



CHAPTER VI

I S L A M

*There is a means of polishing all things
whereby rust may be removed.
That which polishes the heart
is the invocation of Allah.*



The Taj Mahal, masterpiece of Islamic architecture.



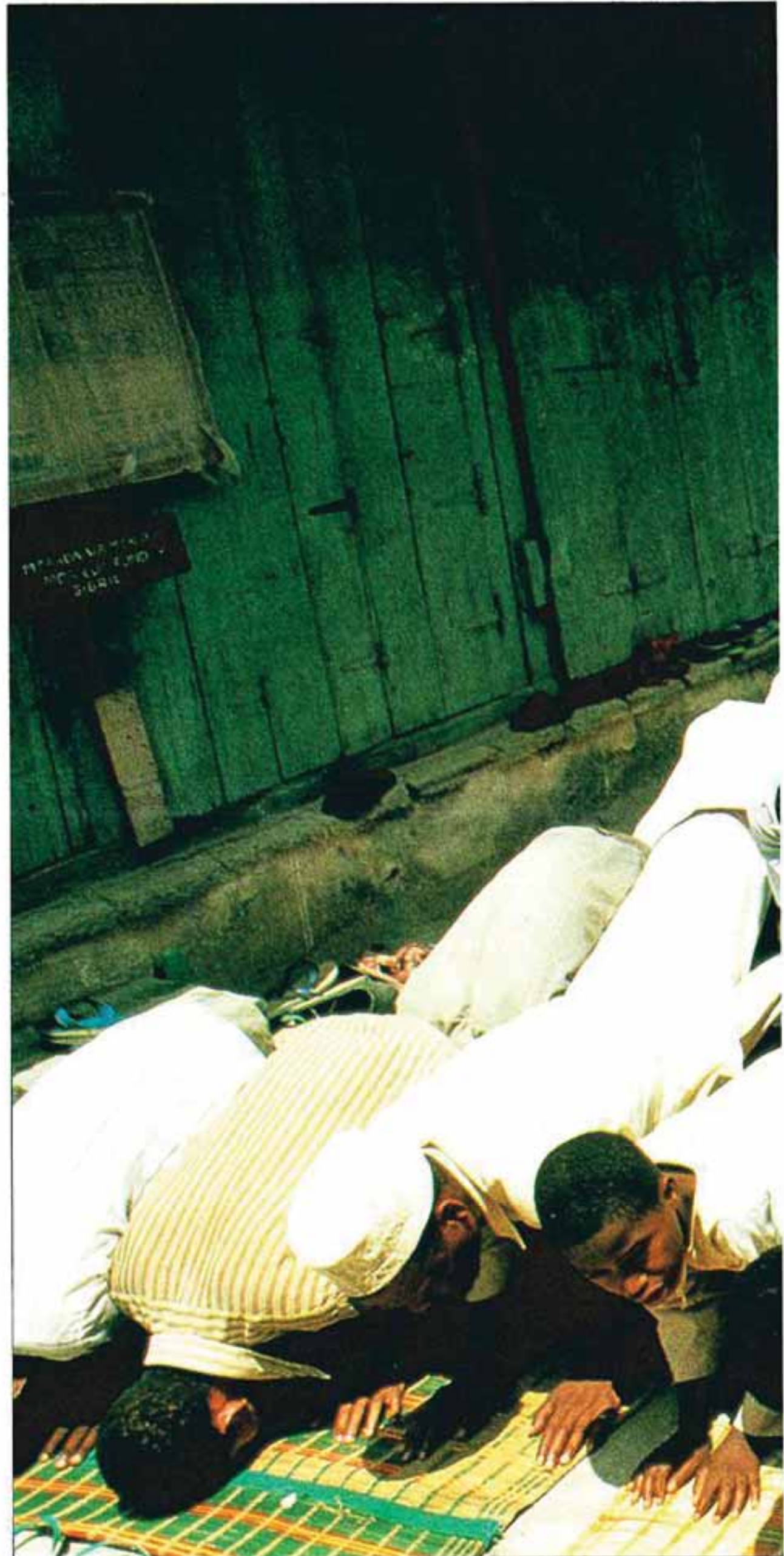
BACKGROUND

THE WORD ISLAM DERIVES from *salam* which means primarily "peace" but in a secondary sense "surrender." Its full connotation, therefore, is the peace that comes from surrendering one's life to God. Those who adhere to Islam are known as Muslims.

