

Islam is the last of the three historic monotheistic faiths that arose in the Middle East, coming after Judaism and Christianity. Its name means 'submission' in Arabic and signifies the commitment of its adherents to live in total submission to God. A person who professes Islam is called a Muslim, meaning 'one who submits to God'. An older term, rarely used today, is 'Mohammedan', which misleadingly—and to Muslims offensively—suggests that Muslims worship the Prophet Muhammad himself.

Who is a Muslim? The Qur'an, the Islamic scripture, presents Islam as the universal and primordial faith of all the prophets from Adam to Muhammad, and of all those who have faith in God, the one sovereign Lord, creator, and sustainer of all things. According to the Qur'an, Islam is God's eternal way for the universe.

Inanimate things, plants and animals, even the angels, are all *muslims* to God by nature or instinct. Only human *islam* is an *islam* of choice. Human beings may voluntarily accept or wilfully reject faith, but on the Day of Judgment they will face the consequences of their choice. They can expect to be rewarded for their faith or punished for their rejection of it.

Most Muslims are born into Muslim families. But it is also possible to become a Muslim simply by repeating before two Muslim witnesses the *shahadah*, or profession of faith: 'I bear witness that there is no god except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.' Anyone

who does this becomes legally a Muslim, with all the rights and responsibilities that this new identity entails.

ORIGINS

Jewish and Christian communities existed in Arabia long before the emergence of Islam in the seventh century. The city of Mecca, where Muhammad was born, was dominated mainly by one tribe, the Quraysh, but it was open to a broad range of cultural and religious influences, including Jewish and Christian moral and devotional ideas. There were desert hermits who practised holiness and healing, and a group of Meccan Arabs known as *hanifs* ('pious ones') who concurred with Judaism and Christianity in their ethical monotheism. The majority of the society, however, was polytheistic, and many of the images of the gods and goddesses they worshipped were housed in an ancient

Hadith: A saying of the Prophet

The Messenger of God (may God bless him and give him peace) said: 'Whoever has faith in God and the Last Day should not hurt their neighbour, and whoever has faith in God and the Last Day should serve their guest generously, and whoever has faith in God and the Last Day should speak what is good or keep quiet' (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 8, book 73).

◀ In the courtyard of the Rustem Pasha mosque in Istanbul, Turkey (Andrew Leyerle).

Timeline

- 622 Muhammad's *hijrah* from Mecca to Medina
- 632 Muhammad dies; leadership passes to the caliph
- 642 Birth of al-Hasan al-Basri, early Sufi ascetic (d. 728)
- 661 Damascus established as capital of Umayyad caliphate
- 680 Death of Husayn at Karbala', commemorated as martyrdom by Shi'is
- 711 Arab armies reach Spain
- 762 Baghdad established as 'Abbasid capital
- 922 al-Hallaj (born c. 858) executed for claiming to be one with the Truth
- 1058 Birth of al-Ghazali, theological synthesizer of faith and reason (d. 1111)
- 1071 Seljuq Turks defeat Byzantines in eastern Anatolia
- 1165 Birth of Ibn 'Arabi, philosopher of the mystical unity of being (d. 1240)
- 1207 Birth of Jalal al-Din Rumi, Persian mystical poet (d. 1273)
- 1258 Baghdad falls to Mongol invaders
- 1492 Christian forces take Granada, the last Muslim stronghold in Spain
- 1529 Ottoman Turks reach Vienna (again in 1683)
- 1602 Muslims officially expelled from Spain
- 1703 Birth of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, leader of traditionalist revival in Arabia (d. 1792)
- 1924 Atatürk, Turkish modernizer and secularizer, abolishes the caliphate
- 1930 Iqbal proposes a Muslim state in India
- 1947 Pakistan established as an Islamic state
- 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini establishes a revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran
- 2001 Osama bin Laden launches terrorist attacks on America
- 2004 Madrid train station bombings
- 2005 London transit bombings

structure called the Ka'ba, believed to have been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael.

The Life of Muhammad (570–632 CE)

Muhammad was born into the Quraysh tribe around the year 570. His father died before his birth and his mother died a few years later.

Muhammad thus grew up an orphan and was cared for first by his paternal grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, and then, after his grandfather's death, by his uncle Abu Talib.

Little is known about Muhammad's youth. He worked as a merchant for a rich widow, Khadijah, whom he married in his mid-twenties. Muhammad is described in the early biographical sources as a contemplative, honest, and mild-mannered

Traditions at a Glance

Numbers

There are more than 1 billion Muslims around the world; approximately 600,000 in Canada; and between 6 and 7 million in the United States.

Distribution

Although Islam originated in Arabia, the largest Muslim populations today are in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Muslims are the second largest religious community (behind Christians) in many Western countries, including Canada, Great Britain, France, and Germany.

Principal Historical Periods

570–632 Lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad

632–661 The time of the four caliphs

661–750 Umayyad caliphate

750–1258 'Abbasid caliphate

1517–1924 Ottoman caliphate

Founder and Principal Leaders

All Muslims place authority in Muhammad as the last prophet. Shi'i Muslims give special authority after Muhammad to his son-in-law 'Ali and 'Ali's descendants.

Deity

Allah is Arabic for 'the God' and is cognate with the Hebrew 'Eloh (plural 'Elohim), 'deity'. Muslims believe Allah to be the same God worshipped by Christians, Jews, and other monotheists.

Authoritative Texts

The essential text is the Qur'an (literally, 'The Recitation'), believed to have been revealed by God to Muhammad between the years 610 and 632 CE. Second in importance are the sayings of Muhammad, known as the *hadith* (literally, 'narrative').

Noteworthy Doctrines

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is a faith based on ethical monotheism. Its prophetic tradition begins with the first created human being (Adam) and ends with the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that the first place of worship dedicated to the one true God is the Ka'ba in Mecca, built by Abraham and his son Ishmael.

young man. He was called al-Amin ('the faithful' or 'trustworthy') because of the confidence he inspired in people.

