

14 ISLAM

CHAPTER



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The name *Islam* is derived from a root word meaning “surrender” or “submission.” In one simple phrase, this is the religion of Islam: submission to the one God, or Allah. The requirement of submission applies to every moment in the life of a Muslim—that is, “one who submits.”

With about 1.6 billion followers, Islam is the world’s second-largest religion. It is also the fastest growing. As Islam rapidly achieves a new level of prominence in the world, many have been surprised to learn that Islam is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, and that it reveres the great prophets of Judaism and Jesus Christ. Islam has also played a crucial role in the shaping of Western culture, especially during the Middle Ages.

Obviously there is much to explore in the religion of Islam. Given Islam’s major role in world affairs, it is now more important than ever to gain a proper understanding of the tradition and its adherents.

Qur'an (kuh-ran'; Arabic: "recitation")

Islam's primary sacred text, regarded by Muslims as the direct words of Allah, revealed to Muhammad through the archangel Gabriel.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAM

Something of the general nature of Islam can be understood simply by noting the degree of importance of each of its basic elements. First, there is the **Qur'an** (kuh-ran'; also called the Koran), the primary sacred text and Islam's earthly center. Next, there is the Prophet Muhammad, who received the contents of the Qur'an from Allah and whose life provides Muslims with an example of human perfection. The primary teachings of Islam, a third basic element, are derived from the Qur'an and from the life of Muhammad. Finally, the Muslim community, or Umma (oom'muh), bases its laws and lifestyle on those teachings.

The Qur'an: Islam's Sacred Presence

The Qur'an is the earthly center of Islam. Its role for Islam can be compared to Jesus Christ's role for Christianity. Both are considered the sacred presence in the world. Just as Christ is the source of Christianity's foundational teachings, so too is the Qur'an the source of Islam's foundational teachings.

The Qur'an is about four-fifths the size of the New Testament and is divided into 114 *suras*, or chapters. It was originally written in Arabic, and there is only one Arabic version. This is logical, for Muslims believe the Qur'an contains the direct words of Allah, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and written down in its present form by the Prophet's earliest followers.

The term *qur'an* literally means "reading" or "recitation," and oral recitation of the text has always been favored over silent reading. Many regard the Qur'an to be the most beautiful work ever composed in the Arabic language. It is not possible to translate its full meaning into another language, owing to both its poetic quality and the subtle meaning that is conveyed visually through the Arabic script. The art of calligraphy was first

used in the West by Muslims to celebrate the visual splendor of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is regarded as a miracle of God, especially because Muhammad is thought to have been illiterate. Today it is the world's most memorized book. It begins with a prayer called the Opening:

IN THE NAME OF GOD
THE COMPASSIONATE
THE MERCIFUL

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

Guide us to the straight path,
The path of those whom You have
favoured,
Not of those who have incurred Your
wrath,

Nor of those who have gone astray.

(Qur'an 1:1-9)

The Prophet Muhammad

Islam is purely monotheistic and therefore carefully avoids regarding Muhammad as anything more than human. Even so, Islam celebrates Muhammad as the most perfect of all human beings, referring to him as a jewel among stones.

Muhammad's Life and Career

Muhammad was born about AD 570 into the leading tribe of Mecca, a city on the Arabian Peninsula that was an important center of commerce and trade. Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad grew up with his uncle. He was an honest and dependable boy who worked hard as a shepherd and later in the trading business. He became a caravan manager for a wealthy widow by the name Khadija. Eventually, when Muhammad was twenty-five and Khadija was about forty, they



married. The couple had at least six children and enjoyed a long and happy union.

Along with raising his family and pursuing business interests, Muhammad spent much time in religious contemplation. He liked to retreat to a cave on nearby Mount Hira, where he could meditate on God in solitude. According to tradition, during one of Muhammad's visits to the cave in 610, the archangel Gabriel appeared to him in a dream and commanded him, "Recite!" Muhammad protested that he was not capable. Twice more Gabriel issued his command, pressing so hard on Muhammad's body that the man feared he would die. In desperation

Muhammad asked, "What shall I recite?" Gabriel answered:

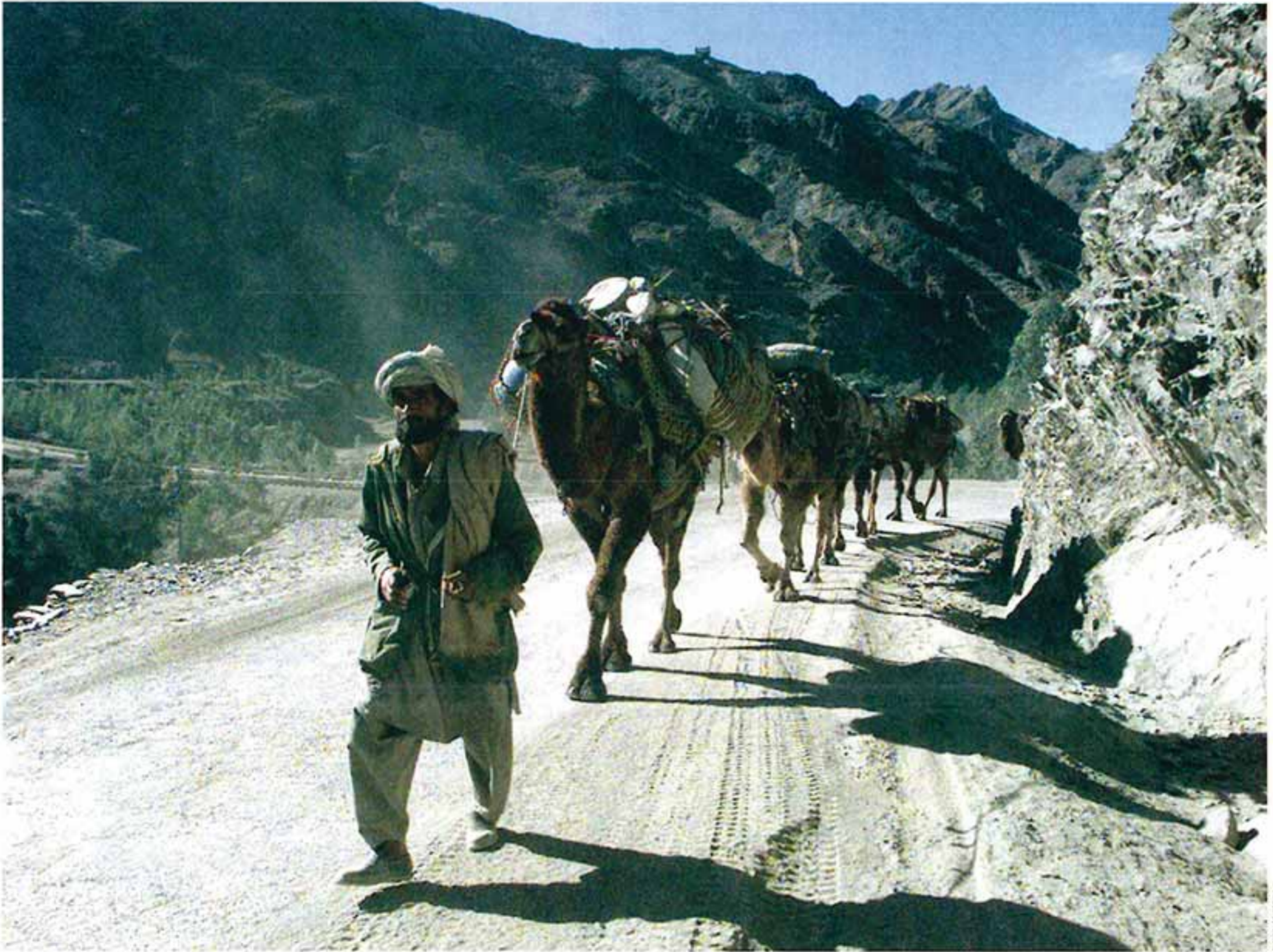
Recite in the name of your Lord who created—created man from clots of blood.