If we ask how Islam arose, the outside answer looks for socio-religious currents that were playing over Arabia in Muhammad's day, but the Muslims' answer is different. In their eyes Islam begins not with Muhammad in sixth century Arabia, but with God. "In the beginning God...", the Book of Genesis tells us. The Koran agrees while using the word *Allah*, which means literally "the God." Not *a* god, for there is only one. *The* God.

God created the world, and after it human beings. The name of the first man was Adam. The descendants of Adam and Eve led to Noah, who had a son named Shem from which the word Semite derives. The descendants of Shem led to Abraham who married Sarah. Sarah had no son, so Abraham took Hagar for his second wife. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael, whereupon Sarah conceived and likewise had a son, named Isaac. Sarah then demanded that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. Up to this point the Koran follows the Bible, but here the accounts diverge, for according to the Koran, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise. His descendants, flourishing in Arabia, became Muslims whereas those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, gave rise to the Hebrews who were later called Jews.

Muslim worshippers overflow from a crowded mosque into the streets of Zanzibar in Africa.





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THE STANDING MIRACLE

THE BLEND OF ADMIRATION, respect, and affection that Muslims feel for Muhammad is an impressive fact of history; they never mention his name without adding, "*blessings and peace be upon him.*" Even so, they never mistake him for the earthly center of their faith. That place is reserved for the bible of Islam, the Koran.

Literally the Arabic word *qur'an* means recitation. So great was Muhammad's regard for its contents that (as we have seen) he considered it the only miracle God worked through him — God's "standing miracle," he called it. That he could himself have produced a book that provides the ground plan of all knowledge and at the same time is grammatically perfect and without poetic peer — this, Muhammad, and with him all Muslims are convinced, defies belief.

Muslims tend to read the Koran literally. They consider it the earthly facsimile of an Uncreated Koran in almost exactly the way that Christians consider Jesus to have been the human incarnation of God. Not that there are two Korans, of course. Rather, the created Koran is the material crystallization of the infinite reality of the Uncreated Koran. When the created Koran is said to be a miracle, the miracle referred to is the presence of the Uncreated Koran within the letters and sounds of its created (and therefore necessarily in certain ways circumscribed) counterpart.

The words of the Koran came to Muhammad in manageable segments over twenty-three years through voices that sounded at first like reverberating bells, but gradually condensed into a single voice that identified itself as Gabriel's. Muhammad had no control over when Gabriel would speak. When he did, Muhammad's state would visibly change. He reported that the words assaulted him as if they were solid and heavy. Once they

arrived while he was riding a camel; by the time they had ceased, its belly was pressed against the earth with its legs splayed out. The words that Muhammad exclaimed in these often trance-like states were memorized by his followers and recorded on bones, bark, leaves, and scraps of parchment with God preserving their accuracy throughout.

The Koran continues God's revelations to the Jews and Christians and presents itself as their culmination. However, it judges the Old and New Testaments as having two defects from which it, itself, is free. For circumstantial reasons, the Hebrew and Christian Bibles record only portions of Truth. Second, they were partially corrupted in transmission, which explains the occasional discrepancies that occur between their accounts and parallel ones in the Koran. Exemption from these two limitations makes the Koran the final and infallible revelation of God's will.

From the outside this book, which for Muslims is Allah's verbal incarnation, presents obstacles — Carlyle called it the most toilsome reading he ever undertook. How are we to account for the discrepancy between the Koran as read from within and from without?

