

# Understanding Islam

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## Preliminaries

The public image of Christianity in the United States in recent decades has been shaped by the outspoken, bold statements and actions of activist Christian fundamentalists. Whether one sees this as a good thing presumably depends on how sympathetic one is to the Christian fundamentalist outlook. Most non-fundamentalist Christians are at least slightly embarrassed by the fundamentalist take-over of the public stage on which Christianity is depicted – many are outraged. They say, “This is not the Christianity I know.” Or, “I want nothing to do with what these people are saying”.

Much the same can be said for those Muslims who are embarrassed or discouraged by the fundamentalist, or “extremist” take-over of the public image of Islam in the United States, particularly in just the last few years. Out of the billion or so Muslims in the world today, there are many millions who want no part of the extreme fundamentalist program of violence. Islam is much more than the shaking fists of bearded Arab men on the street of some Middle-Eastern city. And it is much more than some radical sheikh shouting anti-American slogans in an Egyptian street protest.

But, before we get too far into the details, let’s stop for a bit of terminological clarification. What is a Muslim? What is Islam?

First, “Islam”: “Islam” is the name of a religious tradition, like “Christianity”, or “Judaism”. The word itself is Arabic in origin, roughly meaning peace through surrender to God. (“Islam” is pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, not the first.) Muhammad, an Arab born in the town of Mecca, is the prophet whose claims of having received the ultimate revelations from God crucially shaped the Islamic tradition, but one should not refer to the tradition as “Muhammadism” as has sometimes been done in the West.

While we are at it, let’s be clear that Muhammad is not seen as divine within the Islamic tradition, and is not worshiped.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it would be considered blasphemous for a believer from the Islamic tradition to worship Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> Muhammad is revered as one sufficiently close to God to serve as the vehicle by which God’s truth is revealed to

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<sup>1</sup>Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *A Muslim Primer* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 2000), xxv. Zepp is a retired professor of Religious Studies at Western Maryland College. His book presents a completely uncritical summary of Islam.

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps you have seen “Muhammad” spelled differently. The name is Arabic, as are many of the terms used in discussing the technical details of Islam. Arabic is not written using the Roman alphabet, and so one often finds variations in the English spellings of Arabic words.

humankind, but he has never been said to be divine, as Christians traditionally have said of Jesus. Islamic believers worship God, not Muhammad.

### **What is a “Muslim”?**

While “Islam” refers to a religious tradition, “Muslim” refers to a *person* – roughly, a person who is somehow affiliated with the religious tradition. In its most fundamental meaning, the word “Muslim” is used to refer to someone who adheres to the Islamic tradition and practices it. However, the situation is a bit complicated:

There is, however, a secondary meaning to ‘Muslim’ which may shade into the first. A Muslim is one born to a Muslim father who takes on his or her parent’s confessional identity without necessarily subscribing to the beliefs and practices of the faith, just as a Jew may define him- or herself as ‘Jewish’ without observing the Halacha. In non-Muslim societies such Muslims may subscribe to, and be vested with, secular identities. ... In this limited context... there may be no necessary contradiction between being Muslim and being atheist or agnostic, just as there are Jewish atheists and Jewish agnostics....

It should be noted, however, that this secular definition of ‘Muslim’...is very far from being uncontested. Just as fundamentalist Christians in America have reappropriated the term ‘Christian’ to apply exclusively to those who share their particular (usually narrow) versions of the faith, so modern Muslim activists have tended to redraw the boundaries between themselves and other Muslims who do not share their views, in extreme cases going so far as to designate the latter as ‘infidels’. Generally there is little consistency in the way such labels are applied.<sup>3</sup>

It is not only today’s “extremists” or “fundamentalists” within the Islamic community who draw strict boundaries around what can count as genuine Islam. Almost from the beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, this has been an issue. What if one does not always behave as a true Muslim? Could one have a sincere commitment to Islam and yet sometimes sin gravely and repeatedly? If so, is one still a Muslim? And what if one did not agree with the standard interpretation of the Islamic faith? Could one still count as Muslim? In answer to such questions, some Muslims have proclaimed very strict behavioral criteria that exclude grave sinners from inclusion, but the majority of Muslims have adopted a version of the broader view that basically claims those who sincerely embrace the formula, “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God” are genuine Muslims in the religious sense of the word.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Malise Ruthven, *Islam: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-4. Ruthven is an historian of Islamic religion and culture, a faculty member at University of Aberdeen. He writes from the point of view of an outsider trying to be both accurate and objective, not as an advocate for Islam.

<sup>4</sup>Ruthven, p. 7.

Many Americans confuse “Arab” and “Muslim”. Arabs form an ethnic grouping with ancestry going back to the ancient peoples of the Arabian peninsula, and related tribes. The emergence of Islam as a distinct religious tradition occurred among Arabs, but today only about 1/5 of those who currently get counted as Muslims are Arabs. The largest Muslim populations live in South and Southeast Asia, in countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. These folks are most certainly not Arabs.

### **The beginnings of Islam**

Without at least a superficial knowledge of how Islam began, you cannot understand Islam today, for contemporary Islam sees itself as self-consciously and deliberately tied to those origins. For example, with the ideal Muslim life often pictured as modeled after Muhammad’s life, it becomes crucial to understand Muhammad’s life. Crucial, and yet potentially controversial, for it is possible to put different “spins” on what Muhammad did and why he did it.