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

(Qur'an 96:1–4)

This event is celebrated as the Night of Power and Excellence. It marked the beginning of Muhammad's career as a prophet. This specific passage is the earliest "recitation" contained in the Qur'an. Muhammad would receive many more over the next twenty-two years, until his death in 632.

Two pages from a sixteenth-century manuscript of the Qur'an.



A tribesman in Pakistan transports goods using a camel caravan, much as Muhammad did.

Muhammad told Khadija about his experience, and she became the first convert to Islam. At first Muhammad found few others who were willing to follow him. After ten years, however, several hundred families were Muslim. For the most part, though, Muhammad's fellow Meccans reacted to his message with hostility. This is not surprising, for Muhammad's teachings ran counter to their accustomed ways. He taught that there was only one God, Allah, but Arabia was mostly polytheistic. In Mecca there were 360 shrines to various gods, and pilgrimages to those shrines earned much money for the city. In

addition, Muhammad advocated social and economic justice, and his fellow Meccans were not ready to give up their largely corrupt standards of behavior.

In the face of this hostility, Muhammad and his followers migrated northward, to the city of Yathrib, in AD 622. Leaders there knew of Muhammad's reputation as an able businessman, and they invited him to become the administrator of their city. The migration to Yathrib, of utmost significance to the history of Islam, is known as the **Hijra** (hij'ruh), or "emigration." Muslims base their system for assigning dates on this event, using the abbreviation *AH* (*anno Hegirae*, "in

the year of the Hijra"); for example, AD 622 is AH 1.

Muhammad proved to be a brilliant administrator, merciful and yet firm in his justice. The city of Yathrib soon came to be known by the name Medina, a shortened form of an Arabic phrase meaning "city of the prophet." Eight years later, after several battles with his Meccan opponents, Muhammad returned in triumph to his home city, Mecca. By the time of his death two years later, most of Arabia had converted to Islam.



ACTIVITY

Consider the following characteristics of the Prophet Muhammad, and discuss briefly how each one might have affected his role as the founder of Islam:

- He was illiterate.
- He was married.
- He was an able businessman and a brilliant administrator.

The Seal of the Prophets

Muhammad's unique significance for Islam rests in the belief that he is the final prophet, revealing the will of Allah fully and precisely, and for all time. Muslims believe that the prophets who came before Muhammad, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, also revealed God's will, but only partially. Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets, the last of the line. There is no need for Allah to choose another.

Muhammad and Christ play very different roles within their respective religions, Islam and Christianity. Whereas Christians believe Christ is the sacred presence, Muslims believe Muhammad *delivered* the sacred presence, the Qur'an. Muslims regard Muhammad as nothing more than human, with

no supernatural qualities. Muslims regard Christ, on the other hand, as one of only two humans (Adam is the other) conceived by God.

Muhammad is merely human, but he is revered as the best of all humans. His actions and his own teachings (which he carefully distinguished from the divine teachings of the Qur'an) together constitute the **Sunna** (soon'nuh), or "custom," of the Prophet. The Sunna of Muhammad is the second most important authority for Islam.

Muslims admire and attempt to imitate Muhammad's earthly experience, but they also value a heavenly experience, which is a focal point of Muslim piety. They believe that one night Muhammad was miraculously transported from Mecca to Jerusalem; then ascended with the archangel Gabriel through the seven heavens (the Qur'an specifies that God created seven), saw Moses, Abraham, and Jesus; and then was in the very presence of Allah. This event, the Ascension to Heaven, is one of two miracles involving Muhammad, the first being the production of the Qur'an.

Islam's Primary Teachings

The teachings of Islam are based ultimately on the Qur'an and secondarily on the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, additional great theological achievements have come through Islam, especially during its first two centuries. A lack of consistent agreement between Muslim theologians through the ages helps to explain why Islam tends to be somewhat diverse. Its multiformity is especially dependent on location. Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia, for example, tends to be more conservative than Islam as practiced in Egypt. Virtually all Muslims, however, agree on the following central teachings.

Hijra
(hij'ruh; Arabic:
"emigration")

The emigration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib (thereafter called Medina) in AD 622; the founding event of the Muslim community.

Sunna (soon'nuh;
Arabic: "custom" or
"tradition")

The teachings and actions of Muhammad recorded in writings known as *hadith*, which provide the model for being Muslim; Islam's second most important authority (after the Qur'an).

Allah: The One God

The Arabic name Allah literally means “the God.” Allah was worshipped in Arabia before Islam. Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, regarded Allah as its special deity. But before Muhammad’s call to be a prophet, Allah was considered one among many gods. Islam changed this decisively, for monotheism is one of the most emphasized teachings of the Qur’an.

Muslims understand Allah to be transcendent and suprapersonal, and emphasize those qualities, while at the same time seeing Allah as immanent and personal. For instance, they think of Allah as genderless because maleness and femaleness are human qualities and would thus limit God’s nature. Muslims avoid artistic representations of Allah that in any way evoke human characteristics. To know the personal and immanent nature of Allah is the special achievement of a Muslim mystic, or Sufi (soo’fee), who has first experienced Allah’s transcendence.

The transcendent, suprapersonal nature of Allah is made more accessible by the many names of God. Traditionally there are

ninety-nine, including the Compassionate and the Real. These names provide Muslims with a variety of descriptive expressions for Allah, while maintaining their strict monotheism.

The Prophets: Messengers of Allah

Prophets provide the crucial link between Allah and human history; through them the divine will is revealed. Beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad, Muslims believe many thousands of prophets have walked the earth. An elite few are so important that they have changed the nature of humankind’s relationship with Allah.

Those few include Abraham, whom Muslims regard as the father of the Arabs, just as he is father of the Israelites. According to Islam, Abraham’s son Ishmael moved to Mecca and became the ancestor of the Arabs. Abraham’s prophecy centered on his pronouncement that there is only one God. Moses, Judaism’s greatest prophet, is also revered in Islam. He pronounced Allah’s ethical laws, the Ten Commandments. And then came Jesus Christ, who pronounced the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”). Finally, Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets, pronounced the Qur’an, and the revelation of Allah’s will to humanity was complete.

