomes the focal point of much visiting by friends and neighbors, all seeking to share in the *baraka*, or blessing, of his experience. Pilgrims bring back prayer beads, perfumed oils, and mementos from the sacred city that they give out to visitors, especially those who had helped them prepare for the journey. The average *hajji*, while enjoying a special status, soon returns to normal pursuits. For some, however, undertaking the *hajj* gives special impetus to already established careers in public life, whether in religious or political arenas.

A lesser pilgrimage than the one to Mecca is to Jerusalem, site of the famous shrine-mosque, the Dome of the Rock. The mosque was initially built by the caliph Omar to consecrate the spot from which it is believed that Muhammad took off on a nocturnal journey to Heaven. This legend is well known throughout the Islamic world and is the subject of poetry and art. One version has it that one night the Prophet was carried from Mecca to Jerusalem on a white-winged horse with a human face. In Jerusalem he saw Abraham, Moses, and Jesus at prayer together. Later he ascended the different heavens until he reached the seventh one, after which the horse took him back to Mecca. Sunni Muslims consider the Dome of the Rock to be their second holiest area after the Ka'ba.

Food

As does Judaism, Islam imposes a number of dietary rules and taboos; among foods considered taboo are pork, blood, and all alcoholic beverages. Forbidden also is the flesh of dead animals; only animals that have been ritually slaughtered by having their throats cut are considered fit for consumption.

The handling and serving of food take on ritual significance in many circumstances. The believer is enjoined, for example, to treat bread, water, and salt with special respect and to avoid using the left hand for passing food or drawing from a common cooking pot or serving bowl; the left hand is associated

with the performance of ablutions and unclean acts. Meals begin and end with words of praise to God, and the manner in which food is publicly offered, shared, and consumed has a significance that is more than simple etiquette.

Circumcision

Another ritual act that is not prescribed or even mentioned directly in the Quran but that is treated as a basic requirement of the faith is circumcision of males before puberty. This practice, which is universal among Muslims, is legitimized by the Quranic verse that recommends adherence to the practices of Abraham: "Follow, then, the community of Abraham, a man of pure faith, who was not a polytheist" (Quran 3:95). Although the Quran does not mention any specific practice, Abraham's account of his covenant with the Lord and the ritual of male circumcision are acknowledged and accepted by all Muslims. This rite is carried out with as much public celebration and feasting as the family can afford.

Circumcision, usually done between the ages of four and seven (and now, increasingly, a few days following birth), constitutes a rite of passage; it marks the transition of the boy from the private domain of the household to the public one of the community. Simultaneously, it signals the separation of the young boy from his mother and his joining the world of the males. At this point he is likely to begin his formal religious education and is increasingly expected to identify with and observe the male codes of behavior.

Death

Duties to the dead are elaborate and closely prescribed by religious law and custom. Although practices vary from one locale to another, certain rites are nearly universal. The body is washed by members of the same sex, shrouded in a single cloth, and interred by nightfall, if possible, and never later than the second day after death. Graves are dug so that the body can lie on its side facing Mecca, and care is taken that earth does not fall directly on the face of the individual. There is general agreement that the grave should be simple, and if adorned by a headstone or other marker, the ground immediately above the corpse should be left unobstructed. Under no circumstances are the dead brought inside a mosque, although the body may be carried in a coffin into a mosque courtyard for a final prayer. A frequent sight alongside an inner wall of a mosque courtyard is a wooden litter that serves to transport the dead to the graveyard.

We could elaborate further on belief and ritual practice, but what we hope has emerged from our brief discussion of Islamic Middle Eastern society is a view in which Islam the religion, its ritual, and its ceremony are seen to be enmeshed in the daily activities of the individual. The way one holds one's hands while washing, styles of dress and hair, the manner of presenting food, the prayers on

the lips of a traveler at the onset of a journey—all are acts that weave Islam into the living culture of the people.

SOURCES OF ISLAMIC LAW: SHARI'A

Islam is often portrayed by its own scholar-jurists and by Western-trained orientalist as a severely formal, even rigid legal tradition. Although Islam is the source of law and as such has generated a scholarly tradition emphasizing its jural relevance to virtually any situation, it is also much broader and richer. It is the basis for a moral order. It answers the questions of what constitutes right and wrong, a moral person, a "good Muslim." Like all scriptural religions with codified ritual, it fundamentally distinguishes between the observant believer and the moral person whose life is informed by the ethical structure of Islam. We now turn to a consideration of the sources of this system of beliefs, ritual, and duties that regulate a Muslim's relation to God and to fellow humans.