Once a year, during the month of **Ramadan**, Muhammad spent days in seclusion in a cave on Mount Hira, a short distance from Mecca. Tradition reports that it was during one of those retreats

he received the call to prophethood and the first revelation of the Qur'an.

As Muhammad was sitting one night in the solitude of his retreat, an angel—later identified as Gabriel (Jibril in Arabic)—appeared. Taking hold of him and pressing him hard, the angel commanded, 'Recite [or read]!' Muhammad answered,

'I cannot read.' After repeating the command for the third time, the angel continued, 'Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a blood clot. Recite, for your Lord is most magnanimous—who taught by the pen, taught the human being that which s/he did not know' (Q. 96: 1–5). Shivering with fear and apprehension, Muhammad ran home and asked the people of his household to cover him.

Yet the angel returned to him often, saying, 'O Muhammad, I am Gabriel, and you are the Messenger of God.' Khadijah consoled and encouraged him, and eventually took him to her cousin, a learned Christian named Waraqah bin Nawfal. Waraqah confirmed Muhammad in his mission, declaring him to be a Prophet sent by God with a sacred law like that of Moses.

The idea of a prophet—*nabi* in both Arabic and Hebrew—was not unfamiliar to Muhammad's people. For twelve years Muhammad the Prophet of God preached the new faith in the One God to his people with little success. The Meccans did not wish to abandon the ways of their ancestors, and they feared the implications of the new faith both for their social customs and for the religious and economic status of the Ka'ba.

Muhammad's message was not only religious but also moral and social. He instructed the Meccans to give alms, to care for the orphaned, to feed the hungry, to assist the oppressed and destitute, and to offer hospitality to the wayfarer. He also warned of impending doom on the day of the last judgment. The first to accept the new faith were the Prophet's wife Khadijah, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali bin Abi Talib, his slave Zayd bin Harithah—whom he later freed

and adopted—and his faithful companion Abu Bakr.

Similar to the first followers of Jesus, Muhammad and his followers were often vilified. Around 615, one group of Muslims without tribal protection faced such severe persecution from the polytheistic Meccans that the Prophet advised them to migrate across the Red Sea to the Christian country of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), where they were well received. And in 619 the Prophet himself was left without support or protection when his wife Khadijah and his uncle Abu Talib both died within the space of barely two months. It was soon after these losses that he experienced what came to be known as the *mi'raj* or 'night journey', travelling from Mecca to Jerusalem in the course of one night and then ascending to heaven. There he met some of the earlier prophets and was granted an audience with God. For Muslims, these miraculous events confirmed that the Prophet still had the support of God. Even so, it would be another three years before the Prophet was able to find a place for the Muslims to establish their own community, free of the persecution they suffered in Mecca.

The First Muslim Community

Finally, in 622, an invitation was offered by the city of Yathrib, about 400 kilometres (250 miles) north of Mecca. The migration (*hijrah*) to Yathrib, which thereafter came to be known as 'the city of the Prophet' or Medina ('the city'), marked the beginning of community life under Islam, and thus of Islamic history. In Medina Muhammad established the first Islamic commonwealth: a truly theocratic state, headed by a prophet whose rule was believed to follow the dictates of a divine scripture.

Islamic Dates

The migration to Mecca provided the starting-point for the dating system used throughout the Muslim world. Years are counted backwards or forwards from the *hijrah* and accompanied by the abbreviation AH, from the Latin for 'year of the *hijrah*'. Because Muslims use the lunar year—which is 11 days shorter than the solar year—*hijri* dates gain one year approximately every 33 solar years. Thus the year 1400 AH was reached in 1979 CE, and the new year of 1432 AH was celebrated in 2010 CE.

Medina was an oasis city with an agricultural economy. Its social structure was far more heterogeneous than Mecca's, for its population included a substantial Jewish community as well as two feuding Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, whose old rivalries had kept the city in a continuous state of civil strife. Muhammad was remarkably successful in welding these disparate elements into a cohesive social unit. In a brief constitutional document known as the covenant of Medina, he stipulated that all the people of the city should form a single Muslim commonwealth. The covenant granted the Jews full religious freedom and equality with the Muslims, on condition that they support the state and refrain from entering into any alliance against it, whether with the Quraysh or with any other tribe.

The Qur'an's narratives and worldview are closely akin to the prophetic view of history laid out in the Hebrew Bible. The Prophet expected the Jews of Medina, recognizing this kinship, to be natural allies, and he adopted a number of Jewish practices, including the fast of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). But the Medinan Jews rejected both Muhammad's claim to be a prophet and the Qur'an's claim to be a sacred book. The resulting tension between the two communities is reflected in the Qur'an's treatment of the Jews. Some references are clearly positive; for example: 'Among the People of the Book are an upright community who recite God's revelations in the night, prostrate themselves in adoration, believing in God and the Last Day . . . these are of the righteous, whatever good they do, they shall not be denied it' (3: 113-15). Others are just as clearly negative: 'Take not the Jews and Christians for friends' (5: 51). Increasingly, Islam began to distinguish itself from Judaism, so that within two years of the Prophet's arrival in Medina, the fast of Ramadan took precedence over the fast of Yom Kippur and the *qiblah* (direction of prayer) was changed from Jerusalem to the Ka'ba in Mecca.

In the Qur'an the people of Medina are called Ansar ('helpers') because they were the first

supporters and protectors of Islam and the Prophet. As the flow of Muslim immigrants from Mecca increased, however, a new social group was added to an already diverse society. The new immigrants along with those who came with or shortly after the Prophet, were called Muhajirun ('immigrants').

The Conversion of Mecca

The Muslims who had fled Mecca for Medina had left all their goods and property behind. Without the means to support themselves in their new home, they began raiding Meccan caravans returning from Syria. In 624, when the Meccans sent an army of roughly a thousand men to Medina, they were met at the well of Badr by a 300-man detachment of Muslims.