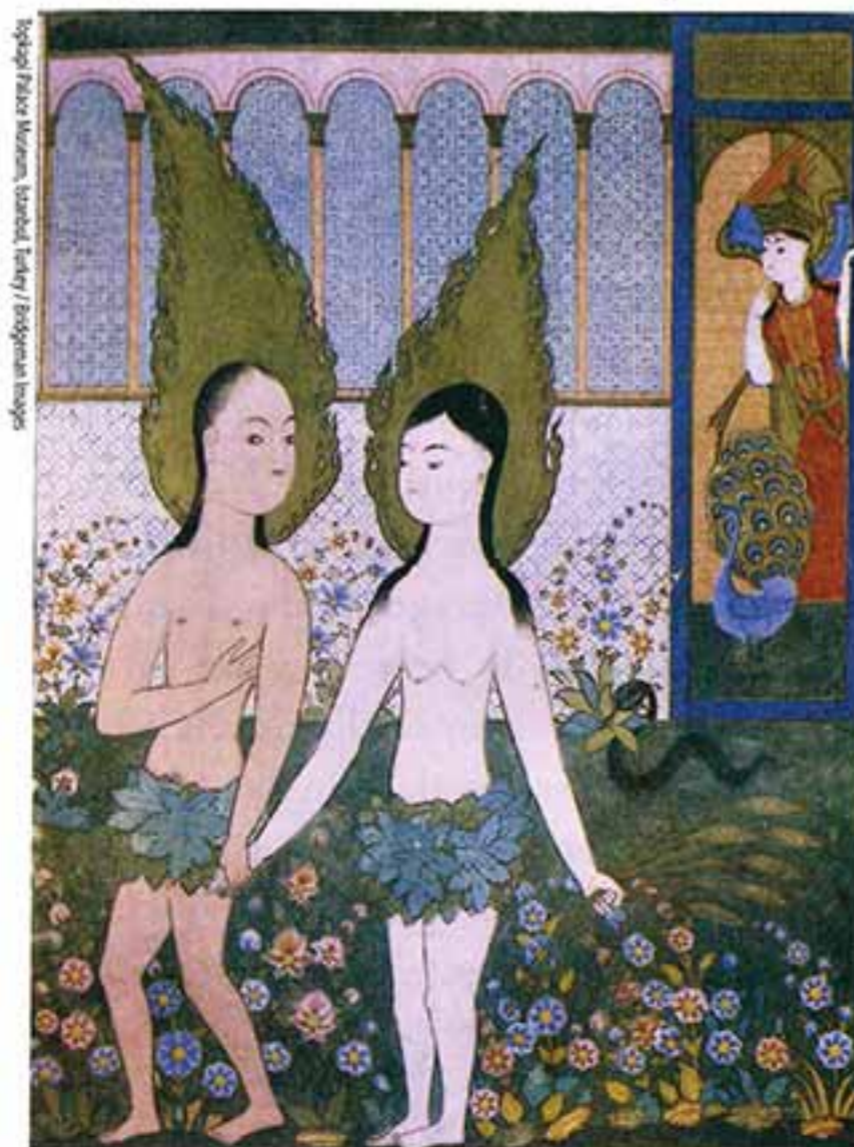


ACTIVITY

Keeping in mind what you now know about Muhammad and some of Islam’s other prophets, describe in your own words the function of prophecy in Islam.

Human Nature and Destiny

Islam teaches that human nature is essentially good, but people are all too capable of



An Islamic depiction of Adam and Eve dating from the seventeenth century.

forgetting this. Forgetfulness is a key element in the Muslim interpretation of the Fall from perfection in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they caused a state of forgetfulness to come upon them. When people momentarily forget their basic goodness, their passions can lead them to sin. Herein lies the need for the Qur'an and the other revelations of the will of Allah. Human beings need directives for correct behavior so that goodness might prevail.

Human destiny is entirely dependent on the outcome of this struggle for goodness. The reward for the righteous is Paradise, and for the evildoers, Hell. The Qur'an vividly describes each realm, so that all Muslims are fully aware of the great consequences of their ethical decisions. Even more emphasis is placed on the Day of Judgment, at which time all humans will stand before Allah, and the destiny of each will be made known.

The Day of Judgment will be preceded by the coming of the Mahdi (meh'dee), a savior figure similar to Judaism's Messiah. The Mahdi will restore Islam and bring order on earth. After this, Jesus Christ will return to Jerusalem and usher in the Day of Judgment.

The following passage from the Qur'an, an entire *sura* entitled the Cataclysm, gives a typical description of the Day of Judgment:

When the sky is rent asunder; when the stars scatter and the oceans roll together; when the graves are hurled about; each soul shall know what it has done and what it has failed to do.

O man! What evil has enticed you from your gracious Lord who created you, gave you an upright form, and proportioned you? In whatever shape He willed He could have moulded you.

Yet you deny the Last Judgement. Surely there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders who know of all your actions.

The righteous will surely dwell in bliss. But the wicked shall burn in Hell upon the Judgement-day: nor shall they ever escape from it.

Would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! Oh, would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! It is the day when every soul will stand alone and God will reign supreme.

(Qur'an, *sura* 82)



ACTIVITY

The Cataclysm specifically describes the Day of Judgment. From that passage, what can you infer about the Muslim perspective on Allah, on human nature, and on the role of Islam?

The Nature of the World

Muslims believe that the natural world, being the creation of Allah, is good and worthy of reverence. Indeed, the world is another form of revelation of God's will, and thus it is sometimes referred to as the cosmic Qur'an. Islamic civilization's great scientific advances are undoubtedly a result of this reverence. Far from regarding science as somehow in conflict with their faith, Muslims celebrate science as a means of knowing more about Allah's perfect creation.

Umma
(oom'muh; Arabic:
"community")

The community of all
Muslims.

Shari'a (sha-ree'ah)

The divine law, derived
from the Qur'an and
the Sunna, encompass-
ing all and setting forth
in detail how Muslims
are to live.

Muslims pray in
Bloomington, Indi-
ana, at a ceremony
ending the month
of Ramadan.



ACTIVITY

Muslims embrace science because it fits perfectly with their religious perspective about the natural world. From your perspective, how well do science and religion go together?

The Umma: The Community of Muslims

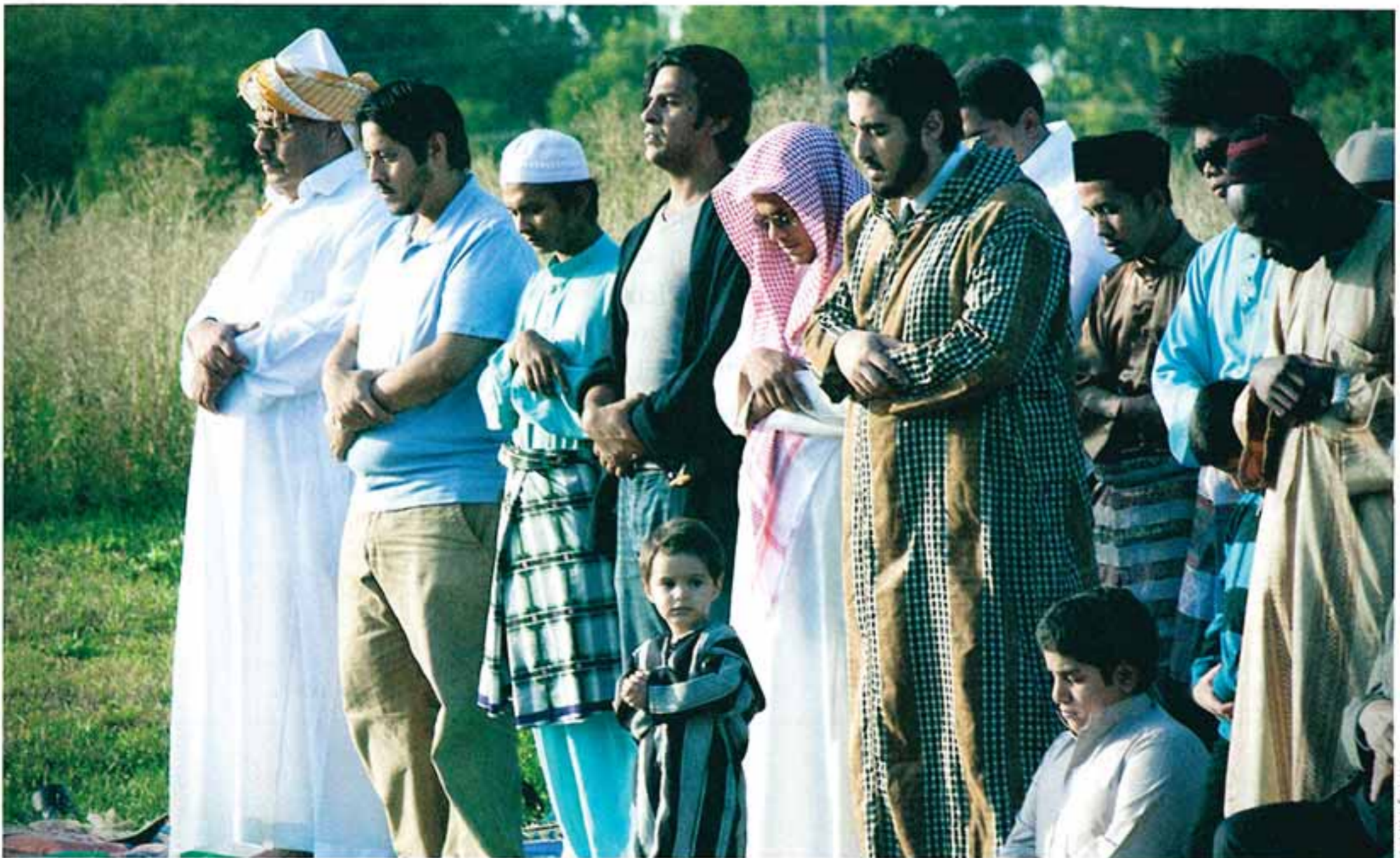
Islam emphasizes the community of all Muslims. Known as the **Umma**, this community transcends the boundaries of race, ethnicity, language, and other cultural factors. The Umma is a brotherhood and sisterhood based solely in religion.