Islam arguably began before Muhammad – in fact, Muslims trace it back at least to the Biblical hero, Abraham. Biblical scholars have debated whether Abraham, who according to the Bible began the family that developed into the Jewish people, was a real person or only a symbol. But Muslims, too, trace their origins back to this same Abraham, and for the vast majority, the question of Abraham’s reality has simply never arisen, for Islam has an important story to tell about Abraham, Abraham’s sons, and God’s promises. In that story, Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, who deserved the honor of being Abraham’s main inheritor, and the recipient of the blessings God bestowed on Abraham’s offspring, was illegally and illegitimately deprived of the recognition he deserved because of the jealousy of the mother of Abraham’s second son, Isaac. (The two sons had different mothers.) According to the Biblical account it was the second son, Isaac, who became the father of the Jewish nation, while according to the Islamic account the first son, Ishmael, became the father of the Arab peoples, and thus the ancestor of Muhammad.

So, many centuries later, when (according to the Islamic account) God caused the text of the Islamic sacred book, *al-Quran*, to be revealed to Muhammad, this was but a continuation of the special relationship between God and the Arabs, used to bring the message of God to the people of the earth. In that sense, Islam did not begin with Muhammad and the *Quran*, but rather with God and God’s relationship with Abraham.

Here is part of the story from the Islamic point of view:<sup>5</sup>

For all intents and purposes, Islam got off the ground with Abraham, but during the succeeding centuries it was distorted and altered. The mission of Muhammad was to restore Islam to its pristine purity.

...God made a covenant with Abraham and promised him that his family and its descendants would be many and blessed. Sarah, Abraham’s wife, did not believe God could fulfill the promise since she was well past childbearing age. So she

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<sup>5</sup>As told by Ira Zepp, pp. 3 - 6.

took matters into her own hands and encouraged Abraham to take another wife, her Egyptian maid, Hagar.

Abraham and Hagar had a son who was named Ishmael, that is, “God hears” or “The Lord had given heed” – presumably to Sarah’s inability to have children. Soon after Ishmael was circumcised at age thirteen, a son was miraculously born to Sarah. This second son was Isaac, who figures prominently in the Hebrew story. Because Sarah feared, perhaps out of jealousy, that Ishmael, the firstborn and legitimate heir to God’s promise,<sup>6</sup> might compete with Isaac for this heritage, she, with Abraham’s consent, forced Hagar and Ishmael out of the household.

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Of particular importance to Islam is that God had an intimate relationship with Abraham and Ishmael and promised to make a great nation from Ishmael’s offspring (Genesis 2:13-18). Islam claims that the great nation promised to Ishmael is the Arab people, who eventually produced the Prophet Muhammad.

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...Furthermore, the covenant between God and Abraham, and by implication Ishmael, was made before Isaac was born. So Ishmael is the “child of promise,” the rightful heir to Abraham’s patrimony. It is Islam’s position that in the Genesis account Isaac’s name was substituted for Ishmael’s to reinforce the Hebrew role in salvation history. ... (See sura 37:100-106 for the Quranic account of the story.) Islam sees the Torah’s exclusion of Ishmael from the story in the name of Jewish and, later, Christian chosenness as a way of excluding Arabs and Muslims from the plan of God.

This is in no way to denigrate Isaac, who is one of the prophets for whom Islam has the highest regard. It instead demonstrates how the rights of firstborn sons were perceived in ancient desert culture....

Notice that the implication of the Islamic version of the story is that the Jews have attempted to claim a birthright that is in fact not theirs. Palestine was not promised to the Jews, but to the descendants of Abraham; the Jews are not the only descendants of Abraham. This Muslim claim strikes directly at the religious basis for the Jewish claim on the West Bank as given by God solely to the Jews.

However, before we become embroiled in contemporary issues, it would be better to finish the story of Islam’s origins. We can jump about 2500 years from Abraham and Ishmael all the way to Muhammad, where we pick up the thread with Muhammad’s birth about 570 CE in the desert trading town of Mecca, located in what is today Saudi Arabia. The region was by then populated by a diverse mix of religions and ethnicities, including Jews and Christian Arabs, although it seems there were no Jews in Mecca. Mecca was not

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<sup>6</sup>According to the traditions of the nomadic peoples at the time, as far as we know, based on the fact that Ishmael was the first-born male child.

only a trading center, but also a religious center, containing a sacred place, called the Kaaba, where many gods were worshiped. Perhaps it gained its religious significance from the presence there of an unusual black stone of mysterious origins – probably a meteoric fragment.

Muhammad’s ancestral tribe, the Quraysh, was a prosperous and politically significant group of families in Mecca ... To a young couple of the Quraysh tribe and Bann Hashim clan was born Muhammad ibn Abdullah. He was born on the twelfth day of the third lunar month of Islam’s calendar, [about 570 C E]. ... Not much was expected from this orphan whose father died two months before his birth and whose mother died when he was six. <sup>7</sup>

Given the cultural situation in Mecca at the time, Muhammad had considerable opportunity to contemplate religious and political matters. As he grew up, he became disturbed by the variety of divinities worshiped at the Kabaa, the tribal structure of his society that produced disharmony and violent raiding, and the somewhat chaotic cultural scene. He appears to have been an introspective, reflective type of person who devoted considerable thought energy to such issues, going off into the desert for solitude. In any case, it was in a nearby desert cave that his life suddenly changed when he became convinced he was literally being confronted by the voice of God or God’s messenger. Here is a typical Islamic version of the story:<sup>8</sup>

Visions, dreams, and trances were all part of this desert experience. “Am I mad?” Muhammad asked himself. “Am I fabricating these voices?” ...