Though poorly equipped and far outnumbered, the Muslims were highly motivated, and they inflicted a crushing defeat on the Meccans. Thus the Battle of Badr remains one of the most memorable events in Muslim history. It is celebrated in the Qur'an as a miraculous proof of the truth of Islam: 'You [Muhammad] did not shoot the first arrow when you did shoot it; rather God shot it' (Q. 8: 17); 'God supported you [Muslims] at Badr when you were in an abased state' (Q. 3: 123).

To avenge their defeat, however, the Meccans met the Muslims the following year by Mount Uhud, not far from Medina, and this time they prevailed. Following the Battle of Uhud, the Jews of Medina were expelled from the city on the grounds that they had formed alliances with the Meccans against the Muslims. The real reason for the decision, however, may have been to free the Muslim state of external influences at a critical stage in its development.

The Muslims were growing in strength. Meanwhile, they continued to raid the caravans of the Quraysh, and before long they received word that the Meccans were planning to attack Medina itself. On the advice of Salman the Persian, a former slave, the Prophet had a trench dug around the exposed parts of the city, to prevent the Meccan cavalry from entering. Thus when the Quraysh

along with a large coalition of other tribes, tried to invade Medina in 627, the city was able to withstand the attack. The 'Battle of the Trench' marked a tipping point in relations between the Muslims and the Meccans, and in 628 the latter were impelled to seek a truce.

Two years later, when the Quraysh breached the truce, the Prophet set out for Mecca at the head of a large army. But there was no need to fight. When the Muslims arrived, the Meccans surrendered to them and accepted Islam en masse.

Whenever an individual or tribe accepted Islam, all hostilities were to cease and enemies were to become brothers in faith. Therefore the Prophet granted amnesty to all in the city. Asked by the Meccans what he intended to do with them, the Prophet answered, 'I will do with you what Joseph did with his brothers. Go; you are free.' Then he quoted Joseph's words to his brothers: 'There is no blame in you today; God forgive you' (Q. 12: 92).

Muhammad took no credit for the conquest of Mecca, attributing the victory solely to God, as prescribed in the Qur'an: 'When support from God comes, and victory, and you see people enter into the religion of God in throngs, proclaim the praise of your Lord and seek God's forgiveness, for God is truly relenting' (Q. 110). He returned to Medina and died there two years later, in 632, after making a farewell pilgrimage to Mecca and its sacred shrine, the Ka'ba.

Muhammad was always known as *rasul Allah* ('the Messenger of God') rather than as a ruler or military leader. But he was all of these. He waged war and made peace. He laid the foundations of a community (*ummah*) that was based on Islamic principles. He firmly established Islam in Arabia and sent expeditions to Syria. Within eighty years the Muslims would administer the largest empire the world had ever known, stretching from the southern borders of France through North Africa and the Middle East into India and Central Asia.

At the time of his death, however, no one could have foreseen that future. The majority of Muslims—the **Sunni**, meaning those who follow the



The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built between 687 and 691 by Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, is not a mosque but a shrine. It stands on the site of the Hebrew temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE (Zafer Kizilkaya/Ponkawonka.com).

sunnah (traditions) of the Prophet—believed that he had not even designated a successor or specified how one should be chosen. But a minority community, known as the Shi'a (from the Arabic meaning 'party'), believed that Muhammad had in fact appointed his son-in-law 'Ali to succeed him. Muhammad's death therefore precipitated a crisis, which grew into a permanent ideological rift.

A *khalifah* is one who represents or acts on behalf of another. Thus after Muhammad's death, his close companion Abu Bakr became the *khalifat rasul Allah*—the 'successor' or 'representative' of the Messenger of God—and Abu Bakr's successor, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, was at first referred to as the 'successor of the successor of the Messenger of God'.

From the beginning, the institution of the caliphate had a worldly as well as a religious

dimension. As a successor of the Prophet, the **caliph** was a religious leader. At the same time, as the chief or administrative head of the community, he was the *amir* or commander of the Muslims in times of peace as well as war. Perhaps conscious of this temporal dimension of his office, 'Umar is said to have adopted the title 'commander of the faithful' in place of his cumbersome original title. Nevertheless, the caliph continued to function as the chief religious leader ('imam') of the community. In all, there were four caliphs who ruled after Muhammad, from 632 to 661. From 661 to 750, the Muslim world was ruled by a hereditary dynasty, known as the Umayyads. The Umayyads, in turn, were defeated by the 'Abbasid dynasty, which ruled from 750 to 1258.

CRYSTALLIZATION

Prophets and Messengers

According to the Qur'an, God operates through prophets and messengers who convey God's will in revealed scriptures and seek to establish God's sacred law in the lives of their communities. From the Islamic point of view, therefore, human history is prophetic history.

Islamic tradition maintains that, from the time of Adam to the time of Muhammad, God sent 124,000 prophets into the world to remind people of every community of their obligation to the one and only sovereign Lord and warn them against heedlessness and disobedience: 'There is not a nation but that a warner was sent to it' (Q. 26: 207). The Qur'an mentions by name 26 prophets and messengers. Most are well-known biblical figures, among them Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jonah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. It also mentions three Arabian prophets: Shu'ayb, Hud, and Salih.

Islamic tradition distinguishes between prophets and messengers. A prophet (*nabi*) is one who conveys a message from God to a specific people at a specific time. A messenger (*rasul*) is also a prophet sent by God to a specific community; but the message he delivers is a universally binding sacred law (*shari'ah*). The Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai was an example of the latter: though delivered to the ancient Hebrews, it remained binding on all those who knew it, Hebrews and others, until the arrival of the next revelation—the gospel of Jesus. In other words, every messenger is a prophet; but not every prophet is a messenger. Among the messenger-prophets, five—Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—are called *ulu al-'azm* ('prophets of power or firm

Abraham

In the Qur'an, it is the innate reasoning capacity of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham—Ibrahim in Arabic—that leads him away from his people's tradition of idol worship and towards the knowledge of God. Even as a youth he recognizes that idols made of wood or stone cannot hear the supplications of their worshippers, and therefore can do them neither good nor harm.

