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# Islam

## *The Straight Path*

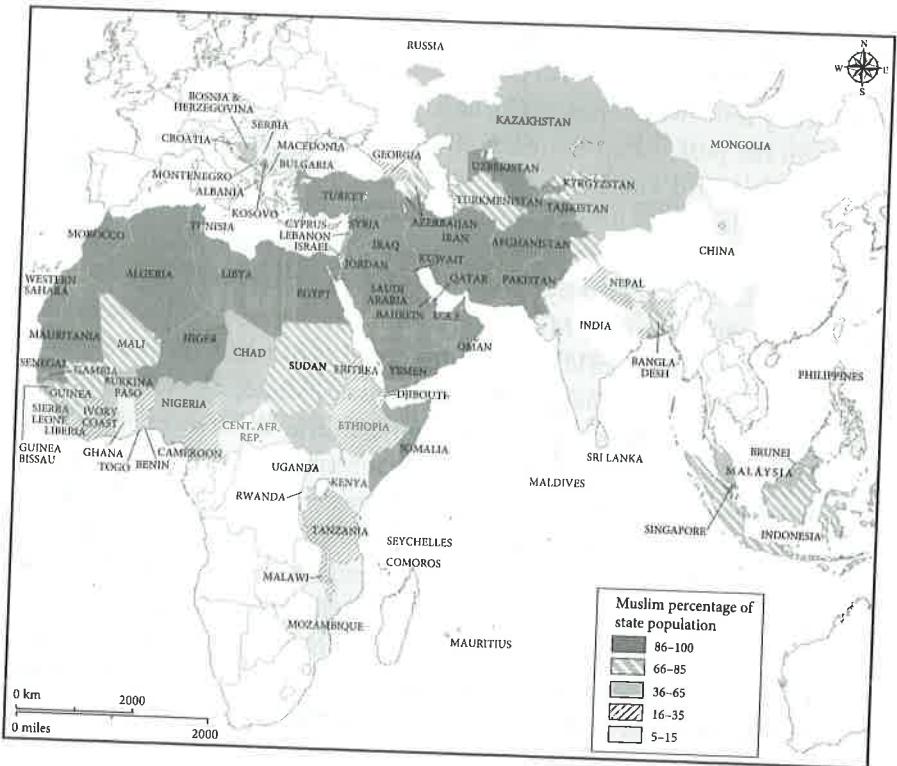


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## *Chapter 1*



# Muhammad and the Quran: Messenger and Message

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

(Quran 1:1-7)

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

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

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

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

## MUHAMMAD AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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

### Arabia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Surely, by Him in whose hand is Waraqa’s soul, thou art the prophet of this people. There hath come unto thee the greatest Namus (angel or Gabriel) who came unto Moses. Like the Hebrew prophets, Thou wilt be called a liar, and they will use thee despitefully and cast thee out and fight against thee.<sup>2</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

### Creation of the Islamic Community

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

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

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

### Muhammad at Medina

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### MUHAMMAD: THE FINAL MESSENGER

No prophet has played a greater role in a world religion and in world politics than Muhammad. He is viewed as the last or final prophet, who brought the final and complete revelation of God. Muhammad ibn Abdullah has served as the ideal model for Muslim life. Some Muslims have called him the “living Quran,” that is, the embodiment or model of God’s will as revealed in the Quran.

Muhammad is the “ideal” religious and political leader, statesman, merchant judge, soldier, and diplomat as well as ideal husband, father, and friend. Muslims look to his example for guidance in all aspects of life: eating, fasting, praying, the treatment of a spouse, parents, and children, the creation of contracts, the waging of war, and the conduct of diplomacy.

to teach the Quran and the duties and rituals of Islam and to collect the taxes due Medina. In the spring of 632, Muhammad led the pilgrimage to Mecca, where the sixty-two-year-old leader preached his farewell sermon, exhorting his followers:

Know ye that every Moslem is a brother unto every other Moslem, and that ye are now one brotherhood. It is not legitimate for any one of you, therefore, to appropriate unto himself anything that belongs to his brother unless it is willingly given him by that brother.<sup>3</sup>

These words summarize both the nature of the Islamic community and the accomplishment of the Prophet Muhammad. When he died three months later in June 632, all Arabia was united under the banner of Islam.