Practically speaking, the Umma is an ideal that is not always realized, for sometimes

contention exists between certain groups of Muslims. Still, the ideal of community is a deeply held conviction and a basic element of Islam. And indeed, for most Muslims, the experience of belonging to the Umma is an everyday reality.

What is it about the religion of Islam that unites Muslims in this communal manner? It is the **Shari'a** (sha-ree'ah), or divine law. Drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunna, the Shari'a divides actions into five categories: obligatory, recommended, indifferent, disapproved, and forbidden. It is all-encompassing, setting forth in detail how to actually practice Islam—submission before Allah. To ignore the Shari'a is to stop being a Muslim.

The Shari'a was intended to be the law of the land and was this way in Islamic civilizations of the past. In modern times, the Shari'a is the basis of government in several countries with Muslim majorities, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan.



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ACTIVITY

Many Muslims live in countries governed by the Shari'a, or divine law, of Islam. Imagine what it would be like if your own country came to be ruled by a religion. What would be the most notable changes?

BASIC PRACTICES AND SOCIAL TEACHINGS

One of Islam's great strengths is its practical approach to religious life. The religion describes, in an orderly and clear manner, the requirements and the rewards of righteous living, and it spells out in detail how to act in order to meet the requirements and reap the rewards. The Shari'a then is a practical form

of divine law, conceived by God but fashioned for human beings' day-to-day life.

The Five Pillars

The order and clarity of the directives for living righteously is nowhere more apparent than in the **Five Pillars** of Islam. Each pillar calls for specific actions, and together the Five Pillars provide a basic framework for life.

Confession of Faith

The first pillar of Islam is its central creedal statement, the confession of faith known as the **Shahada** (shuh-hah'duh): "La ilaha illa'Llah. Muhammadun rasulu'Llah" ("There is no god except God. Muhammad is the messenger of God"). Stating this freely and with conviction officially makes a person a Muslim.

The confession refers to two basic teachings of Islam: monotheism and the

Five Pillars

Specific religious and ethical requirements for Muslims: the confession of faith (Shahada), prayer or worship, fasting during Ramadan, wealth sharing, and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*haji*).

Shahada
(shuh-hah'duh;
Arabic:
"witnessing")

The confession of faith, the first of the Five Pillars and central creedal statement of Islam: "There is no god except God. Muhammad is the messenger of God."

Muslim women pray during Ramadan.



© Michael Sauter / EPA / Corbis

mosque

The Muslim place or building of worship, traditionally including a prayer hall and courtyard, with towers called minarets at the corners.

imam

(i-mahm'; Arabic: "leader")

The leader of the Friday worship service who directs the prayers and delivers a sermon.

Ramadan

(ram'uh-dahn)

The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, a period during which Muslims fast, in accordance with the third of the Five Pillars.

hajj (haj)

The fifth of the Five Pillars; the journey to Mecca that all Muslims are to make at least once in their lifetime, if they can afford it and are physically able.

Ka'ba (kah'bah)

The stone cubical structure in the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Mecca, believed to have been built by Abraham and regarded by Muslims as the sacred center of the earth.

uniqueness of Muhammad as a prophet. Though these beliefs are essential, most of Islam's teachings, like those of Judaism, involve correct practices. The rest of the Five Pillars demonstrate Islam's emphasis on correct practice.

Prayer

The second pillar of Islam is prayer. All Muslims, women and men, are required to pray five times each day: early morning, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and evening. Muslim prayer requires ritual washing of the hands and face, prostration in the direction of Mecca, and other ritual movements. Usually the prayers are performed on a rug specifically designed for this purpose.

On Fridays public prayers are usually conducted in the **mosque**, a structure that traditionally includes a prayer hall and an enclosed courtyard, with towers called minarets at the corners. Public prayers may instead be held in an open field or in the desert, if there is no mosque nearby. Friday prayers are directed by an **imam** (i-mahm'), a "leader" who has been designated to conduct worship. The *imam* also delivers a sermon.

Fasting

The third pillar calls for fasting, which takes place during **Ramadan** (ram'uh-dahn), the ninth month of the Muslim year. Each day throughout that month, from dawn until sunset, Muslims are to avoid eating, drinking, smoking, and having sex. Some are exempt from this requirement: for example, those who are sick, those who are making difficult journeys, and women who are breast-feeding.

Islam uses a calendar based on the lunar year, which has fewer days than a solar year, so Ramadan is celebrated during each season over time. When it occurs during the summer, the requirements of fasting are particularly challenging, especially in the many desert and tropical regions of Muslim lands.

(Depending on when it occurs, it poses difficulties for the growing number of Muslim players in the NFL and NBA.)

Fasting is believed to be beneficial in many ways. By depriving people temporarily of the material goods and sensual pleasures that are often taken for granted, it gives them insight into the situations of people who are less fortunate. Fasting also nurtures an awareness of mortality, and helps to focus attention on moral and religious concerns, which fosters spiritual fortitude.

Wealth Sharing

Islam's fourth pillar, wealth sharing, helps to ensure the economic welfare of the entire Muslim community. It requires that Muslims contribute 2.5 percent of the value of their possessions to a public treasury annually—that is, once every lunar year. Poor people are exempt from this requirement, and in fact are among the recipients of the shared wealth. The treasury funds can also be spent on public concerns, such as educational or cultural institutions.

Wealth sharing is considered a form of worship, and thus provides benefits beyond the economic advantages it offers the community. Along with the specific requirement of wealth sharing, Islam teaches that acts of charity should be performed regularly.

Pilgrimage

Once in their lifetime, if they can afford it and are physically able, all Muslims are to journey to Mecca. The pilgrimage, or **hajj** (haj), is the fifth pillar of Islam. The *hajj* has great religious significance, for Allah forgives the sins of those who make the journey with reverence. Any pilgrim who dies on the journey to or from Mecca is a martyr (or witness to the faith) and enters Paradise.

The pilgrimage vividly captures the communal ideal of the Umma, because Muslims from around the world gather in Mecca to



© Reuters / Corbis

celebrate their common religion, regardless of their worldly differences. Male pilgrims wear plain white clothing that signifies their basic equality, and also symbolizes ritual purity. Female pilgrims wear simple, colorful clothing that is typical of their own homelands. Together the white apparel of the men and the colorful dress of the women identify Islam as a global religion that brings its diverse adherents together in the unity of the Umma.

The pilgrimage takes place during a specific month of the year and lasts for at least fifteen days. It involves several ritual acts, including the circling of the Ka'ba (kah'bah), a stone cubical structure in the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Mecca. This structure is believed to have been built by Abraham,

and it has been a site of religious significance since pre-Islamic times. Muslims regard the Ka'ba as the navel of the earth and as their geographic sacred center.

The Ka'ba is surrounded by pilgrims during the *hajj*.



ACTIVITY

Islam places great emphasis on its primary pilgrimage, the *hajj*. Several features of that journey have great religious significance for Muslims. Try to identify at least three of those features. Does anything in your own life have symbolic meaning similar to that of the *hajj*?

Some people reject the veil as a sign of oppression; others embrace it as a symbol of the Muslim tradition.



ACTIVITY

The Five Pillars of Islam provide a basic framework for life. State in your own words how they do so.

The Personal and Social Life of Islam

The Shari'a, or divine law, spells out details of Muslim life that go far beyond the requirements of the Five Pillars. Its guidelines on care of the body, the status of women, and struggle are just three of the standards of personal and social behavior that contribute to Islam's clear and ordered directives for living righteously.

Care of the Body

Islam holds that the body ultimately belongs not to the individual but to God. This basic principle leads to specific teachings on the

care of the body. Those teachings celebrate physical joys while controlling desires.