One night, gazing at the full moon in its glory, Ibrahim thinks that it must be God. But when he sees it set, he changes his mind. He then gazes at the bright sun and thinks that, since it is so much larger, it must be the real God. But that night the sun too sets, leading Ibrahim to declare: 'I turn my face to the One who originated the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith, and I am not one of the Associators [those who associate other things or beings with God]' (Q. 6: 77–9).

From the Qur'an: Abraham Destroys the Idols

When [Abraham] said to his father and his people, 'What are these idols that you so fervently worship?' they said, 'We found our fathers worshipping them.'

He said, 'Both you and your fathers are in manifest error.' They said, 'Have you come to us with the truth, or are you one of those who jest?'

He said, 'Your Lord is indeed the Lord of the heavens and the earth, for your Lord originated them; and to this I am one of those who bear witness. By God, I shall confound your idols as soon as you turn your backs.'

He thus destroyed them utterly except for the chief one, so that the people might turn to it [for petition].

They said, 'Who did this to our gods? He is surely a wrongdoer.'

Some said, 'We heard a youth called Abraham speaking of them.'

Others said, 'Bring him here in the sight of the people, so that they may all witness.'

They said, 'Did you do this to our gods, O Abraham?'

He said, 'No, it was their chief who did it. Question them—if they could speak.'

The people then turned on one another, saying, 'Indeed you are the wrongdoers!' Then they bowed their heads in humiliation, saying, 'You know well, [O Abraham], that these do not speak.'

He [Abraham] said, 'Would you then worship instead of God a thing that can do you neither good nor harm? Shame on you and on what you worship instead of God; do you not reason?'

They said, 'Burn him and stand up for your gods, if you would do anything.'

We [God] said, 'O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham'

They wished evil for him, but We turned them into utter losers. And We delivered him and Lot to a land that We blessed for all beings. We also granted him Isaac and Jacob as added favour, and We made them both righteous. We made them all leaders guiding others by our command. We inspired them to do good deeds, perform regular worship, and give the obligatory alms; and they were true worshippers of Us alone (Q. 21: 51–73).

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In the context of Muslim piety, respect for Muhammad is shown by speaking (or writing) the phrase 'peace [and blessings of God] be upon him' every time his name or title is mentioned. In writing, the formula is often abbreviated as PBUH.

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The Qur'an

The Qur'an was revealed (literally, 'sent down') to the prophet Muhammad over a period of 23

years. According to both the Qur'an and Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to him, often in human guise, transmitting the *ayahs* (verses) and *surahs* (chapters) that came to constitute the Qur'an.

The Prophet's role as transmitter of revelation is reflected in the Qur'an's characteristic phrasing as God ('We') instructs the Prophet ('you') to 'say' something to the people (that is, to deliver a particular message to them). Yet the first instruction, as we have seen, was the command that Muhammad himself 'recite' or 'read' (*iqra'*). The term Qur'an is derived from the same root: *q-r-*, meaning 'to read' or 'recite'.

In size the Qur'an is nearly as long as the New Testament. The individual portions revealed to Muhammad vary in length and content from short verses on a single theme or idea to fairly lengthy chapters. The early Meccan *surahs* are generally brief admonitions couched in terse and powerful verses, while the later ones are didactic narratives or illustrative tales of earlier prophets and their communities. Through stories, parables, and exhortations urging good conduct and dissuading evil and indecent behaviour, the Qur'an aims to create an *ummah*: a 'community' (that is, a society united by faith).

The *surahs* revealed in Medina are fewer in number but longer, presenting didactic arguments, discourses, and legal pronouncements,

often in response to questions or situations arising in the life of the community.

The Status of the Qur'an

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is an immutable heavenly book containing the eternal Word of God. In fact, there is an interesting theological parallel with Christian understandings of Jesus, who in the prologue to John's gospel is proclaimed to be the eternal Word of God made incarnate at a certain moment in history. For Christians Christ is the Word of God made flesh, while for Muslims the Qur'an is the Word of God made into a book.

Muslims understand the Qur'an to have been revealed specifically in the Arabic language—not surprising, given that Arabic was the language of its first audience. Hence any translation is considered to constitute an interpretation, not the Qur'an itself. Even in places where few if any Muslims speak the language, the Qur'an is always recited in Arabic. Of course, each passage is usually followed by a translation in the appropriate language.

The words of the Qur'an are recited in a newborn child's ear as a blessing. They are also recited to bless and seal a marriage contract or a business deal, to celebrate a successful venture, or to express sorrow and give solace in times of misfortune. Throughout the Muslim world, the Qur'an is recited on most special public occasions and daily on radio and television. Qur'anic recitation is an

From the Qur'an: On the Day of Judgment

This short surah (chapter) is known by the title 'The Earthquake'.

When the earth shall be shaken with a great quake, and the earth yields up her burdens, and the human being exclaims, 'What has happened to her!' On that day the earth shall recount her tidings—as her Lord had inspired her. Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall then see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall then see it (Q. 99).

art of great virtuosity and hypnotic power. For private devotional recitation over the course of a month, the Qur'an has been divided into 30 parts of equal length. The words of the Qur'an, in the form of calligraphy, have also been a central motif in Islamic art, and are used to decorate Muslim homes, mosques, and public buildings.

Compiling the Qur'an

When the Prophet died in 632, there were many people who had committed the Qur'an to memory. The only physical records, however, were fragments written on stones, bones, palm leaves, and animal parchment, which were held in a variety of private collections. In some cases the same material existed in several versions, and since the vowel marks were not added until later, different readings of certain words or phrases were possible. These variants became identified with specific readers through the generations of Muslim scholars.