#### Muhammad: Exemplar of Muslim Life and Piety

Muhammad was among those great religious figures, prophets and founders of religions, whose remarkable character and personality inspired uncommon confidence and commitment. His phenomenal success in attracting followers and creating a community-state that dominated Arabia could be attributed not only to the fact that he was a shrewd military strategist but also to the fact that he was an unusual man who elicited steadfast loyalty despite persecution and oppression. Muhammad’s followers found him righteous, trustworthy, pious, compassionate, and honest. He was revered from earliest times: Muslims remembered and recounted what he said and did. Both during his lifetime and throughout the following centuries, Muhammad has served as the ideal model

for Muslim life, providing the pattern that all believers are to emulate. He is, as some Muslims say, the “living Quran”—the witness whose behavior and words reveal God’s will. Thus the practices of the Prophet became a material source of Islamic law alongside the Quran.

Muslims look to Muhammad’s example for guidance in all aspects of life: how to treat friends as well as enemies, what to eat and drink, how to make love and war. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the growth of Prophetic traditions. For the tribes of Arabia, the ideals and norms of their way of life had been contained and preserved in their practices (Sunna, trodden path), the customs or oral laws handed down from previous generations by word and example. As Prophet and leader of the community, Muhammad reformed these practices. Old ways were modified, eliminated, or replaced by new regulations. His impact on Muslim life cannot be overestimated, as he served as both religious and political head of Medina: prophet of God, ruler, military commander, chief judge, lawgiver. As a result, the practice of the Prophet—his **Sunna**, or example—became the norm for community life. Muslims observed and remembered stories about what the Prophet said and did. These reports or traditions (**hadith**) were preserved and passed on in oral and written form. The corpus of hadith literature reveals the comprehensive scope of Muhammad’s example; he is the ideal religiopolitical leader as well as the exemplary husband and father. Thus when many Muslims pray five times each day or make the pilgrimage to Mecca, they seek to pray as the Prophet prayed, without adding or subtracting from the way Muhammad is reported to have worshipped. Traditions of the Prophet provide guidance for personal hygiene, dress, eating, marriage, treatment of wives, diplomacy, and warfare.

### Reformer

Muhammad was not the founder of Islam; he did not start a new religion. Like his prophetic predecessors, he came as a religious reformer. Muhammad maintained that he did not bring a new message from a new God but called people back to the one, true God and to a way of life that most of his contemporaries had forgotten or deviated from. Worship of Allah was not the evolutionary emergence of monotheism from polytheism but a return to a forgotten past, to the faith of the first monotheist, Abraham. The Prophet brought a revolution in Arabian life, a reformation that sought to purify and redefine its way of life. False, superstitious practices such as polytheism and idolatry were suppressed. Such beliefs were viewed as the worst forms of ingratitude or unbelief, for they contradicted and denied the unity or oneness (**tawhid**) of God. Polytheism, or association (**shirk**) of anything with Allah, was denounced as the worst