The body is to be kept clean; recall that washing is part of the Muslim prayer ritual. Clothing should be neither overly seductive nor overly luxurious, but there is nothing wrong with choosing clothes that are fashionable and attractive. Perfumes are especially popular. Muhammad himself once mentioned three particular joys: the company of women, prayer, and perfume. Good aromas tend to remind Muslims of Paradise.

Like Judaism, Islam regulates the diet. The Shari'a distinguishes between permitted and forbidden foods; for example, it forbids the eating of pork and the drinking of alcohol. Several passages in the Qur'an condemn wine and other intoxicants.

Sexuality is celebrated as one of Allah's greatest gifts, but one that is to be enjoyed only within marriage. Premarital and extramarital sex, and even lustful thoughts, are forbidden, as are homosexuality and prostitution. Muslims are urged to marry as early

in life as possible. Marriages are traditionally arranged by parents; couples generally do not date. This custom of course contrasts sharply with the Western perspective, which places romantic love as the foundation for marriage. In Islam marriage is first and foremost a legal contract; love is expected to grow once a couple has begun married life.



ACTIVITY

Compare Islamic teachings on the care of the body with the teachings you have received from your own religion and culture.

Women in Islam

The status of women in Islam is a controversial issue. Critics tend to accuse Islam of being chauvinistic and of denying basic rights to women. Muslims, in turn, tend to be frustrated and irritated by these accusations, dismissing them as meddling and unfair.

On the whole, the Qur'an itself, and the ideals of Islam, regard men and women as equals, but with different roles. Often those ideals are realized in daily life. For example, though men usually have predominant roles in economic and public life, women generally have greater influence within the family, Islam's central social institution.

Three specific points of contention are commonly cited by critics: divorce, polygamy, and the wearing of the veil.

JIHAD

[*Jihad*] is an Arabic word, the root of which is *Jahada*, which means to strive for a better way of life. . . . The other meanings are: endeavor, strain, exertion, effort, diligence, fighting to defend one's life, land, and religion.

Jihad should not be confused with Holy War; the latter does not exist in Islam nor will Islam allow its followers to be involved in a Holy War. . . .

Jihad is not a war to force the faith on others, as many people think of it. It should never be interpreted as a way of compulsion of the belief on others, since there is an explicit verse in the Qur'an that says: "There is no compulsion in religion" Al-Qur'an: Al-Baqarah (2:256).

Jihad is not a defensive war only, but a war against any unjust regime. If such a regime exists, a war is to be waged against the leaders, but not against the people of that country. People should be freed from the unjust regimes and influences so that they can freely choose to believe in Allah.

Not only in peace but also in war Islam prohibits terrorism, kidnapping, and hijacking, when carried against civilians. Whoever commits such violations is

considered a murderer in Islam, and is to be punished by the Islamic state. During wars, Islam prohibits Muslim soldiers from harming civilians, women, children, elderly, and the religious men like priests and rabbis. It also prohibits cutting down trees and destroying civilian constructions.

War is therefore the last resort, and is subject to the rigorous conditions laid down by the sacred law. The often misunderstood and overused term *jihad* literally means "struggle" and not "holy war" (a term not found anywhere in the Qur'an). *Jihad*, as an Islamic concept, can be on a personal level—inner struggle against evil within oneself; struggle for decency and goodness on the social level; and struggle on the battlefield, if and when necessary.

(Muslim Student Association of the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, at www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/glossary/term.JIHAD.html)

jihad
(ji-had'; Arabic:
"exertion" or
"struggle")

Sometimes counted as the sixth pillar of Islam, the general spiritual struggle to be a devout Muslim. In a more narrow context, *jihad* sometimes is used to refer to armed struggle (holy war) for the sake of Islam.

caliphs (Arabic:
"successors")

The military and political leaders of the Muslim community who succeeded Muhammad after his death.

According to the Shari'a, either the husband or the wife may initiate a divorce, although traditionally it has been easier for the husband to do so. In the practice known as repudiation, a man can divorce his wife simply by stating, "I divorce you," three times. Usually, however, a waiting period is required between the utterances, to allow opportunities for reconciliation. In some Muslim countries, repudiation is no longer legal, and men and women are generally on equal footing when it comes to initiating a divorce. In any event, Muhammad denounced divorce as being detested by Allah, even though it is categorized as a "permitted" act.

As for polygamy, the Qur'an technically allows it, but sets limits:

You may marry other women who seem good to you: two, three, or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only.

(Qur'an 4:3)



ACTIVITY

Very few Muslims practice polygamy, though it is technically allowed by the Qur'an. How do you interpret the Muslim teaching on this issue, as set forth in passage 4:3 of the Qur'an?

This passage is open to interpretation. Some Muslims contend that it actually recommends monogamy, because being perfectly equitable toward two or more wives is nearly impossible. In most regions, polygamy is rare. In some situations, however, Muslims condone the practice as the right thing. If there are many more women than men (in periods following warfare, for example), or if an older woman is widowed, it is better that men have multiple wives than that women remain alone. Muhammad himself had many wives

late in life, though he was married to only Khadija for twenty-five years, until her death. Muslims hold that his practice of polygamy was mainly for the sake of political unification, and not for sensual pursuits.

Like polygamy, the wearing of the veil is referred to in a few passages of the Qur'an that have been interpreted in different ways. The most commonly cited passage is this:

Prophet, enjoin your wives, your daughters, and the wives of true believers to draw their veils close around them. That is more proper, so that they may be recognized and not be molested.

(Qur'an 33:59)

Some Muslim communities require women to cover every part of their bodies and hide their faces behind veils. Others define veiling simply as covering the hair while in public. Veiling was a pre-Islamic practice in Arabia, and it is no longer universal among Muslim women. In the last few decades, educated women in relatively modernized countries like Egypt have intentionally returned to wearing the veil. For them it is perceived as a means of embracing their own traditional heritage, not as a form of male domination.

Jihad: "Struggle"

Jihad (ji-had'), whose name means "exertion" or "struggle," is a principle that applies to all aspects of Islamic life, personal and social. It is sometimes counted as the sixth pillar of Islam.

On a personal level, *jihad* refers to the individual's spiritual struggle against anything that detracts from venerating Allah and from acting in accordance with the divine will. Socially *jihad* refers to the preservation of the order Allah has willed for the world.

The term *jihad* is also sometimes used in a more controversial way. In a narrow context, it is used by some Muslims to refer to armed struggle, and is sometimes thought

of as meaning “holy war.” The Qur’an, however, nowhere connects *jihad* specifically with armed struggle.

THE EXPANSION OF ISLAM

Islam has developed and spread rapidly since its beginnings early in the seventh century AD.