The process of producing an official text of the Qur'an was completed under the third caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, within twenty years of the Prophet's death. One of the first copies of the complete text was given to Hafsa, a widow of the Prophet.

As an earthly book, the Qur'an has been shaped by Muslim history. Tradition maintains that the verses of each individual *surah* were arranged by the Prophet at Gabriel's instruction, but that the order of the *surahs* in relation to one another—roughly in decreasing order of length—was fixed by a committee that 'Uthman appointed to compile an official version. Of the 114 *surahs*, 113 are preceded by the invocation *bism-illahi ar-rahman ar-rahim* ('in the name of God, the All-merciful, the Compassionate'); the exception is the ninth *surah*, which commentators generally believe to be a continuation of the eighth.

a text. Any such interpretation is based on one of three authoritative sources: the Qur'an itself, Prophetic *hadith* (tradition), and the opinions of the Prophet's Companions and their successors. Like the Qur'an and the *hadith*, the earliest commentaries were transmitted orally, but by the tenth century Qur'anic interpretation had developed into a science with several ancillary fields of study.

In fact, every legal or theological school, religious trend, or political movement in Muslim history has looked to the Qur'an for its primary support and justification. The result has been a wide range of interpretations reflecting the diversity of the sects, legal schools, and mystical and philosophical movements that emerged as the Islamic tradition developed.

The Qur'an's Concept of God

The Qur'an presents its view of the divinity in direct and unambiguous declarations of faith in the one and only God, creator, sustainer, judge, and sovereign Lord over all creation. For Muslims, it is a sin to associate any other being with God or to ascribe divinity to any but God alone.

'Allah' is not the name of a particular deity but the Arabic word for God, 'the Lord of all beings' (Q. 1: 2), who demands faith and worship of all rational creatures. It was used in the same sense by the pagan Arabs before Islam, and is still used in that sense by Arab Jews and Christians today.

Islamic theology holds that God's essence is unknowable, inconceivable, and above all categories of time, space, form, and number. Materiality and temporality cannot be attributed to God. Nor, properly speaking, can masculinity or femininity, although references to God in the Qur'an and throughout Islamic literature use masculine pronouns, verbs, and adjectives.

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The process of producing an official text of the Qur'an was completed under the third caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, within twenty years of the Prophet's death. One of the first copies of the complete text was given to Hafsa, a widow of the Prophet.

As an earthly book, the Qur'an has been shaped by Muslim history. Tradition maintains that the verses of each individual *surah* were arranged by the Prophet at Gabriel's instruction, but that the order of the *surahs* in relation to one another—roughly in decreasing order of length—was fixed by a committee that 'Uthman appointed to compile an official version. Of the 114 *surahs*, 113 are preceded by the invocation *bism-illahi ar-rahman ar-rahim* ('in the name of God, the All-merciful, the Compassionate'); the exception is the ninth *surah*, which commentators generally believe to be a continuation of the eighth.

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In fact, every legal or theological school, religious trend, or political movement in Muslim history has looked to the Qur'an for its primary support and justification. The result has been a wide range of interpretations reflecting the diversity of the sects, legal schools, and mystical and philosophical movements that emerged as the Islamic tradition developed.

The Qur'an's Concept of God

The Qur'an presents its view of the divinity in direct and unambiguous declarations of faith in the one and only God, creator, sustainer, judge, and sovereign Lord over all creation. For Muslims, it is a sin to associate any other being with God or to ascribe divinity to any but God alone.

'Allah' is not the name of a particular deity but the Arabic word for God, 'the Lord of all beings' (Q. 1: 2), who demands faith and worship of all rational creatures. It was used in the same sense by the pagan Arabs before Islam, and is still used in that sense by Arab Jews and Christians today.

Islamic theology holds that God's essence is unknowable, inconceivable, and above all categories of time, space, form, and number. Materiality and temporality cannot be attributed to God. Nor, properly speaking, can masculinity or femininity, although references to God in the Qur'an and throughout Islamic literature use masculine pronouns, verbs, and adjectives.

art of great virtuosity and hypnotic power. For private devotional recitation over the course of a month, the Qur'an has been divided into 30 parts of equal length. The words of the Qur'an, in the form of calligraphy, have also been a central motif in Islamic art, and are used to decorate Muslim homes, mosques, and public buildings.

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Qur'anic Commentary (Tafsir)

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God is known through attributes referred to in the Qur'an as the 'most beautiful names' (sometimes translated as 'wonderful names'). These divine attributes are manifested in creation in power

and mercy, life and knowledge, might and wisdom. The Qur'an (59: 22–3) declares:

God is God other than whom there is no god, knower of the unknown and the visible. God is the All-merciful, the Compassionate. God is God other than whom there is no god, the King, the Holy One, Peace, the Faithful, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Lofty One.

Faith and Action

Righteousness as it is expressed in the Qur'an has several components. In addition to faith in God, God's angels, books, and prophets, and the judgment of the last day, it includes good works: Muslims should give of their wealth, however cherished it may be, to orphans and the needy or for the ransoming of slaves and war captives. It also includes patience and steadfastness in times of misfortune or hardship and war, and integrity in one's dealings with others.

Because all men and women belong ultimately to one humanity, they are all equal before God, regardless of race, colour, or social status. They may surpass one another only in righteousness: 'Humankind, We have created you all of one male and one female and made you different peoples and tribes in order that you may know one another. Surely, the noblest of you in God's sight is the one who is most aware of God' (Q. 49: 13).

The Arabic word *iman* means faith, trust, and a personal sense of safety and well-being in God's providential care, mercy, and justice. On this level of inner personal commitment, *iman* is synonymous with *islam*: total surrender of the human will and destiny to the will of God. The opposite of *iman* is *kufr*, rejection of faith. To have faith is to know the truth and assent to it in the heart, profess it with the tongue, and manifest it in concrete acts of charity and almsgiving. *Kufr*, on the other hand, means knowing the truth but wilfully denying or obscuring it by acts of rebellion against the

law of God. The word *kufr* literally means 'to cover up, deny, or obscure'.