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### MUHAMMAD AND THE WEST

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

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

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

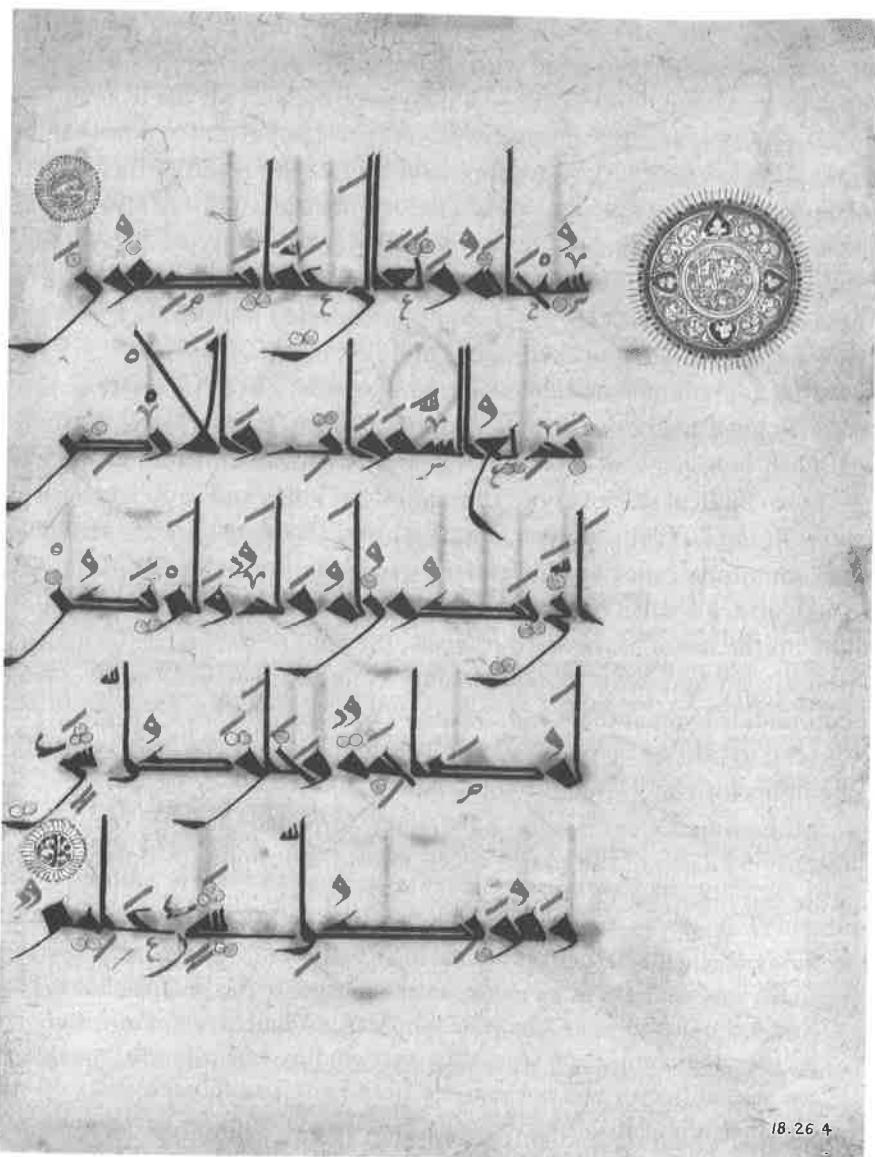
Battle of the Ditch in 627, the Jews of the Banu Qurayza were denounced as traitors who had consorted with the Meccans. As was common in Arab (and, indeed, Semitic) practice, the men were massacred; the women and children were spared but enslaved. However, it is important to note that the motivation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

One final point should be made. Muhammad's use of warfare in general was alien neither to Arab custom nor to that of the Hebrew prophets. Both believed that God had sanctioned battle with the enemies of the Lord. Biblical stories about the exploits of kings and prophets such as Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Samuel, Jehu, Saul, and David recount the struggles of a community called by God and the permissibility, indeed requirement, to take up arms when necessary against those who had defied God and to fight "in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in speaking of the Israelite conquests, Moses recalls: "And I commanded you at that time, saying, 'The Lord your God has given you this land to possess . You shall not fear them; for it is the Lord your God who fights for you'" (Deuteronomy 3:18–22).

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

No great religious leader has been so maligned as Muhammad. Attacked in the past as a heretic, an imposter, or a sensualist, it is still possible to find him referred to as "the false prophet." A modern German writer accuses Muhammad of sensuality, surrounding himself with young women. This man was not married until he was twenty-five years of age, then he and his wife lived in happiness and fidelity for twenty-four years, until her death when he was forty-nine. Only between the age of fifty and his death at sixty-two did Muhammad take other wives, only one of whom was a virgin, and most of them were taken for dynastic and political reasons. Certainly the Prophet's record was better than that head of the Church of England, Henry VIII.<sup>5</sup>

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



Page from an eleventh- to twelfth-century Quran manuscript on paper in stylized Kufic script with gold illumination, made in eastern Islamic lands (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York accession # 18.26.4).

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

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

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

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

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

### THE QURAN: THE WORD OF GOD

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

### THE QURAN

For Muslims, God's word, as revealed in the Quran, is the final and complete revelation. It provides the primary and ultimate source of guidance, the basis for belief and practice in Islam. Study, memorization of the entire text, and copying (calligraphy) of the Quran have been central acts of piety. Recitation or chanting of the Quran is a major art form as well as an act of worship. Muslims gather in stadiums and auditoriums around the world to attend international Quran recitation competitions as many in the West might attend an opera.

not chronology. The longer chapters, representing the later Medinan revelations, precede the shorter, earlier Meccan revelations to Muhammad.