His most traumatic moment came at age forty around the twenty-seventh day of the month of Ramadan, when he was meditating in a cave on Mount Noor. ... A voice next to him, as clear and distinct as if it belonged to a friend, said, “Recite in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created man of a clot of congealed blood! Proclaim!” (96:1-2)

Muhammad was overwhelmed. “I can’t read or write. How can I do what you command?” was his natural response. He soon realized that the person speaking to him with such clarity was none other than the angel Gabriel – the same Gabriel who had spoken to Moses and the Virgin Mary.<sup>9</sup> This realization caused

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<sup>7</sup>Zepp, pp. 7 - 8, and 16.

<sup>8</sup>Zepp, pp. 18 - 20.

<sup>9</sup>Zepp here repeats the most common traditional Muslim account that Muhammad thought he was getting God’s word via the angel, Gabriel. However, there is some evidence that Muhammad may have thought himself to be in the presence of Allah himself, at least on some occasions, rather than merely in the presence of an intermediary angel. In any case, the *Quran* is seen as a record of the exact words of Allah.

Muhammad greater anxiety. He very quickly shared the whole experience with [his wife] Khadija, whose opinion he had long trusted....

Khadija immediately went to her uncle, a Christian, for guidance and advice. After she related to him the words Muhammad had received, the uncle replied, in effect: "That message we have heard before; it is from God. He is our spiritual brother." Khadija then assured Muhammad he had received an authentic divine revelation; he was not a madman or just another soothsayer. ... Khadija found her husband's religious instincts credible and became his first convert. In fact, among his first converts were people he knew well – Khadija's cousin, Waraqa; a slave, Zaid; and Muhammad's own cousin, Ali, who became the fourth caliph.<sup>10</sup> A few of the early converts were merchants and persons with some standing in Mecca, especially Abu Bakr of the Umayyad clan, but most of his first followers were from the lower classes.

Muhammad was drawn again and again to the cave at Mount Noor, and Gabriel kept reciting the words of Allah to him. The more Gabriel spoke, the more convinced Muhammad was that he was not mad (81:19-25). He memorized the words revealed to him and then recited them to his friends, who wrote them on any piece of scrap material they could find, be it stone, leather, leaf, or bone.

And so over a period of twenty-three years, until his death in 632, Allah, through the angel Gabriel, communicated the words of the Quran to Muhammad [although not always in the cave]. For Islam this is the greatest of miracles – that an illiterate, ordinary camel herder from Mecca could be the source of such wisdom, could remember it, and above all could recite it in such exquisite verse. It was clear to his followers that only Allah could be responsible for this.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, *al-Qur'an* came to be. After the first revelations had been written, Muhammad became more outspoken in the community, preaching the message he had become convinced was from God. As you can easily imagine, this did not sit well with the local

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<sup>10</sup>Caliph: a recognized primary ancient Muslim religious and political leader.

<sup>11</sup>This description covers up a recent controversy in Islam, related to Islamic fundamentalism. According to some ancient sources, Muhammad's recitations of Allah's revelations included some verses (later repudiated as Satanic in origin) which spoke highly of three local goddesses. According to that version of the story, the inclusion of these verses was met with considerable enthusiasm by the members of the dominant tribe in Mecca, until Muhammad reversed himself and repudiated the references to goddesses. Some historians of Islam suggest that there may be truth to the story that Muhammad changed the content of his recitations in this regard, either because he decided that he had been deceived by Satan or because he underwent religious development. Neither of these alternatives will be acceptable to someone who sees the *Quran* as having been dictated by God alone, and remembered perfectly by Muhammad, with no possibility of error.

religious establishment. He did not immediately convert many to this new point of view, that held there is but one God, who is Lord and Creator of the Universe, the God of Abraham, and that worship of idols in the Kabaa is not only mistaken but a grievous sin. And so, Muhammad suffered the fate so common to outspoken religious reformers – he was tossed out of town. Here is Zepp’s summary of the story:<sup>12</sup>

...In 615, to avoid being under siege, about seventy-five Muslims emigrated to Abyssinia (roughly the current Ethiopia) across the Red Sea, where they were protected by Negus, its pious Christian king...

Another, more famous migration (*hegira* or *hijra* in Arabic), to Yathrib [later known as Medina], took place in 622. Over a period of weeks Muhammad encouraged his followers to go in small groups to Yathrib, a city not quite three hundred miles north of Mecca, because the Yathribi people offered the Prophet an opportunity to establish an Islamic society there....

This migration to Medina was so decisive a move, such a defining moment for Islam, that the Muslim calendar is dated from that activity. It was not Muhammad’s birth, as in Jesus’ case, which divided history, but this migration to Medina.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Islam as a lasting distinctive religious/cultural movement was born with the move to Medina.