The Qur'an also makes an important distinction between Islam and faith. Outwardly, Islam is a religious, social, and legal institution, whose members constitute the worldwide Muslim *umma*, or community. *Iman*—faith—is an inner conviction whose sincerity God alone can judge, a commitment to a way of life in the worship of God and in moral relations with other persons. This is described beautifully in the Qur'an (49: 14), where the Bedouin come to Muhammad and say, 'we have faith'. Muhammad is commanded to respond: 'Do not say that you have faith, rather, say that you have submitted [you have *islam*], for faith has not yet entered your hearts.' Faith, as a comprehensive framework of worship and moral conduct, is explicitly depicted in the answer that the Prophet is said to have given to the question 'What is faith?': 'Faith is seventy-odd branches, the highest of which is to say "There is no god except God" and the lowest is to remove a harmful object from the road.'

Above Islam and *iman* stands *ihsan* (doing good or creating beauty). On the level of human inter-relations, *ihsan* is a concrete manifestation of both Islam and *iman*. On the level of the personal relationship of the man or woman of faith with God, *ihsan* constitutes the highest form of worship, expressed in this hadith: '*Ihsan* is to worship God as though you see God, for even if you do not see God, God sees you.'

Religious Sciences

In Arabic a learned person is termed an '*alim*'. The plural, '*ulama*', refers to the religio-legal scholars, or religious intellectuals, of the Islamic world as a group. What Muslims call the 'religious sciences' were part of a comprehensive cultural package—including theology, philosophy, literature, and science—that developed as Islam expanded geographically far beyond the religio-political

framework of its Arabian homeland. Cosmopolitan, pluralistic Islamic cultural centres like Baghdad, Córdoba, and Cairo offered ideal settings for intellectual growth. Beginning in the eighth century, the development of philosophy, theology, literature, and science continued in different parts of the Muslim world well into the seventeenth.

Islam is a religion more of action than of abstract speculation about right belief. Hence the first and most important of the religious sciences, Islamic law, stresses that the essence of faith is right living. The Prophet characterizes a Muslim thus: 'Anyone who performs our prayers [i.e., observes the rituals of worship] and eats our ritually slaughtered animals [i.e., observes the proper dietary laws] is one of us.' For Muslims, inner submission to the will of God is God's way for all of humankind. At both the personal and the societal level, Islam is a way of life that is to be realized by living within the framework of divine law, the *shari'ah*: that is, a way of life based on moral imperatives.

The Sources of Islamic Law

The Qur'an

The Qur'an and hence the *shari'ah* are centrally concerned with relationships among individuals in society and between individuals and God. The most particular and intimate human relationship is the one between husband and wife; the second is the relationship between parent and child. The circle then broadens to include the extended family, the tribe, and finally the *ummah* and the world.

Islam has no priesthood. Every person is responsible both for his or her own morality and for the morality of the entire Muslim *ummah*: 'Let there be of you a community that calls to the good, enjoins honourable conduct, and dissuades from evil conduct. These are indeed prosperous people' (Q. 3: 104).

The Qur'an places kindness and respect to par-

a means of increasing one's wealth. But renunciation of material possessions is no more desirable than total attachment to them. Rather, the Qur'an enjoins the faithful to 'Seek amidst that which God has given you, the last abode, but do not forget your portion of the present world' (Q. 28: 77).

In short, the Qur'an is primarily concerned with moral issues in actual situations. It is not a legal manual. Of its 6,236 verses, no more than 200 are explicitly legislative.

The Sunnah

The life-example of the Prophet includes not only his acts and sayings but also his tacit consent. His acts are reported in anecdotes about situations or events to which he reacted or in which he participated. In situations where he expressed neither approval nor objection, his silence is taken to signify consent. Thus the *sunnah* of consent became a normative source in the development of Islamic law.

Accounts that report the Prophet's *hadiths* (sayings) must go back to an eyewitness of the event. The *hadith* literature is often called 'tradition' in English, in a quite specific sense. Islamic 'tradition' (or 'Prophetic tradition') is the body of sayings traced to the Prophet Muhammad through chains of oral transmission. *Hadith* is the most important component of *sunnah* because it is the most direct expression of the Prophet's opinions or judgments regarding the community's conduct.

To qualify as a *hadith*, a text must be accompanied by its chain of transmission, beginning with the compiler or last transmitter and going back to the Prophet. The aim of the study of *hadith* is to ascertain the authenticity of a particular text by establishing the completeness of the chain of its transmission and the veracity of its transmitters.

There are six canonical collections of *hadiths*. The earliest and most important collectors were

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The Qur'an places kindness and respect to parents next in importance to the worship of God. These are followed by caring for the poor and the needy through alms giving. Usury is prohibited as

a means of increasing one's wealth. But renunciation of material possessions is no more desirable than total attachment to them. Rather, the Qur'an enjoins the faithful to 'Seek amidst that which God has given you, the last abode, but do not forget your portion of the present world' (Q. 28: 77).

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There are six canonical collections of *hadiths*. The earliest and most important collectors were Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari (810–70) and Muslim bin al-Hajjaj al-Nisaburi (c. 817–75). As their names suggest, the former came from

the city of Bukhara in Central Asia and the latter from Nishapur in northeastern Iran. Although the two men did not know each other, they were contemporaries and both spent many years traveling across the Muslim world in search of *hadith* traditions. The fact that their independent quests produced very similar results suggests that a unified *hadith* tradition was already well established.