The language in which it was proclaimed provides an initial clue, for no other language seems able to play on human emotions the way Arabic can. But language is not the only barrier the Koran presents, for its contents too are like no other religious text. Unlike the Upanishads, it is not explicitly metaphysical. It does not ground its theology in dramatic narratives as the Indian epics do, nor in historical ones as do the Hebrew scriptures. Nor is God revealed in human form as in the Gospels and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Confining ourselves to the Semitic scriptures, we can say that whereas the Old and New Testaments are directly historical and indirectly doctrinal, the Koran is directly doctrinal and indirectly historical.



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This page and overleaf: These finely illustrated Persian manuscripts are typical of the extraordinary flowering of art and literature in the early centuries of Islam.

Because the overwhelming thrust of the Koran is to proclaim the unity, omnipotence, omniscience and mercy of God – and correlatively the total dependence of human life upon Him – historical facts are in its case merely reference points that have scarcely any interest in themselves. When the Lord-servant relationship is the essential point, all else is commentary and allusion.

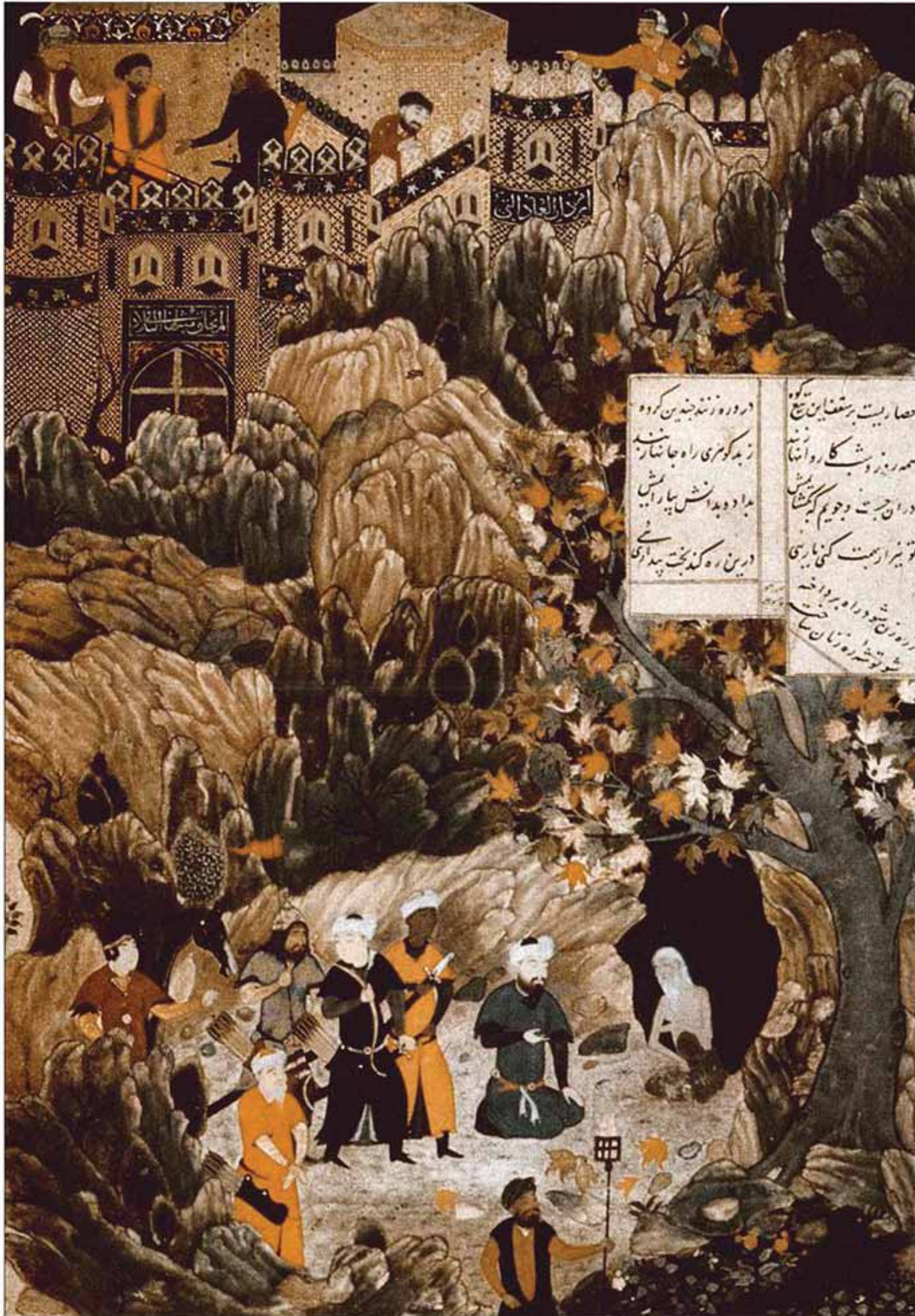
Perhaps we shall be less inclined to fault the Koran for the opaque face it presents to foreigners if we note that foreign scriptures present their own problems to Muslims.