Islam teaches that God's revelation has occurred in several forms: in nature, history, and scripture. God's existence can be known through creation; nature contains pointers or "signs" of God, its creator and sustainer (3:26–27). The history of the rise and fall of nations, victory and defeat, provides clear signs and lessons of God's sovereignty and intervention in history (30:2–9). In addition, God in His mercy determined to reveal His will for humankind through a series of messengers: "Indeed, We sent forth among every nation a Messenger, saying: 'Serve your God, and shun false gods'" (16:36; see also 13:7, 15:10, 35:24). The verses of revelation are also called signs of God. Thus, throughout history, human beings could not only know that there is a God but also know what God desires and commands.

If scripture is a sign from God sent to previous generations, what can be said about these scriptures and prophets? Why was the Quran subsequently revealed, and what is the relationship of the Quran and Muhammad to previous revelations?

Although God had revealed His will to Moses and the Hebrew prophets and later to Jesus, Muslims believe that the scriptures of the Jewish community (Torah) and that of the Christian church (the Evangel or Gospel) were corrupted. The current texts of the Torah and the New Testament are regarded as a composite of human fabrications mixed with divine revelation. Of God's revelation to the Jews, the Quran declares:

Surely We sent down the Torah, wherein is guidance and light; thereby the Prophets who had surrendered themselves gave judgment for those of Jewry, as did the masters and rabbis, following that portion of God's book as they were given to keep and were witness to. (5:47)

Muslims believe that after the deaths of the prophets, extraneous, nonbiblical beliefs infiltrated the texts and thus altered and distorted the original, pure revelation. The Jews, and later the Christians, are portrayed as having distorted their mission to witness into a doctrine of their divine election as a chosen people:

And the Jews and Christians say, "We are the sons of God, and His beloved ones." Say: "Why then does He chastise you for your sins? No; you are mortals, of His creating; He forgives whom He will, and He chastises whom He will." (5:20)

The Quran teaches that a similar degeneration or perversion of scripture occurred in Christianity. God sent Jesus as a prophet: "He [God] will teach him [Jesus] the Book, the Wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a messenger to the Children of Israel" (3:48–49). Yet, the Quran declares that after his death, Jesus's message was altered by those who made him into a god:

The Christians say, "The Messiah is the Son of God." God assail them! How they are perverted! They were commanded to serve but One God; There is no God but He. (9:30–31)

A Muslims believe that God in His mercy, after the falsification of the revelation given to the Jews and the Christians, sent down His word one final time. The Quran does not nullify, but rather corrects, the versions preserved by the Jewish and Christian communities: "**People of the Book**, now there has come to you Our messenger making clear to you many things you have been concealing of the Book, and effacing many things" (5:16).

Thus, Islam is not a new religion with a new scripture. Instead of being the youngest of the major monotheistic world religions, from a Muslim viewpoint it is the oldest. Islam represents the "original" as well as the final revelation of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Quran, like the Torah and the Evangel, is based on a preexisting heavenly tablet, the source or mother of scripture. It is a book written in Arabic that exists in heaven with God; from it, the discourses or teachings of the three scriptures are revealed at different stages in history: "Every term has a book and with Him is the essence of the Book" (13:38–39).

Because Muslims believe that the Quran's Arabic language and character are revealed (26:195, 41:44), Muslims, regardless of their national language, memorize and recite the Quran in Arabic whether they fully understand it or not. Arabic is the sacred language of Islam because, in a very real sense, it is the language of God. In contrast to Judaism and

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

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

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

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

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

### **Revelation and Prophecy**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many Muslim theologians, and even more so, the **Sufis**, have often maintained that God does reveal Himself in a limited way through his signs (*ayat*) in the Quran, in nature, and in the souls and intellect of human beings. Moreover, the Quran not only reveals God's will but also details something of His nature, through repeated mention of His Attributes, which are not other than His Essence, according to Muslim theology, as well His Acts, which again reveal aspects of who He is. As Vincent Cornell argues, "the Qur'an is not only didactic but 'autobiographical,' because God is often depicted as speaking about God's own divine nature."<sup>8</sup>

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

### Major Teachings of the Quran

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

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

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

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

### Allah

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Quranic Universe

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Muslim Community**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Last Day

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

### KEY TERMS

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

### QUESTIONS

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

## NOTES

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