Both men are said to have collected hundreds of thousands of *hadiths*, out of which each selected about 3,000, discounting repetitions. Their approach became the model for all subsequent *hadith* compilers. Their two collections, entitled simply *Sahih* (literally, 'sound') *al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, soon achieved canonical status, second in authority only to the Qur'an. Within less than half a century, four other collections—by Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, Ibn Majah, al-Tirmidhi, and al-Nasa'i—were produced. It is worth noting that, like al-Bukhari and Muslim, these four also came from Central Asia and Iran. Each of these collections is entitled simply *Sunan* (the plural of *sunnah*).

As legal manuals, all six collections are organized topically, beginning with the laws governing the rituals of worship and then continuing with the laws regulating the social, political, and economic life of the community.

The Scope of Islamic Law

For Muslims God is the ultimate lawgiver. The *shari'ah* is sacred law, 'the law of God'. It consists of the maxims, admonitions, and legal sanctions and prohibitions enshrined in the Qur'an and explained, elaborated, and realized in the Prophetic tradition.

The term *shari'ah* originally signified the way to a source of water. Metaphorically it came to mean the way to the good in this world and the next. It is 'the straight way' that leads the faithful to paradise in the hereafter. Muslims believe the *shari'ah* to be God's plan for the ordering of human society.

Within the framework of the divine law, human actions range between those that are absolutely

obligatory and will bring rewards on the Day of Judgment, and those that are absolutely forbidden and will bring harsh punishment. Actions are classified in five categories:

- lawful (*halal*), and therefore obligatory;
- commendable, and therefore recommended (*mustahabb*);
- neutral, and therefore permitted (*mubah*);
- reprehensible, and therefore disliked (*makruh*); and
- unlawful (*haram*), and therefore forbidden.

These categories govern all human actions. The correctness of an action and the intention that lies behind it together determine its nature and its consequences for the person who performs it.

Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

Jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, is the theoretical and systematic aspect of Islamic law, consisting of the interpretation and codification of the *shari'ah*, or sacred law. A scholar who specializes in this exacting science is called a *faqih* ('jurist').

Islamic jurisprudence, as it was developed in the various legal schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), is based on four sources. Two of these, the Qur'an and *sunnah*, are its primary sources. The other two are secondary sources: the personal reasoning (*ijtihad*) of the scholars, and the general consensus (*ijma'*) of the community. The schools of Islamic law differed in the degree of emphasis or acceptance that they gave to each source.

Personal reasoning is the process through which legal scholars deduced from the Qur'an and *sunnah* the laws that are the foundations of their various schools of thought. The term *ijtihad* signifies a scholar's best effort in this endeavour, which is based on reasoning from analogous situations in the past: modern software piracy, for instance, would be considered analogous to theft.

Finally, the principle of consensus (*ijma'*) is meant to ensure the continued authenticity and truth of the three other sources. In the broadest

sense, *ijma'* refers to the community's acceptance and support of applied *shari'ah*. More narrowly, it has encouraged an active exchange of ideas among the scholars of the various schools, at least during the formative period of Islamic law. Consensus has remained the final arbiter of truth and error, expressed in the Prophet's declaration that 'my community will not agree on an error.'

Yet even this important principle has been the subject of debate and dissension among the scholars of the various schools. Among the many questions at issue are whether the consensus of earlier generations is binding on the present one, and whether the necessary consensus can be reached by the scholars alone, without the participation of the community at large.

Islamic Philosophy and Theology

An important subset of the religious sciences (also known as the transmitted sciences) contained the 'rational' sciences of philosophy and theology. Theology is discourse about God, God's attributes, and God's creation and nurture of all things. It is also concerned with human free will

and predestination, moral and religious obligations, and the return to God on the Day of Resurrection for the final judgment. Insofar as theology addresses human faith and conduct, it is part of the science of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence.

In time, however, Islamic theology also came to concern itself with more philosophical questions about the existence of God, creation, and the problem of evil and suffering. In these areas Islamic theology reflects the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, whose principles and rationalistic methodology it adopted.

The rapid spread of Islam out of Arabia into Syria and Mesopotamia brought Muslims into contact with people of other faiths and ethnic backgrounds, including Hellenized Jews and Christians. With the rise of the 'Abbasid dynasty in the mid-eighth century, interest in Greek philosophy, science, and medicine increased, and Arabic translations of Greek works began to appear.

The quest for knowledge reached its peak in the next century under the caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–33), whose Bayt al-Hikmah ('House of Wisdom') in Baghdad was the first institution of higher

Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i

A decisive stage in Muslim jurisprudence came in the ninth century with Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767–820). Having travelled widely and studied in various centres of learning across the Muslim world, he spent his last years in Egypt, where he wrote the first systematic treatise on the subject. This work radically changed the scope and nature of Islamic jurisprudence. Rejecting personal opinion in favour of absolute dependence on the two primary sources, the Qur'an and *sunnah*, Shafi'i based his system on a vast collection of *hadith* and legal traditions entitled *Kitab al-Umm*, which he compiled in order to write his work. In opposition to the majority of jurists of his time, he argued that they should not base their judgments on the opinions of people, but should rely exclusively on the Book of God and the *sunnah* of his Prophet.

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Although Shafi'i's legal system was later adopted as the basis of a school of thought bearing his name, he himself expressly opposed the idea. He saw himself not as the founder of a new legal school, but as the reformer of Islamic law. The Shafi'i school took root early in Egypt, where its founder lived and died. It then spread to southern Arabia and later followed the maritime trade routes first to East Africa and then to Southeast Asia, where it remains the dominant legal school.

learning not only in the Islamic world but anywhere in the West. Christian scholars had already translated many Greek medical, philosophical, and theological treatises into Syriac and commented on them, but the House of Wisdom, which housed an impressive library of Greek manuscripts, provided additional support for their work. Families of translators worked in teams, rendering into Arabic the ancient treasures of Hellenistic science and philosophy. Smaller centres of philosophical and medical studies in Syria and Iran also made notable contributions.