At this point, you may be saying to yourself that this is all more than you really wanted to know about the origins of Islam. What does all this detail have to do with Islam today? The answer is, “Plenty”. If you ask a practicing Muslim today how a good Muslim should decide what to do, how to live, you will probably be told two things: a) Follow the *Quran*. b) Do what Muhammad did. The details of Muhammad’s life and the things he said in reaction to various practical life situations that faced him have been preserved in great detail in the Islamic literature. (There is controversy over how much of this literature is historically accurate, but we will ignore that for now.) So, the point is that the details of Muhammad’s way of dealing with life situations are seen as a model and guide to the faithful Muslim today.

In particular, since there is a serious contemporary issue about the use of violence to promote the interests of Islam, it becomes important to think about exactly what the historical evidence shows about Muhammad’s own example. Critics of Islam, who are aware of the extent to which Muhammad is used as an example, often say that Muhammad was a violent man, silencing his critics with the sword, and spreading his new religion by military force. Thus, there is room for a bit more ancient Islamic history in our present discussion of the origins of Islam.

The reason Muhammad was invited to Medina is interesting. There were severe tensions in Medina between the Arab and Jewish residents. Both sides saw an advantage to bringing in an outsider to mediate. The Jews probably knew of Muhammad’s admiration

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<sup>12</sup>Pp. 20 - 22.

for Abraham and his strict monotheism, while the Arabs presumably were attracted by Muhammad's being an Arab from a prominent family in an important Arab town not far away. Initially, Muhammad was quite successful in bringing harmony to the community, probably for the reasons mentioned, in addition to his leadership based on his conviction that he was inspired by God. The first Islamic mosque was built, and an Islamic social and religious life developed amongst many of the Arabs. With Muhammad's guidance and blessing, a formal written agreement was drawn up according to which Christians, Jews, and Muslims (along with other monotheists) all had their religious rights protected in Medina. This may well be the first example of a significant formal legal guarantee of religious freedom in human civilization. It represents the foundation for later Islamic practice in the early centuries that generally treated Christians and Jews in Muslim-controlled areas as having at least some rights to avoid persecution. ("Idolaters" however did not have the same standing as Christians, Jews, and other monotheists.)

However, the party in Medina didn't last. Muhammad hoped the Jews would eventually come around to following his particular vision of God's plan, accepting him as a prophet of God, along with Jesus, joining in the Islamic worldview, and when that did not happen, the relationship with them turned sour. The Jews plotted against him by conspiring with his enemies in Mecca, apparently hoping to be rid of him one way or another.

At this point, things got nasty. Muhammad eventually drove the Jews out of Medina and slaughtered many of them as enemies of God. Those who wish to paint Muhammad as having become a ruthless and violent man make note that even some of Muhammad's own followers were put off by the extent of the slaughter. Those who wish to defend Muhammad see his acts as necessary self-defense of the Islamic community against evil plotters who had proved they were subversive and could never be trusted again. However, at the very least one can say that these events established a foundation for all future Islamic thinking that extreme violence in the name of defending the Islamic community from attack is part of God's way of life. We continue to see this way of thinking exemplified today in Islam. (Analogous ways of thinking are also exemplified in the historical behavior of other religious traditions, thus providing modern critics of religion with a strong ground for rejecting religion altogether as inherently divisive and dangerous.)

Ultimately, after a number of military confrontations with attackers from Mecca, Muhammad miraculously survived his wounds and led his victorious band of armed supporters in triumph back to his hometown, Mecca, where he basically pulled off a relatively bloodless takeover. He treated the conquered town graciously and mercifully (which seems to have been quite unusual for that time and place). Perhaps more importantly, he rode around the Kaaba seven times, paying respect to its sacred space; he thus established a ritual that Muslims today follow in a pilgrimage to Mecca. The numerous idols in the Kaaba were destroyed; but the Kaaba remained the center of Islamic worship, the place established by Abraham and Ishmael. And so, although Muhammad returned to Medina to live, Muslims were instructed to pray facing toward Mecca, in respect to the Kaaba, and the central location toward which Muslims make religious pilgrimages yet today is Mecca and the Kaaba.

It is sometimes said that Islam spread by the sword – meaning that Muhammad and his followers went into places like Mecca with military force and then required the conquered inhabitants to convert to Islam. You can see from the above story that such a

picture is not quite accurate. Islam recognized from the beginning that religious conviction must come from within, and cannot be artificially produced by threatening someone's life. However, when military conquest was accomplished in the name of God (Allah) by Muslims, public idol worship became difficult or impossible (in Mecca, Muhammad destroyed the idols in the Kaaba, saying that the time of ignorance in the city had passed, and truth has come to Mecca), and there certainly was a pressure to recognize the power of God displayed by the victory. Many conversions to Islam appear to have followed this pattern.

Muhammad, being a human being, eventually died. (Supposedly on an especially hot desert day, June 8, 632 CE.) He left no plan for carrying on. This rather surprising situation led to a real crisis in the Islamic community – there never was agreement regarding how the continuing leadership of the movement should be chosen. A few years later, this dispute led to the division of the community into two camps that became known as the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. These divisions remain today, with Sunni Muslims comprising the vast majority of Muslims in the contemporary world, but Shi'ites being a significant minority, and in some places (such as Iran) in the majority and in control.