To speak only of the Old and New Testaments, Muslims express disappointment in finding that they do not take the form of Divine speech and merely report things that happened. In the Koran, God speaks in the first person; he describes himself and makes known his laws. The Muslim is therefore inclined to consider each individual sentence of the Holy Book as a separate revelation and to experience the words themselves, even their sounds, as a means of grace.

Putting comparisons behind us, it is impossible to overemphasize the central position of the Koran in Islamic life.

With large portions memorized in childhood, it regulates every decision and interprets every event. It is a memorandum for the faithful, a reminder for daily doings, and a repository of revealed truth. It is a manual of definitions and guarantees, and at the same time a road map for the will.

Finally, it is a collection of maxims to meditate on in private, deepening one's sense of the divine glory. "Perfect is the Word of your Lord in truth and justice" (6:115).





BASIC THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

WITH A FEW STRIKING EXCEPTIONS that will be noted, the basic theological concepts of Islam are virtually identical with those of Judaism and Christianity, its forerunners. We shall confine our attention in this section to four that are the most important: God, Creation, the Human Self, and the Day of Judgment.

As in the other historical religions, everything in Islam centers on its religious Ultimate, God. God is immaterial and therefore invisible. For the Arabs this casts no doubt on his reality, for as desert dwellers, the notion of invisible hands that drove the blasts that swept the desert and formed deceptive mirages was always with them. The Koran did not introduce the Arabs to the unseen world or even to monotheism, for a few solitary seekers, called *hanifs*, had moved to that position already. Its innovation was to rid the scene of Allah's rivals.

We must immediately add that Muslims see monotheism as Islam's contribution not simply to the Arabs but to religion in its entirety. Hinduism's prolific images are taken as proof that it never arrived at the worship of the single God. Judaism was correctly instructed, but its teachings were confined to the people of Israel. Christians, for their part, compromised their monotheism by deifying Christ. The Koran honors Jesus as a prophet and accepts his virgin birth, but it draws the line at the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Trinity, seeing these as blurring the Divine/human distinction.

Turning to the Koranic depiction of God's nature, the first thing that strikes us is his awe-inspiring power. Unlimited power inspires fear, and it is fair to say that Muslims fear Allah. Theirs is not, however, a cringing fear in the face of a capricious tyrant. It is, rather (they

argue) the only realistic emotion when people face up to the magnitude of the consequences that follow from being on the right or wrong side of an uncompromisingly moral universe. If nihilism is the dissipation of difference, a leveling-out of life through moral entropy, Allah's universe is its exact opposite.

Good and evil matter, and choices have consequences. The other side of fear of the Lord, however, is that when it has been dealt with, other, lesser fears subside. The second, supporting root of the word *islam* is peace.

It is important to remember this last point because the holy dread that Allah inspires is more than outweighed by his love for his creatures. Allah's compassion and mercy are cited 192 times in the Koran as against 17 references to his wrath and vengeance. He who is Lord of the worlds is also the Deliverer from affliction, the Friend of the bereaved, and the Consoler whose love is more tender than that of the mother-bird for her young.

From God we can turn to Creation as our second theological concept. The Koran does not present the world as oozing from the infinite by some vague process of emanation. Allah deliberately created it. This fact carries two important consequences.