The Early Period

Early Islamic philosophy had a distinctive character: Aristotelian in its logic, physics, and metaphysics; Platonic in its political and social aspects; and Neoplatonic in its mysticism and theology. Two figures stand out in this early period. The first was the Iraqi theologian-philosopher Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Kindi (d. 870), who used philosophical principles and methods of reasoning to defend fundamental Islamic teachings such as the existence and oneness of God, the temporal creation of the universe by God's command out of nothing, the inimitability of the Qur'an, and the necessity of prophets. In his argument for the latter, Al-Kindi underlined the distinction between the philosopher who acquires his knowledge through rational investigation and contemplation and the prophet who receives his knowledge instantaneously, through divine revelation.

In sharp contrast to al-Kindi, Abu Bakr Zakariyah al-Razi ('the one from Rayy, Iran'; c. 865–926) was a thoroughgoing Platonist who rejected the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Rather, drawing on the theory that Plato elaborated in his *Timaeus*, al-Razi argued that the universe evolved from primal matter, floating gas atoms in an absolute void. The universe or cosmos came into being when God imposed order on the primeval chaos, but it will return to chaos at some distant point in the future, because matter will revert to its primeval state.

The Flowering of Islamic Philosophy

Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 878–950), who moved to Baghdad from Turkestan, in Central Asia, was not only a great philosopher but an important musical theorist and an accomplished instrumentalist. His Platonic philosophical system was comprehensive and universal. According to al-Farabi, God is pure intellect and the highest good. From God's self-knowledge or contemplation emanates the first intellect, which generates the heavenly spheres and a second intellect, who then repeats the process. Each subsequent intellect generates another sphere and another intellect.

Al-Farabi agreed with al-Kindi that a prophet is gifted with a sharp intellect capable of receiving philosophical verities naturally and without any mental exertion. He then communicates these truths to the masses, who are incapable of comprehending them on the philosophical level.

Although al-Farabi was called 'the second teacher', after Aristotle, even he was excelled by 'the great master' Ibn Sina (known in Latin as Avicenna, 980–1037). Ibn Sina, who was born in Bukhara, Iran, was a self-taught genius who mastered the religious sciences at the age of ten and by the age of eighteen had become a leading physician, philosopher, and astronomer. His encyclopedic manual of medicine, *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* ('The canon of medicine'), and his philosophical encyclopedia, *al-Shifa'* ('The book of healing'), were studied in European universities throughout the Middle Ages.

Ibn Sina built on al-Farabi's Neoplatonic ideas to produce a comprehensive system of mystical philosophy and theology. He accepted and developed al-Farabi's emanationism, placing it in a more precise logical and philosophical framework. Although he affirmed the prophethood of Muhammad, the revelation of the Qur'an, and the immortality of the soul, he rejected the Qur'anic traditions of the resurrection of the body, the reward of paradise, and the punishment of hell.

According to a widely accepted Prophetic tradition, at the beginning of every century God

raises a scholar to renew and strengthen the faith of the Muslim community. Such a man is known as a *mujaddid* ('renovator') of the faith. Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) of Tus, in Iran, has been regarded as the *mujaddid* of the sixth Islamic century. His work went far beyond theology and philosophy, encompassing mysticism and all the religious sciences.

In 1091 al-Ghazali was appointed a professor of theology and law at the prestigious Nizamiyah college in Baghdad, where he tirelessly defended mainstream Sunni Islam against the innovations of the theologians and the heresies of the philosophers. Four years later, however, he suffered a deep psychological crisis and gave up teaching. After a long quest, he determined that true knowledge could not be attained through either the senses or the rational sciences, but only through a divine light that God casts into the heart of the person of faith. His reason thus enlightened, al-Ghazali produced one of the most ambitious works in the history of Islamic thought. Appropriately entitled *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (The Revivification of the Religious Sciences), this magnum opus examines all religious learning from a deeply mystical point of view.

In his book *The Incoherence* [or 'Collapse'] of the *Philosophers*, al-Ghazali rejected the philosophical principle of causality (which said, for example, that created things could be the efficient causes of events) and in its place proposed a theory of occasionalism, according to which the only cause of anything in the universe is God. Al-Ghazali's critique itself would be the subject of a critique by the Andalusian Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd.

Ibn Rushd (known in Latin as Averroës, 1126–98), who was born in Córdoba, Spain, was the greatest Muslim commentator on Aristotle. He came from a long line of jurists, and was himself a noted scholar of Islamic law. His legal training decisively influenced his philosophy. In his critique of al-Ghazali, entitled *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Ibn Rushd methodically criticizes

al-Ghazali for misunderstanding philosophy and Ibn Sina for misunderstanding Aristotle. The first to construct a true Aristotelian philosophical system, Ibn Rushd essentially shared his Eastern predecessors' belief in the primacy of philosophy over religion. In his famous double-truth theory, however, he argued that both were valid ways of arriving at truth: the difference was that philosophy was the way of the intellectual elite, while religion was the way of the masses.

The great thirteenth-century philosopher-mystic Ibn 'Arabi will be discussed later, in the context of Sufism. A more empirical philosopher than any of those mentioned so far was the Tunisian-born 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Through his extensive travels and the positions he held as a jurist and political theorist, Ibn Khaldun gained insight into the workings both of nations and of political and religious institutions. This led him to write a universal history. The most important part of this work is its introduction (*Muqaddimah*), in which Ibn Khaldun presents the first social philosophy of history in the Western world.

Islamic philosophy had a lasting influence on medieval and Renaissance thought in Europe, particularly through its interpretation of Aristotelianism. Europeans came to know many Muslim philosophers by Latinized forms of their names: Rhazes for al-Razi, Alpharabius or Avennasar for al-Farabi, Avicenna for Ibn Sina, Algazel for al-Ghazali, Averroës for Ibn Rushd.

DIFFERENTIATION

Shi'ism

As we have seen, the Muslim community was permanently divided soon after the death of the Prophet when a political party (*shi'ah*) formed around his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali in support of his right to succeed Muhammad as leader, or Imam.