### **Early growth years of Islam and what they mean for us today**

The *Quran* envisioned a unified people of Allah defending one another against outsiders, and spreading the law of God wherever the believers were found. It pictured an equality of all males before Allah, with the same rules of life applied to everyone. (The role of women has always been somewhat more problematic within Islam.) It called for social justice and care of the poor.

These ideals proved powerful, and attractive. The power of Islam spread very rapidly after Muhammad's death, and the lack of a clear model for leadership caused less damage to the movement than one might have expected. In fact, it proved to be the source of an innovation in social governance.

First, let Zepp tell part of the story in his characteristically generous way:<sup>13</sup>

The rate of Islam's expansion after Muhammad's death has no parallel in history. ... The new faith burst forth from Arabia like a skyrocket. Before twenty years had elapsed, Islam spread north of Arabia to Damascus and Jerusalem, east to Persia, west to Egypt, and further on to the northern coast of Africa. This expansion [eventually] included the construction of magnificent centers of Islamic culture, education, and religion in such cities as Baghdad and Cairo.

Zepp here glosses over the fact that the spread of Islam was not by missionary exhortation, but by military and political conquest. Independent politically-oriented scholars assert that the Islamic armies were motivated not by religious fervor but by an interest in looting and control of trade. The Islamic faith came along as something of an afterthought, and the Islamic injunction that God does not love aggressors was ignored. However, the religious power of the Islamic faith stood on its own. That is, it seems that conquered peoples were not too often pressed to say they accepted Islam, although on some occasions they may

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<sup>13</sup>P. 25.

have been forced to stop public worship of idols or to cease public feast days that flew in the face of Islam. The typical model seems to have been that the invaders established garrison towns for their small armies, and so long as the conquered tribe paid their taxes and didn't cause trouble, they were left to their own devices.

Less than 200 years after Muhammad's death, Muslims ruled vast reaches of land from current-day Spain and the south of Switzerland, across all of north Africa and the Arabian peninsula, and on into eastern areas of the Indian subcontinent. Further Muslim inroads into Europe were stopped only by military defeat at the hands of Charles Martel in southern France in 732. This Muslim control of much of the "civilized" world continued until the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, and even after.

Zepp claims

Islam tended to be viewed positively by people it conquered. This was due in some measure to the relief conquered peoples felt after centuries of tyrannical rule by Byzantine emperors and Persian kings. It was also due in large part to the sense of equality and justice set forth in the Quran and practiced by the Muslim rulers. Conquered people were called *dhimmi* – non-Muslims who were guaranteed tolerance by Islamic law. Jews and Christians, because of their relation to "the Book," were given special treatment. *Dhimmi* were permitted to retain their religious and civil rights, and for this privilege a tax, similar to our state taxes, was levied against them.<sup>14</sup>

...Islam, as a conquering force, did not always live up to the ideals of the Quran. But in most cases Muslims were able to live harmoniously with their neighbors and the people they ruled.

Ruthven provides a more detailed political analysis of how Islamic rule was structured. It turns out that this is important for assessing the claims of the Islamic "fundamentalists" and reformers today:<sup>15</sup>

No one need doubt that, at the level of civilization, an unprecedented degree of knowledge, excellence and sophistication was achieved in *dar al-Islam* [the sphere of Islamic rule] several centuries before the Renaissance occurred in Europe, or that, as many scholars have noted, much of the groundwork for the

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<sup>14</sup>This is something of an exaggeration. For example, Muhammad destroyed the idols in the Kabaa. So the religious rights of the idol worshipers were not in fact retained. However, Christians who happened to live in territories conquered by Muslims were treated much better than were Muslims who happened to live in areas later conquered by Christians. This is because Islam recognized Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians as people who were "believers." On the other hand, Christians saw Muslims and Judaists as "lost", or in total error, since they were without Christ, and so they were seen as a danger to the religious harmony of Christian-dominated locales.

<sup>15</sup>Pp. 11 - 14.

scientific and philosophical thought that would flourish in the West was laid in Muslim lands. A short introductory text such as this cannot hope to even hint at the achievements of Muslims in the areas in which they excelled – architecture and design, metalwork and ceramics, poetry and philosophy, as well as the ‘harder’ sciences including mathematics, optics, astronomy, and medicine....

The very speed and range of the initial expansion, however, were the source of political problems that remain unresolved. ... From the first, the message of social justice and the equality of men (and, more problematically, of women) before God, as conveyed in Muhammad’s preaching and preserved in the Quran, came up against the realities of tribal and dynastic power. ...

This historical achievement (which may without too much distortion appear as a golden age in the social memory of Muslims) was counter-balanced by a conspicuous failure at the level of power politics. After its initial expansion, the Arab empire imploded. Islam’s central institution, the caliphate, at first contested by rival factions was gradually drained of legitimacy, as the caliph, the ‘shadow of God on earth’ became the prisoner of palace guards recruited from the tribes.