First, the world of matter is completely real. (Herein lies one of the sources of Islamic science, which during Europe's Dark Ages flourished as nowhere else on earth.) Second, having been fashioned by a Craftsman that is perfect, matter must be – not perfect, for there cannot be two perfections – but overwhelmingly good.

Conjoined, these two points inspire a respect for the material sides of life that the other two Semitic religions, Judaism and Christianity, likewise affirm.



Foremost among God's creations is the human self, whose nature, Koranically defined, is our third doctrinal subject. That nature is unequivocally good; it has been stained by no catastrophic fall. The closest Islam comes to the Christian doctrine of original sin is in its concept of forgetting. People do forget their divine origin, but their fundamental nature is irrevocably good, so they are entitled to self-respect and a healthy self-image.

With life acknowledged as a gift from its Creator we can turn to its obligations, which are two. The first of these is gratitude for life received. The Arabic word for infidel is shaded more toward one who lacks thankfulness than one who disbelieves. The second human obligation calls us back to the name of this religion. Islam, we recall, means surrender. We must now attend to this attribute explicitly.

Thoughts of surrender are so freighted with military connotations that it requires conscious effort to notice that the word also tokens self-giving, in which mode no religion is without it. William James speaks so insightfully to this point that his words are worth quoting.

"When all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose. Now in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary."

To this account of surrender's virtues we can add in Islamic parlance that to be a slave to Allah is to be freed

from other, degrading forms of slavery – to greed, say, or anxiety, or ambition. Also, the "slavery" referred to here is voluntary, for the human soul is a free agent. Several passages in the Koran seem to imply predestination, but they do not finally do so, for *"whoever gets to himself a sin, gets it solely on his own responsibility"* (4:111).

Nowhere is the soul's freedom more conspicuous than on the Day of Judgment, our concluding theological concept. The Koran presents life as a brief but immensely precious opportunity, offering a once-and-for-all choice. Hence the urgency that informs the entire Book. The chance to return to life for even a single day to make good use of their opportunities is something "the losers," facing their Reckoning, would treasure beyond anything they desired while they were yet alive.

Depending on how it fares in its Reckoning, the soul will repair to either the Heavens or the Hells, which in the Koran are described in vivid, concrete, and sensual imagery. The Koran allows these images to be read either literally or allegorically, for *"some of the signs are firm and others are figurative"* (3:5). Underlying their differences of interpretation, all Muslims believe that each soul will be held accountable for its actions on earth, with its future thereafter dependent upon how well it has observed God's commands.

As a final point: if all this talk of judgment still seems to cast God too much in the role of punisher, we can resort to verses in the Koran that exempt Allah from direct involvement altogether. In those verses souls judge themselves. What death burns away is self-serving defenses, forcing one to see with total objectivity how one has lived one's life. In the uncompromising light of that vision where no dark corners are allowed, it is one's own actions that rise up to accuse or confirm. Once the self is extracted from the realm of lies, the falsities by



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which it armored itself become like flames, and the life it there led like a shirt of Nessus.

God, Creation, the Human Self, and the Day of Judgment – these are the chief theological pegs on which the Koran's teachings hang. In spite of their importance, however, the Koran is a book that emphasizes deeds

rather than ideas. It is to those that we turn in the next two sections.

Meditation in a mosque in Asuan, Egypt.



THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

IF A MUSLIM WERE ASKED to summarize the way Islam counsels people to live, his answer might be: It teaches them to walk the straight path. The phrase comes from the opening surah (chapter) of the Koran which includes the supplication, "Guide us in the straight path, the path of those on whom Thou hast poured forth Thy grace."