There are basically two sources: the Quran and the Hadith, the Traditions of the Prophet. For Muslims, the Quran is the word of God; the term *Quran* means "recitation" and underscores the belief that it was revealed verbatim to Muhammad, who simply "recited" God's words: "The Koran (Quran) is the record of those formal utterances and discourses which Muhammad and his followers accepted as directly inspired. Muslim orthodoxy therefore regards them as the literal Word of God mediated through the Angel Gabriel" (Gibb, 1958, p. 36).

The Quran is believed to be a direct transcript of a tablet divinely inscribed and preserved in Heaven. Thus, as the literal word of God, the Quran may not be translated into any tongue other than Arabic and still retain the same validity.⁹ This explains the phenomenon observed in non-Arab Muslim countries, where some worshipers learn the Quran phonetically by heart and recite it without necessarily understanding the meaning of the words they utter. Considered holy and miraculous, the Quran is used by many as a talisman to ward off the evil eye. Verses from it are sealed in metal or leather containers and carried on the body to ward off evil and sickness and to ensure health and good luck.

Most of the Quran was committed to memory or written down on pieces of parchment or bone during Muhammad's lifetime. The text was collected in its entirety by the first caliph, Abu Bakr, but it was not until the reign of the third caliph, 'Uthman, that a committee authorized a final version of the Quran. This standardized version is the only one that exists today, all others having been destroyed.

⁹ There are few who would call themselves Muslim but not accept the standard version of the Quran. Some Alevi and Alawi (see Chapter 3) assert that the Quran merely reflects the powers that were in place following the death of Muhammad and that numerous passages that should have referred to 'Ali and the Prophet's family were expurgated in the time of the caliph 'Uthman. See Farouk Bilici (1998, pp. 54, 62). This view is considered heretical by both Sunni and Shi'a.

The chapters of the Quran, known as *suras*, are arranged according to length by descending order, with the exception of the *fatiha*, which comes first. In all, there are 114 *suras*, the first half of which tend to be inspirational and exhortative in content and poetic in style; the latter half are more concerned with legislative and prescriptive matters. The Quran is written in beautiful, poetic, rhymed prose that, when recited publicly, is intoned slowly in a melodic chant that is considered aesthetically pleasing to the listener. Special training is given in the art of Quranic recitation.

In addition to the Quran, Muslims are guided by the example of the life of Muhammad. The sayings and deeds of the Prophet form a system of social and legal usages collectively referred to as the Sunna of Muhammad (course of conduct or path). The Sunna is preserved in the form of short stories and anecdotes all dealing with what Muhammad said and did at various times. These anecdotes form an extensive but uncodified literature in Islam known as the Hadith, sayings or Traditions.

The Quran and the Hadith are the major sources of the Islamic legal system known as Shari'a, or Divine Law. "As in other Semitic religions, law is thought of not as a product of human intelligence and adaptation to changing social needs and ideals, but of divine inspiration and immutable" (Gibb, 1958, p. 73). But because neither the Quran nor the Traditions provided a comprehensive and unified legal system, it was left for Muslim theologian-jurists, *'ulama*, to interpret and elaborate the relevant texts and to construct the body of law, the Shari'a.¹⁰

The Shari'a joins faith and practice as a comprehensive code establishing Islam as a way of life. As Nathan Brown notes, the Shari'a is central to Islam in the minds of most Muslims, and its importance as a social and legal point of reference is, in fact, increasing, not decreasing, although the subject of contention and dispute (1997, p. 360). The Shari'a is not simply a finite legal code in the Western jural sense but is a set of institutional processes and practices that potentially govern all aspects of a believer's life. While there are standard texts and treatises, Shari'a law is not codified and not derived from state legislated texts. Shari'a courts were historically without lawyers and were "essentially for private disputes between and among parties" (Brown, 1997, p. 363). Even murder was not a crime against the state.

Although the interpretation and application of the Shari'a have been transformed in every country in the Middle East in recent years, the debate continues as to the proper balance between state-legislated law and the Shari'a. The consensus, according to Brown, is that while there is a need for state-instituted legislation, such legislation should be within the larger boundaries of the Shari'a. The very centrality of the Shari'a to an Islamic moral and social order has challenged every secular political movement in the Middle East. It has

¹⁰ For two recent books on Islamic law, see R. Cleave and E. Kermeli (1997) and Rodolphe de Seife (1995).

aised problems for those who would legislate without reference to it; this is particularly true in the area of personal status or laws affecting marriage, divorce, and inheritance. But, with the exclusion of the laws of personal status, reform in every country in varying degrees and on differing schedules has led to the introduction of civil and criminal laws based on European models. Only the government of Turkey has completely repudiated the Shari'a as a source of legal guidance, and, indeed, a public appeal to the Shari'a is a criminal offense.