In other words, there was a time, not too long after the year 800 when the sphere of Islamic rule and the influence of Islamic ideas encompassed most of human advanced civilization. The heady expansiveness of Islam rapidly came to a halt, but while it lasted, Islamically-based civilization flourished. As Ruthven mentions, art and architecture, science and medicine, and various forms of intellectual achievement and sophistication were supported and found fertile ground. To give just one example, much of the work of the ancient Greeks from a thousand years earlier would have been lost in the ruin of the Roman Empire if it were not for the interest in philosophy and learning found in the Islamic world that ensured that copies of documents such as Aristotle’s works were preserved.

However, note also that during the “Golden Age”, there was never a unified state encompassing all the territory under Islamic control, there never was a unified interpretation of Islamic law enforced everywhere. Social organization remained tribal, rather than being in the form of a nation, or collection of nations. Tribal loyalties were negotiated by tribal leaders. Islamic law was everywhere modified to meet local conditions. Tribal customs intermingled with Islamic law. And the idea of one correct interpretation of Islam was nowhere on the horizon. The flourishing of science and learning, the arts, and all the other trappings of sophisticated civilization that marked the Golden Age could never have been achieved, in my opinion, in a closed society, where orthodoxy was strictly enforced or desired. We need then to be cautious today when Muslim “fundamentalists” claim they wish to return Islam to its Golden Age glory. As we will see, it is only very selected elements of the Golden Age that are desired today by these folks. For example, they do not desire the intellectual ferment and open discussion of alternative ideas that was part of the intellectual life that animated Islam at that time. Nor do they wish to see the corruption of Islamic central values that was evidenced by the behavior of some so-called Muslim leaders of the day who were more interested in power for themselves than in promoting the world vision found in the *Qur’an*.

You may have heard of the Christian Crusades against Islamic control of the Middle East. These Medieval military adventures, beginning about 1000, carried out under the banner of Christianity, were brutal affairs initiated at the request of Christian communities afraid of being crushed by Muslim advances, but motivated in part by desire to control trade routes. The rallying cry for the Crusaders was to fight a holy war to retrieve control of the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem, for Christians, since the Muslims could easily be pictured as evil threats. These Christian Crusades had some fleeting success at wresting control of pieces of the Middle East from Islamic rule, but the harshness of the Crusaders hardly could have been expected to win the hearts and minds of the conquered Muslims, and in the end the Crusaders were forced to leave. The most lasting impact of the Crusades on Islam was to build resentment, to present Christianity as considerably more brutal and unsophisticated than Islam, and to build pride in the Islamic community that they were able to unify sufficiently to drive out the invaders. Violently anti-Western Muslim activists today make frequent reference to the Crusades, accusing the United States and other “Christian” countries of engaging in a new crusade against the Islamic world, and suggesting that Islam will once again drive out these new “Crusaders” just as during the Golden Age.

The Golden Age faded away, but what brought about its demise and exactly when that happened is controversial. Politically, it is easy to point to the extremely violent and sustained highly mobile invasions from the northeast, launched by the Mongols in the early 13<sup>th</sup> Century. (Jenghiz Khan and successors.) The center of Islamic culture and arts, Baghdad, fell, along with the northern part of the Middle East, and the last caliph was murdered. However, many of the invading Mongols stayed in the conquered territories, converted to Islam, or something that resembled Islam. Nor did the Mongols control the southern regions of the Arabian peninsula or north Africa or southeast Asia. So, in my view, the Mongol invasion is not the whole story. The question is why did the Islamic world never recover? Why did it never modernize? Why did almost all of it eventually get taken over by European powers and made into colonies? Why even now when the colonies have gained their political independence and operate as modern nation-states is Islamic culture not flourishing?

Contemporary Islamic reformers would say that a large part of the problem is religious. More liberal Islamic reformers point to the fact that beginning around the year 1000 CE, Sunni Islamic leaders and scholars developed a consensus that Islamic doctrine and law had been fully developed, that further open discussion of disagreements should cease. This has led, they would say, to a closing of the Islamic mind to new ideas and the vitality that comes with it, and thus to a dead Islamic traditionalism that is incapable of speaking effectively in a more modern world. From this point of view, the Golden Age began to end around the year 1000 because of the shift in intellectual climate that took place about then. Islamic *fundamentalist* reformers see it very differently. They believe it was a fading of strong Islamic commitment, a retreat from faith in God, a loosening of standards, that led God to allow these terrible things to happen, and that Islam will never recover until the Islamic people become strict Muslims again, and reject the evils of modernity that have crept into Muslim societies. They would probably tend to see the Golden Age as fading more slowly.

Nevertheless, despite the loss of the Golden Age, Islam remains the dominant religious tradition, at least superficially followed, throughout most of the regions that came under

its influence during the Golden Age, and in Southeast Asia into which it had spread somewhat more slowly through the efforts of missionaries. And it generally has followed the Sunni consensus in its outlook – that is, it has remained very traditional. That means until recent decades it has not genuinely confronted the question of what Islam should do about modernity.