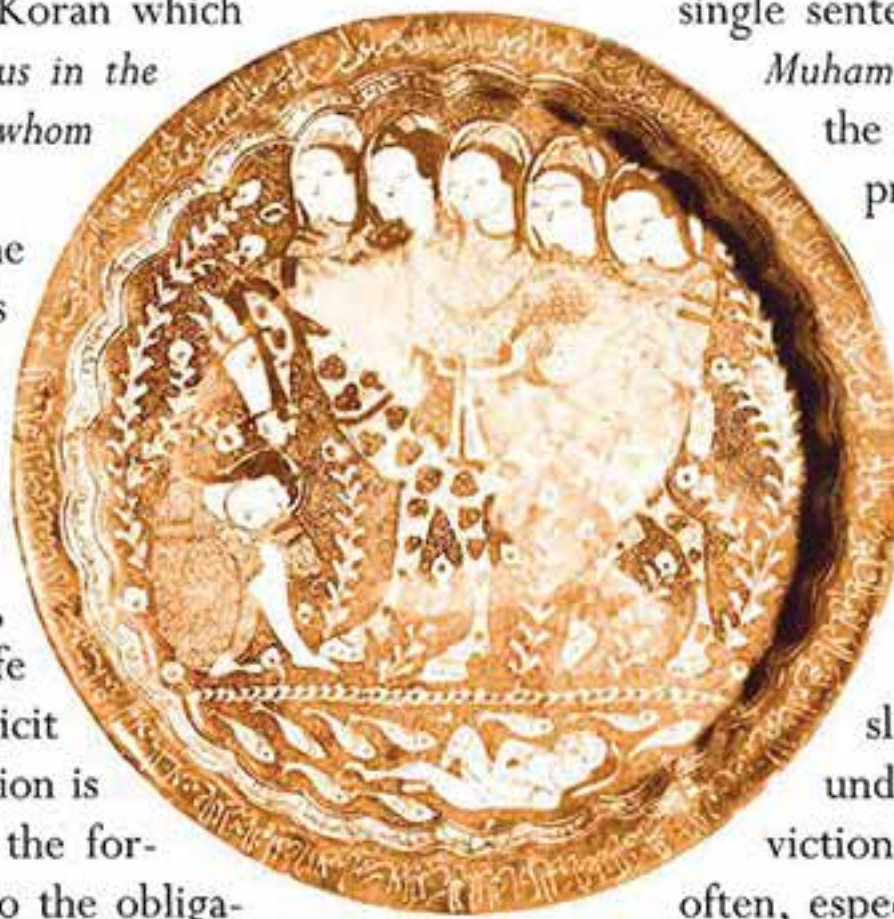
Why "the straight path"? To the obvious answer (a straight path is not crooked or corrupt) there is another which is distinctive to Islam. A straight path is one that is straightforward; it is direct and explicit. More than other religions, Islam claims to detail the way of life it proposes, spelling it out in explicit directives. Every major type of action is classified on a sliding scale from the forbidden, through the indifferent, to the obligatory. Muslims consider this to be one of their religion's strengths. God's revelation to humankind, they say, has proceeded through four great stages. To Abraham, God revealed the truth of monotheism; to Moses, the Ten Commandments; and to Jesus, the Golden Rule. There remained the question of what the Golden Rule requires — how it is to be put into practice. Once life becomes complicated, guidelines are needed and the Koran provides them.

What are these guidelines? We shall divide our presentation into two parts. In this section we shall consider the Five Pillars of Islam, the principles that regulate the private lives of Muslims in their dealings with God. In

the next section we shall consider the Koran's social teachings.

The first of the Five Pillars is Islam's creed, or confession of faith known as the *shahadah*. It consists of a single sentence: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet." The first half of the proclamation announces the cardinal principle of monotheism, that there is no god but *the* God. The second affirmation — that Muhammad is God's prophet — registers the Muslim's faith in the authenticity of Muhammad and the validity of his revelation. At least once during his or her lifetime a Muslim must say the *shahadah* correctly, slowly, thoughtfully, aloud, with full understanding, and with heartfelt conviction. In actuality, Muslims pronounce it often, especially its first half, *La ilaha illa 'llah*.

In every crisis and at every moment when the world threatens to overwhelm them, not excepting the approach of death, "There is no god but God" will spring from Muslims' lips. A pious man, seized by rage, will be stopped in his tracks by this phrase which distances him from his emotion. A woman, screaming in childbirth, will fall silent as she remembers. A student, bowed over his test in an examination hall, will raise his head and



Above: Painted dish shows an image from an esoteric tradition in Islam that speaks of "awakening the *lataif*," or the five organs of spiritual perception. Right: "The Ascent of the Prophet Muhammad" from a 16th century Indian manuscript.





utter the phrase, and a barely audible sigh of relief will pass through the entire assembly. The *shahadah* is the ultimate answer to all questions.