At the beginning of Islamic rule, the Shari'a developed in a period of lively debate and discussion about the sources of law that would govern the rapidly expanding and heterogeneous Muslim community. The debates focused on the relative weight to be given to experience, rationality, and local custom. In time, four different schools of law (*madhabs*) crystallized within the dominant division of Islam known as Sunni; each of these schools respects the "orthodoxy" of the other. The Shi'a, the other major division in Islam, has its own interpretations.

The four Sunni schools, or *madhabs*, do not constitute separate sects, as they are in agreement on matters of doctrine and creed. Each was named after its jurist-founder and predominates in a different region. The Hanafi is found primarily in areas formerly governed by the Ottomans: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Lower Egypt, as well as parts of Central Asia and India. The Maliki predominates in northern and western Africa, Upper Egypt, and the Sudan. The Shafi'i is represented in parts of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, but especially in Indonesia. The Hanbali, which predominates in Arabia, is considered the most conservative in that it allows little scope for the use of "reason" or local custom.

Although purporting to be the universal basis for law, the Shari'a in practice today is evident primarily in matters pertaining to personal status. These are cases that we might think of as falling within the jurisdiction of family and probate courts. Only Turkey, as we have said, has altogether rejected the Shari'a as a basis for national legal codes. Even there, though, there is a movement instigated by the religiously motivated far right for the return of a Shari'a-guided court system. Elsewhere, Shari'a-based laws serve to adjudicate matters of marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, adoption, and public decorum. In most countries, commercial and criminal legislation tacitly ignores the Shari'a, and such codes are derived from European sources. Two major exceptions are Iran and Saudi Arabia, where, in principle at least, the Shari'a is adhered to in both civil and criminal matters. Today, one important controversy concerning the Shari'a throughout the Middle East is its relationship to the rapidly changing relative status of the sexes and to changing patterns of family life, topics we take up in later chapters.

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP: THE 'ULAMA

Our cursory discussion of the Shari'a and its central place in Islam might suggest that the ideal Muslim state or society would be a theocracy. This, however,

would be an inaccurate conclusion and one not supported by history. One paradox of Sunni Islam is that its great emphasis on the all-pervasive scope of the Shari'a disavows any fundamental distinction between religious and nonreligious domains. What a Christian might consider secular and religious domains of life are indistinguishable in Islamic thought; from this perspective, the terms *secular* and *theocratic* become meaningless. In fact, if one were to use them to describe the ideal Islamic society, it would have to be as a *secular theocracy*. For even though all legitimate power belongs to God, since Muhammad's death God has had no earthly spokesperson, nor is he served by a special caste or priesthood. In principle, each Muslim is equally capable of communicating with God without any mediation, and each may aspire to any position within the community. The Shi'a situation is rather different, and we take it up in the following chapter.

For Sunni Middle Eastern society, the many distinctions of religious rank, learning, and even institutional authority do not form one unified hierarchy, let alone a church. The most exalted religious office, for example, the Sheikh al-Azhar in Cairo, head of the most prestigious mosque-university of Sunni Islam, has no jural authority over the humblest village sheikh. In the absence of a church, the definition of "orthodoxy" becomes problematic. For example, senior 'ulama can issue *fatwas*, or "responses," to specific questions that may involve legal ambiguity. Varied and often contradictory *fatwas* have been issued in recent years on such topics as abortion, birth control, female circumcision, suspected blasphemy, and even the appropriateness of state policies, such as the *fatwa* issued by the Sheikh al-Azhar to the effect that President Anwar Sadat's visit to the Israeli Knesset in 1977 did not violate the Shari'a. In general, the weight of the *fatwa* is directly proportionate to the authority and status of the issuer. A highly controversial *fatwa* was issued in 1989 by the late Iranian Shi'a Ayatollah Khomeini, declaring the Indian Muslim author Salman Rushdie, a British citizen, to be a blasphemer for his book *Satanic Verses*.

This situation is complicated by the fact that there is no final arbiter of the Shari'a. This results in another paradox. While viewed as eternal and fixed, the Shari'a is also constantly changing. Within this contradiction lies fertile ground for the development of reformist ideologies, mystical movements, and schismatic rebellions, all of which have been part of Islamic history.