### **The bases of Islamic doctrine and practice**

In theory anyway, central Islamic doctrine and practice all comes from *al-Qur'an* plus a very large collection of stories about Muhammad and his utterances within the context of those stories, known as the *hadith* literature. There appears to be little controversy over whether the *Qur'an* has indeed been passed down to us correctly, in its original version (so long as one understands that this accuracy pertains solely to the Arabic text, and not to translations). Nor was there any meaningful controversy over the original compilation of its contents, unlike the Bible. But the *hadith* literature is another matter. Supposedly, the *hadiths* were passed on in writing or orally to others by eyewitnesses – associates of Muhammad – and then collected in the decades (even centuries) after Muhammad's death. However, there really is no sure way to tell which eyewitnesses are the sources of the various pieces of this literature, or how authentic and accurate these pieces are. As these pieces were being assembled, and more and more individuals came forward with their own claims to have legitimate *hadiths*, the Muslim leadership made serious attempts to sort out true from false claims, going by their assessment of the trustworthiness of the individual who brought forth the various documents, and tracing the history of each story as well as they could. Ultimately, many Muslim scholars have had to concede that the method of determining the authenticity of each *hadith* was not entirely reliable, and that it is quite possible that spurious or inaccurate *hadiths* have gotten mixed in. Ironically, in recent years, when Islam has sought a way to reassert itself in the modern world, Muslim activists have dropped the skepticism of the older scholars within the Muslim community about the *hadiths*, probably because that skepticism is seen as weakness. The result is that the *hadiths* now enjoy an upsurge in perceived reliability, with activists sometimes citing specific *hadiths* to support some particular interpretation of Muslim practice, in much the same way as Christian fundamentalists seek out specific Bible verses as “proof texts” to show that they are right.

The *hadith* literature is not thought by Muslims to consist of God's own very words in the way that *al-Qur'an* is. Even authentic and accurate *hadiths* are not thought to be the word of God, but rather the word of Muhammad. However, because Muhammad was so close to God, it is thought that anything he said or did was “inspired” by God. Muhammad is basically considered to be error-free. That is the reason the *hadith* literature is taken so seriously.

For most Muslims, the *Qur'an* is more religiously central than the *hadiths*. Here is where one finds the agreed-upon most important theological ideas of Islam. But *al-Qur'an* does not contain a detailed code of law. Islamic law in its various interpretations derives mostly from the *hadith* literature. This can be quite confusing. For example, in Sura 24:2 of *al-Qur'an* we are told that a man and a woman who have committed adultery should both be punished equally, by being given a public flogging of 100 lashes each. However, an early caliph who apparently didn't like what the *Qur'an* said about this matter found

an obscure *hadith* to support very unequal punishments for the man and the woman, in which only the woman would be publicly executed after conviction.

Excerpts from *al-Qur'an* are included as a separate chapter in this packet as a sample. You may want to refer to them now. Much of the spirit of Islam can be seen, however, in the opening chapter, or Sura:<sup>16</sup>

All praise be to Allah, Lord of all the worlds,  
Most beneficent, ever-merciful,  
King of the Day of Judgement.  
You alone we worship, and to You alone turn for help.  
Guide us, O Lord, to the path that is straight,  
The path of those You have blessed,  
Not of those who have earned Your anger, nor those who have gone astray.

*Al-Qur'an* assumes that the reader is familiar with the Bible stories, and with Muhammad's personal history, for it often alludes to specific events in those stories in order to make a theological point. Moreover, its allusions are based on the versions of the stories available to the Arabs around Mecca at the time – possibly somewhat different from the versions we have now. This can make for difficult reading. However, the main outlines of Islamic theology are quite clear nonetheless, since they are repeated and elaborated throughout the book.

### **Basic Islamic traditional theology**

The central idea of Islam is the idea of God – Allah – who created the earth and who will judge its human inhabitants on the Day of Judgment. This God is perfectly just, and very threatening to those who thumb their noses at Him. The *Qur'an* repeatedly threatens terrible punishments (primarily in the afterlife) for unbelievers and evildoers. On the other hand, Allah is also merciful. If a believer sins and yet sincerely turns to Allah for mercy, that believer has nothing to fear. But at the same time, if an individual is only saying that he trusts and follows Allah, while secretly denying Allah's lordship, or is not truly repentant, Allah has no trouble seeing through such lies, and the terrible punishment will follow. The Devil is constantly at large, causing as much evil as possible, but in the Day of Judgment, God will separate those who are true believers from those who have gone astray, and the believers will join God in a life of eternal pleasantness in Paradise. This is the primary message of Islam. Simple and direct.

Belief and unbelief are seen as matters of the individual heart, not something that can be forced, although it can be encouraged through preaching and through social pressure. But belief can be feigned. This situation creates a certain amount of ambiguity over who exactly counts as an unbeliever – an “infidel”. From a very strict point of view, someone who sees themselves as a Muslim, but who repeatedly sins grievously, might be labeled an “infidel” – an unbeliever. From a more liberal and commonly accepted point of view, the standards are less strict – perhaps all one needs to do is to sincerely recognize Allah at

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<sup>16</sup>From the translation by Ahmed Ali. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1988.

some level, and accept Muhammad's legitimacy as Allah's ultimate prophet. But even from a fairly strict point of view, a devout Christian or committed Judaist need not count as an "infidel", for these individuals do accept the lordship of Allah and worship Him. As far as I can tell, in the *Qur'an* the main meaning of "infidel" is the unrepentant sinner who refuses to acknowledge Allah's rule even while knowing of Allah, or the idol worshiper who does not worship Allah but instead worships idols.