The second pillar of Islam is canonical prayer. An obvious reason to pray is to give voice to the gratitude one feels for life itself, but a deeper reason is to keep human life in perspective. The Koran considers this the most difficult lesson people must learn, and directs itself entirely (one can almost say) to making things clear on this front. Not having created themselves, human beings are derivative; but they can't seem to get this straight and keep placing themselves at the centers of their worlds, living as if they were laws unto themselves. Wherewith, havoc. In prayer, Muslims acknowledge their creatureliness before the Creator, and take thereby the first step toward orienting their wills (*islam*) toward him.

How often each day should Muslims pray? There is an endearing account in the Koran which has Allah originally setting the number at fifty, which Moses (when he heard of it during Muhammad's Night Journey through the heavens) pronounced ridiculous.

Through the negotiations that Moses insisted be instigated, Muhammad was able to reduce the number to



five. Even this Moses considered too many – “*I know those people*,” he told Muhammad. But Muhammad refused to press the matter further and the number was fixed at five. The times of the five prayers are likewise stipulated: on arising, when the sun is overhead, in mid-afternoon, at sunset, and before retiring. Congregational worship is not an Islamic emphasis, nor is any day of the week considered especially holy; but Muslims are expected to pray in mosques when they can, and are especially encouraged to do so Friday noon. Muslims began by facing Jerusalem (where Muhammad began his Night Journey through the heavens)

when they prayed, but a Koranic revelation then instructed them to pray in the direction of Mecca. Ablutions precede canonical prayers, which begin while standing but reach their climax in the foetal position with forehead touching the floor. In content, the prayers stress praise and gratitude while including supplication.

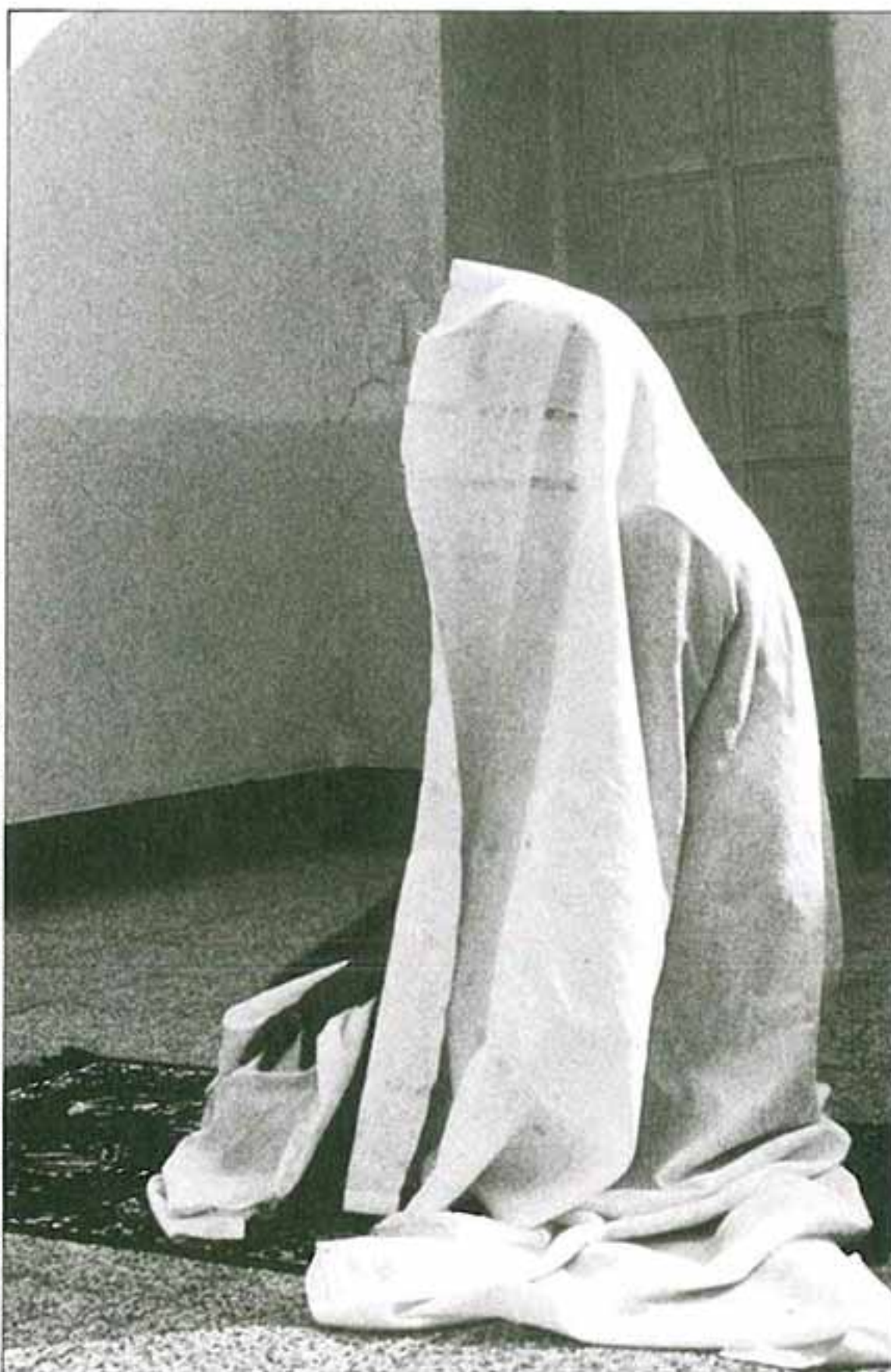
The third pillar of Islam is charity. Those who are comfortable should share with the unfortunate. Again the Koran is explicit; annually, two and one-half percent of one's holdings should be distributed to the poor. Recipients of charity, too, are named. They are to be persons in immediate need, slaves in the process of buying their