Given the absence of church and priesthood, how is religious life structured within the society? Who instructs the young, interprets the Shari'a, and leads the congregation in prayer? And how does one account for the obvious disparities in rank and influence among different religious personages?

Until quite recently, as in medieval Europe, most formal teaching was in a religious context. Learned individuals, the 'ulama, were by definition religious scholars whether they were concerned with the Quran and its exegesis or with astronomy or medicine. They could be self-taught or the student-disciples of one or another well-established scholar. With time, the 'ulama came to form a special group, with its own insignia of distinctive turbans and robes and with

more or less agreed-upon ranking procedures and rules for recruitment. Status differentiation was based on a combination of factors, which included scholarly achievement, the personality of the individual, peer recognition, and general support of the local community. Particular scholars emerged as authorities in particular areas, acquired reputations, and attracted followings. The lack of a formal hierarchy is reflected in the terminology. The same term, *sheikh*, may be used for *'ulama* of all levels. This is in contrast to the Shi'a practice in which clerics are more carefully distinguished by rank.

The *'ulama* as a group trained the teachers, preachers, and bureaucrats of the society, and in some periods they themselves constituted a powerful patrician class. Their students spent variable periods of time in places of learning, *madrasas*, where they would study individually under the tutelage of a particular master. Those who were successful themselves became the future *'ulama*—theologians-cum-jurists, judges, government advisers, and even ministers. The *'ulama* were, and still are, the self-appointed guardians and executors of the Shari'a. In the past, and in some countries today, it was they who ultimately legitimized a ruler, a role that conferred on them considerable power, even if indirectly. In some countries, they were incorporated into state bureaucracies, primarily as *qadis*, judges, and school administrators.

Traditionally, the *'ulama* derived their income and sometimes considerable power from their role as administrators and beneficiaries of trusts in land and urban property (called *waqf*) set up by wealthy donors. In some areas a sizable portion of the arable land was *waqf*, and the great mosque complexes of major cities were *waqf* supported not only by the donations of the faithful but by the income derived from renting the many shops and other properties they owned in the city, as well as from their rural holdings.

The spread of European-style education and the expansion of scientific curricula in the nineteenth century presented the *'ulama* with a serious challenge to their historic monopoly on education. Today the term *'ulama* refers exclusively to those trained in the religious tradition, and recruitment to this group in most countries reflects the *'ulama's* increasingly restricted role in modern society. The governing elite and the well-to-do almost always educate their children in Western-style schools and universities. Quranic schools today are primarily attended by the very young, who come to learn the rudiments of religion and to memorize parts of the Quran. Virtually every large village aspires to its own Quranic school supported by the community, and failing that, families get together to hire a religious teacher (*mullah*, *faqih*, or *hoja*) for their children. This, however, is usually in addition to secular education.

The relationship between the *'ulama* and the state, both in Sunni and Shi'a Islam, is a very complex subject and is outside the scope of our presentation. Suffice it to say here that, generally speaking, in Sunni countries the *'ulama* have tended to work closely with the ruling establishment. Under the Ottomans, for example, the sultan came to appoint or ratify major religious posts and even attempted to centralize and control religious leadership through the creation of

the post of *sheikh al-Islam*, a paramount sheikh. In Iran, the Shi'a *'ulama's* position has generally been, at least since the eighteenth century, in opposition to the state. Following the revolution of 1979, however, the *'ulama* in Iran have come to constitute a major locus of power and authority in the state.

The *'ulama* themselves are subject to constantly shifting boundaries of religious knowledge. In an era prior to popular literacy, they enjoyed a near monopoly on text-based knowledge in almost every domain. In the nineteenth century, as they attempted to counter European influences spread with printed matter for the masses, they inadvertently weakened their own control. Today, Islam and the *'ulama* confront the digital age of Islam. CD-ROMs and electronic cassettes disseminate both reformist and conservative rhetoric, and there are numerous Islamic Web sites on the Internet. The impact of these changes on the worldwide Islamic community and on Islamic religious discourse remains to be seen, but in general the masses have direct individual access now to textual or scriptural Islam.

Our emphasis in this chapter has been on the origin and development of Islam, its basic tenets and rules. In the following chapter, we take up the doctrinal and historical bases for the important sectarian divisions, especially Shi'ism, as well as the development of mysticism in Islam and its different popular expressions today.