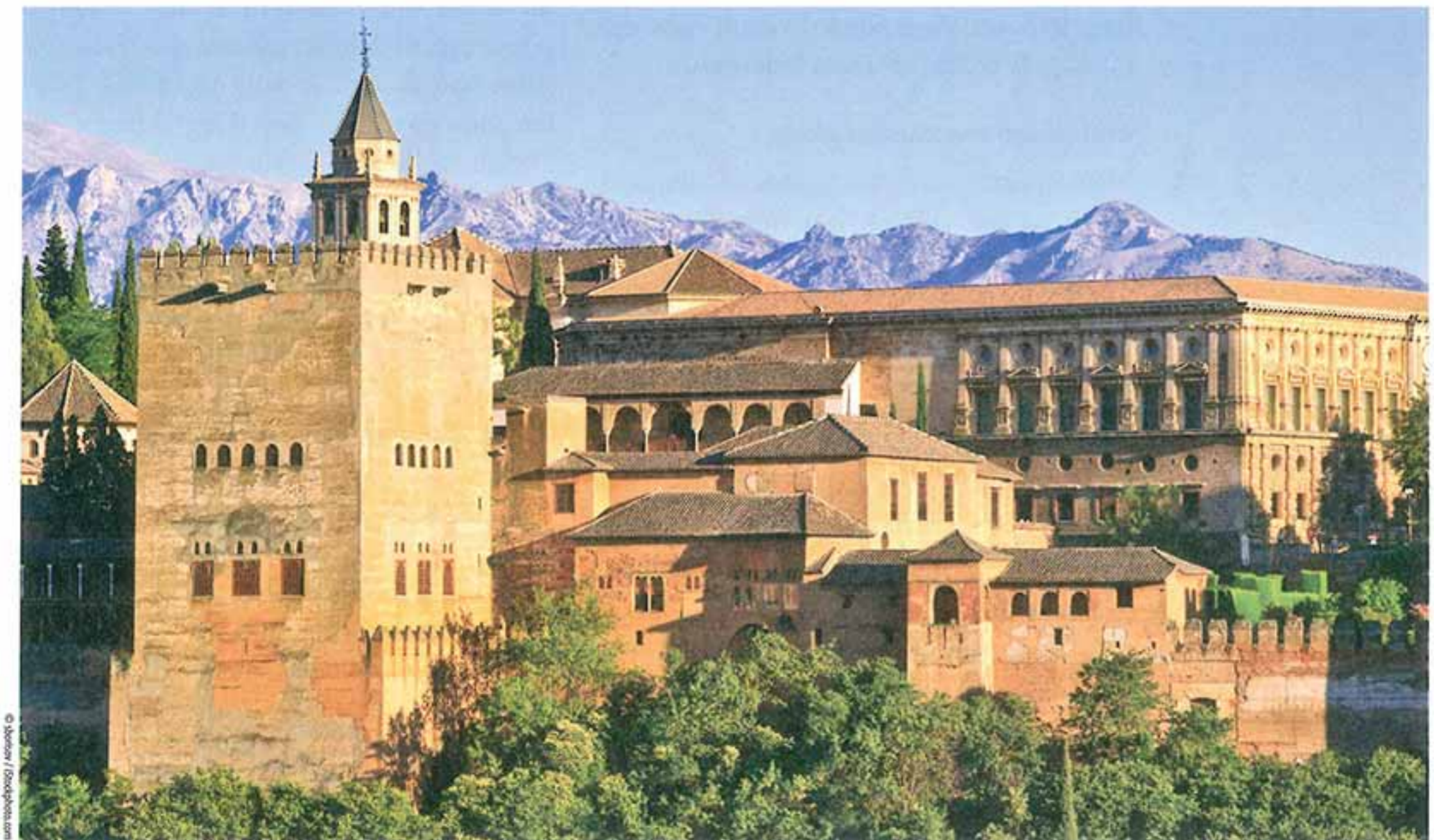
The Expansion of Islamic Civilization

Following the death of Muhammad in AD 632, Muslims were led by **caliphs** (successors) chosen by the community. The first caliph was Muhammad’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr. The caliphs oversaw a remarkable phenomenon. First, all of Arabia, which had never managed to unite over anything in the past, embraced Islam. Soon the peoples of vast stretches of territory converted to the new religion, most often by their own free will and not because of armed force.

Within one century of Muhammad’s death, Islam was the religion of the entire Middle East, Persia, North Africa, and almost all of Spain. If Muslim forces had not been defeated in the Battle of Tours / Poitiers in southern France in 732, they may well have conquered France and the rest of Europe.

The religion of Islam is, by its very nature, also a system of government and the foundation for a literary and artistic culture. In other words, Islam is also Islamic civilization. And so it was that in these vast regions, great centers of Islamic civilization developed. Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived side by side in Muslim Spain, where civilization flourished even as the rest of Europe endured the relatively stagnant Middle Ages. A mathematical system, called *al-jabar* in Arabic, was invented; in English we know it as algebra. The library of Cordoba, the main city of Muslim Spain, housed four hundred thousand titles. It is through those Arabic translations that some of the classics of

The Alhambra, a palace outside the city of Granada in southern Spain, shows the architectural influence of Islamic culture and art.



Sunni (soon'nee)

The division of Islam practiced by most Muslims, named after the Sunna.

Shi'i (shee'ee; from shi'at 'Ali: "partisans of Ali")

The division of Islam dominant in Iraq and Iran, originating as a result of an early dispute over leadership; distinguishable from Sunni Islam mainly by its figure of the Imam and strong messianic expectations.

ancient Greece and Rome have survived to this day.

Other Muslim empires arose, and in widely diverse regions. The Mogul Empire ruled India from 1526 to 1858. The Ottoman Empire, centered in modern-day Turkey, endured from 1326 all the way into the twentieth century.

For the most part, the flourishing of Islamic civilization came to an end during the era of European colonization. Many lands with a majority Muslim population came under the rule of European nations, and the normal functioning of Islam as a system of government within a religion was crippled. Today Islam seems to be making a rapid recovery from the effects of colonization.

The Locations of Muslims Today

Presently the nations with the greatest concentration of Muslims are located in the northern half of Africa, all of the Middle East and southwestern Asia (including Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan), South Asia, and the islands of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Arabia and the Muslim World

Islam crosses many boundaries of language, ethnicity, and culture. It cannot simply be equated with Arabia—which consists of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf States—whose citizens constitute less than 20 percent of the entire Muslim population. In comparison 31 percent of the world's Muslims live in the South Asian nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Still Arabia enjoys a special status in Islam for several reasons: Arabic involvement in Islam goes back to the earliest history of Islam, Arabia is the location of Muslim sacred sites, and Arabic is the language of Islam.

Islam in the United States

About five million Muslims live in the United States, where Islam is the fastest-growing religion. About 40 percent of the U.S. Muslim population is made up of African Americans, some of whom claim a Muslim heritage. It is estimated that nearly 20 percent of Africans brought to North America as slaves were Muslim.

This heritage is one reason why some African Americans have argued that Islam is better suited for their community than Christianity, which they regard as the religion of their white oppressors. This has been the view of the Nation of Islam, a movement that began in the twentieth century and has been led by such notable men as Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan. The Nation of Islam upholds only some of the practices of traditional Islam, and most Muslims do not regard it as an authentic part of their religion. These differences were highlighted in the 1960s when Malcolm X, after making a pilgrimage to Mecca, rejected the Nation of Islam and formed a more traditional Muslim movement. For one thing, whereas the Nation of Islam teaches racial separatism, Malcolm X embraced the interracial unity he observed firsthand in Mecca.

Most Muslims in the United States, however, are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Muslim countries. Some arrived by the end of the nineteenth century, from the Middle East and eastern Europe. Large-scale immigration first occurred in the 1960s, caused by troubles in Muslim homelands. Immigrants from that time period tended to maintain their own ethnic ways within small communities of fellow Muslims. Their children have been more affected by Western influences. Today many of them are as typically American as they are Muslim. Islam is rapidly settling in as a common feature of the religious landscape of the United States.



ACTIVITY

What aspects of Islam have you observed in your own nation and community? What have your observations taught you about Muslims and their religion?

VARIETIES OF ISLAM

Like most religious traditions, Islam has taken various forms over the centuries. But there are only two major historical divisions: Sunnism and Shi'ism. Sufism, the mystical form of Islam, draws its adherents from both of those historical divisions, and therefore is not a separate division.

Historical Divisions within Islam

The divisions within Islam are secondary to the theme of unity that holds together the brotherhood and sisterhood of Muslims. Various specific reasons underlie this theme of unity: Only one Arabic version of the Qur'an exists, and all Muslims regard it as the direct word of Allah. The Sunna of the Prophet allows all Muslims to share in the inspiration of Muhammad's life and teachings. And ritual practices, such as those required by the Five Pillars, are common to all.

Sunnism

Sunni (soon'nee) is drawn from a longer phrase referring to the people who follow the established custom, or sunna, meaning the Sunna of the Prophet. It is simply the common name for the form of Islam practiced by the majority (about 87 percent) of Muslims. In this respect then, it is Islam as described in the preceding pages of this chapter.



The late Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shi'i Muslim, was an influential and controversial leader in the Iranian revolution of 1978 to 1979.