freedom, debtors who are unable to meet their obligations, strangers and wayfarers, and those who collect and distribute the donations.

The fourth pillar of Islam is the observance of Ramadan. Ramadan is the holy month in the Islamic calendar, because during it the Koranic revelation commenced and (ten years later) Muhammad effected his migration from Mecca. To commemorate these two great occasions, able-bodied Muslims (who are not ill or involved in crises like war or unavoidable journeys) fast during Ramadan. From the first moment of dawn to the setting of the sun, neither food nor drink nor smoke passes their lips; nor are they sexually active. As the Muslim calendar is lunar, Ramadan rotates around the year. What is the significance of this fast? For one thing, it makes one reflect. (Why am I performing this unnatural act?) It teaches self-discipline. It reminds one of one's frailty and dependence. And it fosters compassion, for only the hungry know what hunger means.

Islam's fifth pillar is pilgrimage. Once during his or her lifetime, every Muslim who is physically and economically able to do so is expected to journey to Mecca where God's climactic revelation first descended. The basic purpose of the journey is to heighten the pilgrim's



commitment to God and his revealed will, but the practice carries fringe benefits. It is, for one thing, a reminder of human equality, for upon reaching Mecca, pilgrims exchange their clothes (which are status-ridden) for two simple sheet-like garments. The gathering also promotes international understanding. In bringing together people from multiple countries, it demonstrates that they share a loyalty that transcends national and ethnic barriers. Pilgrims pick up information about other lands and peoples, and return to their homes knowing more about the world.

The Five Pillars of Islam consist of things Muslims do to support the house of Islam. There are also things they should not do. Gambling, thieving, lying, eating pork, drinking intoxicants, and being sexually promiscuous are some of these. Even Muslims who transgress these rulings acknowledge that they are normative. With the exception of charity, the precepts we have considered in this section pertain to the Muslim's personal life. We turn now to the social teachings of Islam.

Above: Muslim woman in prayer. Opposite: Man praying inside a mosque.