Shi'ism

Shi'i (shee'ee) comes from *shi'at Ali*, which means "partisans of Ali." Ali was a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad's. Three times he was passed over before finally being named caliph, and eventually he was assassinated. These events led to the origination of the Shi'i movement by Muslims who favored Ali as the true successor of Muhammad. Shi'ism was consolidated into a distinct form of Islam when Ali's son, Husayn, was assassinated in AD 680. The martyrdom of Husayn continues to be observed within Shi'i Islam as a significant event, and Husayn himself is regarded as a great hero.

Shi'i Islam thus originated primarily from historical circumstances. Today it can be distinguished in part by geography. The nations of Iraq and Iran have Shi'i majorities. Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Pakistan also have significant Shi'i populations.

In terms of its teachings, Shi'ism is most notably distinguished by the figure of the

MUSLIM LIFE

Nizar Najjar is a university student in the United States. He grew up in Tunisia, a predominantly Muslim country on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. He was asked to remark on a few topics.

What is it like to be a Muslim here, compared with in Tunisia?

There are big differences. In Tunisia, a Muslim country, we have the call to prayer, we go to the mosque, and in Ramadan everyone fasts and prays together. We can freely butcher the lamb needed for our feast at the end of Ramadan. Here, if you go to your home and butcher a lamb, you can get into trouble. Also, when I am fasting here during Ramadan, I see everyone else eating. That gives me an uncomfortable feeling. Back home, the whole community is supportive and synchronized. If a Muslim chooses not to fast, that is fine. But it is considered wrong to eat or to smoke outside, in front of others, because they are fasting, trying to resist the urge to eat or to smoke.

As for prayer, in the United States, we do not have the call to prayer. We use our watches instead. Here there is no mosque. We must find an empty, clean room for prayer, and determine the direction to Mecca before praying. We students are trying to buy a place and transform it into a mosque, so that we can at least perform our prayers.

What is involved in the practice of prayer?

Preparation for prayer involves ablution, or ritual washing. But even before ablution, you have to have good intention, by purifying your heart. Ablution is not going to do you any good if you don't purify yourself spiritually before praying. Praying is not simply a duty that you can perform just to get rid of it. What you need to do is purify yourself. You also wash yourself—your hands, face, and other parts of your body, all in a certain order. Then, if your inside is pure and your outside is clean, you are ready spiritually to perform the prayer.

In prayer we are in the presence of Allah. He is metaphorically—though not physically—in front of us. So when you are praying, it's strictly forbidden for anyone to cross in front of you. It would interrupt your sacred time of worship. It would interrupt your concentration, which is vital to prayer.

Prayer must be done with good intention. Still, it is a duty. Allah deserves our prayer. It is the least thing we can do to obey Him and to satisfy Him and to appease Him.

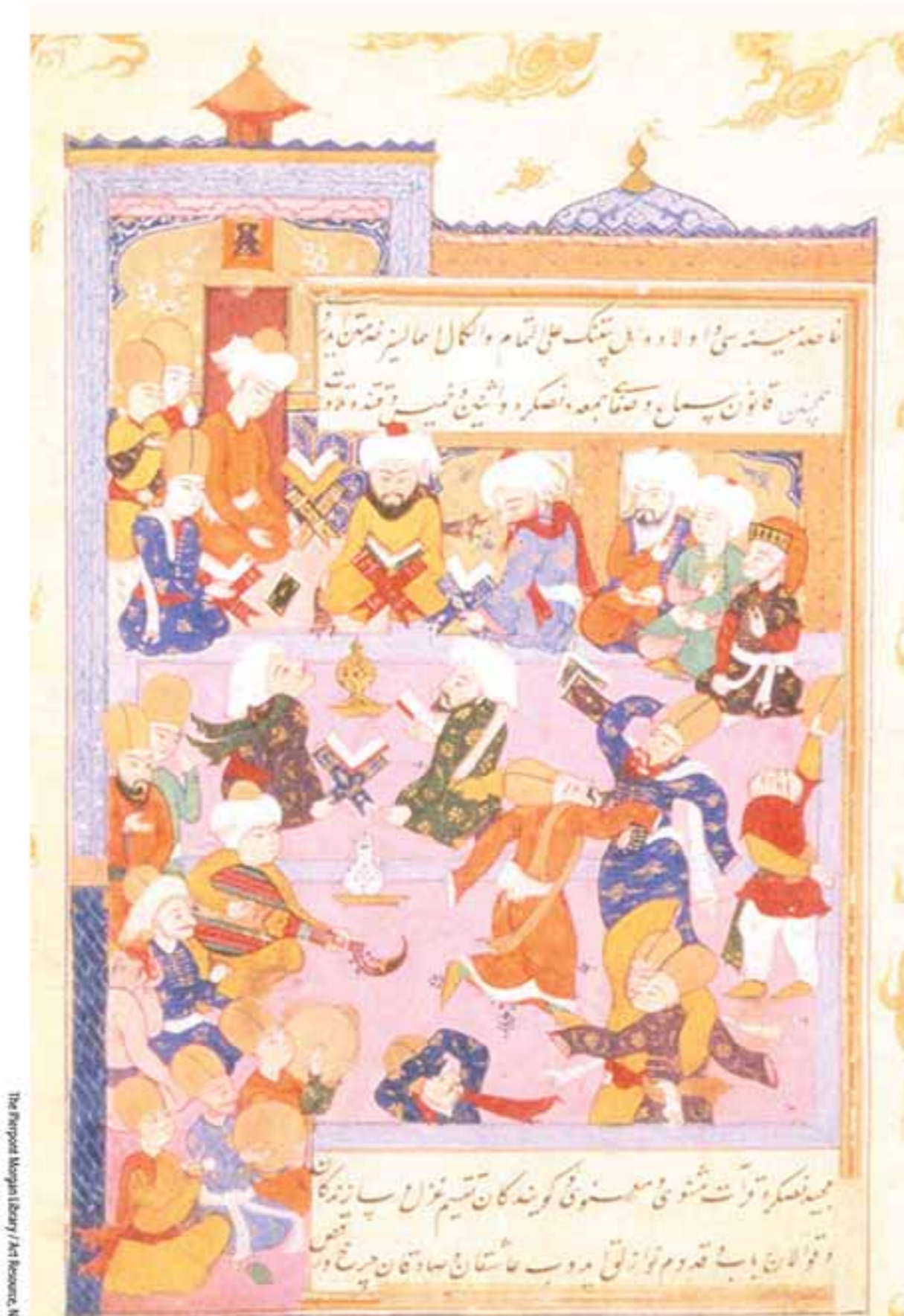
How would you describe the Prophet Muhammad?

Muhammad is great. Muhammad is wonderful. Muhammad had lots of accomplishments. Muhammad was successful. Muhammad transformed the whole nation. Muhammad was a political leader, he was a war strategist, he was a good economist. He was all these things. But the bottom line is, he was just a human being. He doesn't have the presence that Jesus has in the heart of Christians. We have lots of respect for Muhammad, but he was just a human being, and we do not idolize and worship him. Allah and the Qur'an are first. When we need advice, we go first to the Qur'an. If we don't find anything in the Qur'an that will guide us, then we go to the sayings of the Prophet. This is the importance of the Prophet. Some aspects of daily life and social problems were addressed by the Prophet. So we are required to follow his teachings.

What do you most want readers to know about Islam?

Just know that Muslims do not hate Christians. Actually, Muslims are the closest religion, or the closest people, to Christians. Muslims are not enemies, as the media sometimes tend to present them. Islam is the only non-Christian religion that makes it an article of faith for its followers to believe in Jesus, to believe that Jesus was one of the mightiest messengers of God, or of Allah, as we call Him. We believe in Jesus' miracle birth. We believe that he healed the blind and the lepers, by God's permission. And we believe that he is coming back. So we have lots of similarities. The only difference we have is that we do not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. But this is a separate issue. Actually, Jesus appears in the Qur'an more frequently than does Muhammad. An entire chapter in the Qur'an is dedicated to Mary, just to honor the mother of Jesus.

We have some differences with Christians, but there is no way a Muslim could hate a Christian just because he's a Christian. That's absurd. Basically we love everybody, especially Christians and Jews, who follow the Scriptures, who do good deeds. There is no difference, except in the form of worship. We love everybody. We just want everybody to love us. That's it. We don't deny that we have shortcomings. We have people who are fanatics, who want to go bomb places. But a true Muslim disagrees with these people. We don't send people to kill innocent people—that is absurd. So don't judge us based on what some bad people, some bad Muslims, do. Just judge us as persons, and judge our religion.



The Sufi practice of dancing or whirling is meant to induce a mystical union with God.

Imam. Though not a prophet, the **Imam** is believed to have special spiritual insight and is revered as the true earthly authority. Most Shi'is believe there have been twelve Imams, all of them descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband, Muhammad's cousin Ali. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, is thought to have been hidden away at a young age. At the end of time, he will return to restore Islam and to bring on the Day of Judgment.

This belief in the return of Muhammad al-Mahdi, and the general emphasis on

the Imam as an authority figure, has made Shi'ism more politically volatile than Sunnism. In the Iranian Revolution of 1978 to 1979 and its aftermath, for example, the late Ayatollah Khomeini was thought to have special authority, and sometimes was even regarded as the Imam.

Islamic Mysticism: Sufism

Islam, as practiced by most Muslims, Sunni and Shi'i alike, emphasizes the transcendence and suprapersonal nature of Allah. Worship focuses on living in accordance with the

Imam

For Shi'i Islam, an early successor to Muhammad and leader of Islam (most Shi'is acknowledge twelve Imams), believed to have special spiritual insight.

Sufi (soo'fee)

An adherent of Sufism, the form of Islam characterized by a mystical approach to Allah, who is experienced inwardly.

shaykh (shayk)

A teacher and master in Islam, such as the leader of an order in Sufism.

al-fana

(ahl-fuhn'ah;
Arabic: "extinction")

The extinction of one's sense of separate existence before achieving union with Allah; the aim of Sufi mystics.

divine will, through following the Shari'a. An abyss lies between the religious understanding of the individual and the great magnificence of Allah.

Sufism strives to cross that abyss, to experience Allah as immanent, dwelling within the worshipper. A Sufi saying expresses this in the words of Allah: "My Earth and My Heaven contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant containeth Me" (quoted in Arberry, *Sufism*, page 28).

Sufism's Place within Islam

The term *sufism* is derived from the word *suf*, which refers to the coarse wool garment that is traditionally worn by Sufis. Despite the simplicity of the name's origin, the place of Sufism within Islam is a complicated and controversial issue.

Recall the first verse of the confession of faith, the first pillar of Islam. It declares, "There is no god except God." Sufism extends this a step further, declaring that there is *nothing* but God. If that is the case, then the worshipper too must be one with God. This is the guiding principle of Sufism. The Sufi experiences oneness with Allah, and through that experience gains spiritual fortitude.

Sometimes this perspective has landed Sufis in trouble with orthodox Muslims. A great Sufi by the name al-Hallaj, for example, was crucified by his fellow Muslims in 922 for having stated, "I am the Real." The Real is one of the ninety-nine names of God, so al-Hallaj was in fact claiming identity with Allah. To orthodox Muslims, this was blasphemous. To Sufis it was a description of the pinnacle of religious experience.

Despite such events born of controversy, in the past Sufism generally fared well alongside orthodox Islam. In fact, it played an enormous role in attracting new adherents to Islam, especially in the East. Today, however, with the rise of more traditionalist forms of orthodox Islam, Sufism is commonly blamed

for having caused Islam to stray from the true path, and is therefore frowned on by many.

Sufi Methods

Similar to Christian monasticism, Sufism is made up of groups known as orders. Each is led by a *shaykh* (shayk), a master and teacher. He leads his disciples through a variety of spiritual disciplines to help them achieve union with God, including recitation of sacred names and phrases, breathing exercises, and the chanting of odes. Perhaps the most famous Sufi discipline is a dance form best known in the West as the dance of the whirling dervishes.

Sufis identify the aim of their disciplines as *al-fana* (ahl-fuhn'ah), or "extinction." They are referring to the extinction of the person's sense of ego, of the notion of separate existence. Once this notion is annihilated, the separation between self and God disappears, triggering the experience of union with the divine. This aspect of Sufism is similar to some of the mystical teachings of Hinduism.

**ACTIVITY**

Reconcile these two statements about Sufism:

- "The Sufi experiences oneness with Allah."
- "Sufis identify the aim of their disciplines as *al-fana*, or extinction of the person's sense of ego, of the notion of separate existence."

ISLAM AND THE WORLD

Islam is distinctive among the great religions of the world for the extent to which it embraces the totality of life. There is simply no recognition of a division between what is religious and what is secular. The very meaning of the term *religion* in Arabic implies the need to repay one's debt to God; every aspect

of life is indebted, and every action should tend to the need for repayment.

The all-encompassing nature of this, the world's second-largest religion, makes Islam an especially relevant subject of study. How does Islam see its place within our pluralistic world? Can a religion that understands itself as embracing the totality of life truly be tolerant of other religions?

The answer to such questions is twofold. Muslims regard Islam as the final revelation to all religions, just as they believe the Qur'an itself is the final revelation of the divine will. But Muslims also acknowledge that other religions include expressions of the divine will. Judaism and Christianity, especially, are favored by Islam, which regards their followers as People of the Book.

We often hear of conflicts involving Muslims: fights between Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews, riots pitting Hindus against Muslims in India, attacks by those labeled Muslim extremists. Like the ideals of every

religion, those of Islam are not always put into practice. Nevertheless, Islam's overriding theme is the ideal of unity. This statement is from the great Sufi poet Rumi:

I am neither eastern nor western, neither
heavenly nor earthly,
I am neither of the natural elements nor of
the rotating spheres.
I am neither from India nor China, from
neither Bulgaria nor Tabriz,
From neither the country of Iraq nor the
land of Khurasan.
My sign is without sign, my locus is
without locus,
It is neither body nor soul for I am myself
the Soul of souls.
Since I expelled all duality, I see the two
worlds as one.

I see the One, I seek the One, I know the
One, I call upon the One.

(Quoted in Nasr, "Islam," in
Our Religions, page 522)

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. What is the root meaning of the name *Islam*?
2. Describe the Qur'an's size and structure, and identify its original language.
3. What is the literal meaning of the term *qur'an*?
4. When and where was Muhammad born?
5. Briefly describe the Night of Power and Excellence.
6. What is the Hijra, and why is it important?
7. Why is Muhammad referred to as the Seal of the Prophets?
8. What is the Sunna of the Prophet?
9. Why is Allah thought to be genderless?
10. Identify at least two of Islam's prophets other than Muhammad.
11. Who is Ishmael, and what is his place in Islam?
12. How do Muslims interpret the Fall from perfection in the Garden of Eden?
13. Briefly describe what Muslims expect to happen before and on the Day of Judgment.
14. What is the Muslim view of the natural world?

15. What determines inclusion in the Umma?
16. Identify two modern nations whose government is based on the Shari'a.
17. What is the English translation of the Muslim confession of faith?
18. Briefly describe the Muslim practice of daily prayer.
19. What is Ramadan?
20. What is required of Muslims according to the fourth pillar, wealth sharing?
21. What is the *hajj*, and what is its religious significance?
22. Summarize two Muslim teachings on the care of the body.
23. With regard to Muslim perspectives on women, what are the three specific points of contention commonly cited by Western critics?
24. Define the word *jihad*.
25. What was the extent of Islamic expansion one century after Muhammad's death?
26. What areas of the globe are presently populated with the greatest concentration of Muslims?
27. Why does Arabia enjoy a special status in Islam?
28. Why have some African Americans argued that Islam is better suited for their community than is Christianity?
29. What is Sunnism?
30. What is the meaning of the term *shi'i*?
31. Identify at least two modern nations that have a Shi'i majority or a significant Shi'i population.
32. Briefly describe the figure of the Imam in Shi'ism.
33. How does Sufism extend the first sentence of Islam's confession of faith?
34. Identify at least two Sufi methods, or disciplines.