All this is important for contemporary relationships between Islam and other religions. Uneducated militant Muslims and non-Muslims who have heard that Islam condemns infidels and authorizes harsh treatment of infidels tend to misunderstand what an infidel is. It is, for example, often thought that someone who is Christian or a Judaist would automatically count as an infidel under the *Qur'an*. I think myself that is a mistaken view of what the *Qur'an* says. However, these scholarly points can easily be lost in today's world of suspicion between the West and the Muslim world, and it is quite possible that many militant Muslims do not see things this way. That is, it is quite possible that many militant Muslims think that all non-Muslims are infidels, and thus may be treated harshly.

In this connection it might be of some interest to note that contemporary Muslim "fundamentalists" sometimes condemn the leaders of predominantly Muslim countries as "infidels", despite the outward protestations of those leaders that they are indeed Muslims. For example, Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader, has been quoted as saying publicly that Saddam Hussein, the long-time dictator of Iraq, recently ousted by joint American and British military action, is an "infidel". Presumably, what is going on here is a repeat of the old idea that someone who sins grievously but who claims to be a Muslim is really a hypocrite, and an unbeliever. American political leaders who feared an alliance between Hussein and al-Qaeda did not take this talk seriously, or if they did, they kept it quiet because it undermined their justification for ousting Hussein.

Quite naturally, all of this connects with a simple idea: if you truly accept the lordship of Allah in your life, you will live in accord with Allah's will, to the best of your ability. The *Qur'an* and the *hadith* literature present to the Muslim a picture of what that will of Allah is. This is where the important behavioral component of Islam comes from. We will discuss details later, because there is some disagreement about the details – for example, with respect to keeping women covered up in public. So, before looking at the details of Islamic law, let's look at a summary of the basics of the Islamic worldview:

- Absolute monotheism. Total rejection of all forms of idolatry.
- God (Allah) is creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe, almighty, just, but also merciful. The picture seems quite similar to that presented in the Old Testament.
- Personal peace is found by submission of one's life to God.
- Eternal damnation in a place of torment awaits those who reject God.
- God's mercy and forgiveness are available to those who sincerely turn to God in faith, which seems to mean making a sincere commitment to live in God's way and honestly communing with God in prayer. (In actual practice, this often seems to get watered down to following certain rituals and formulas, but mere ritual and formula do not seem to me to be what *al-Qur'an* is talking about.)
- Emphasis on living according to God's will as revealed in the Bible (such as in the Ten Commandments) but primarily in *al-Qur'an* and in the life and sayings of Muhammad. A matter for debate: the extent to which Islam is constituted

*entirely* by how one lives, without regard to one's inner devotion to God. (There have been some Islamic clerics who have advocated the latter view.)

- God will reward the faithful with an eternal life of extreme pleasantness in communion with God in Paradise after the Day of Judgment. Martyrs and other specially favored people go to Paradise immediately. E.g., Jesus is said to have never died, because he was such a favored prophet that God saved him from his enemies by taking him directly to Paradise.
- God sent many prophets to spread His word before Muhammad, such as Moses and the great Jewish prophets, including Jesus. But the completion of the revelation comes with Muhammad, and now nothing more is needed except to understand the revelation found in Muhammad's recitations and life.
- God's way of living rejects materialism and all other forms of idolatry, it requires the people of God to concern themselves with social justice and charity, and it includes various important rules regarding the institution of marriage and crime control.
- God's way of living requires constant defensive struggle against the forces of evil within oneself and in the world that seek to overcome the truth. (This is *jihad*, to be discussed later.)

Here are a few less central traditional Islamic views, of special interest in connection with the relationship between Islam and Judaism and Christianity:

- The Old Testament contains much that is true about God, but the Jews corrupted the message to give themselves the role of chosen people. The New Testament contains some good material about God, but the Christians corrupted the message by inserting materials that represent Jesus as divine. Jesus was not divine; he was a man who was an especially potent prophet, delivering God's message to humankind.
- Despite the theological errors of the Christians and the Jews, they share with Muslims the Hebrew Scriptures ("the Book") as sacred (especially the Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures), and so there is an important shared common ground.

This summary of Islamic ideas applies equally to the Shi'ite and Sunni traditions. Those traditions differ in terms of organization and tribal loyalties, but not in terms of basic doctrines.

### **Islamic law**

Generally speaking, Islam does not focus on the nature of Allah, nor on elaborate conceptualizations of how humans and God may be reconciled. Instead, it focuses on how the life of one at peace in submission to God should be lived. This picture of the individual life of submission to the will of Allah is known as Islamic law, or shari'a law. For the everyday Muslim, Islam requires following whatever aspects of shari'a fall within their consciousness, with the understanding that shari'a law comes directly from Allah. Those who count as believers, then, will want to follow the shari'a law, either out of fear of punishment by Allah or out of devotion to Allah.

Islamic fundamentalists make a great deal out of shari'a law, typically insisting that it now become the sole legal code in Muslim countries. So, it is important to understand what exactly this law is like.<sup>17</sup>

The term Shari'a applies to much more than law in the strictly legal sense. It includes the details of ritual, as well as a whole range of customs and manners, although local customary laws are also recognized. Shari'a means literally 'the way to a watering place': the Quranic use of the term suggestively combines the notions of a vital means of sustenance in this world and access to the divine realm of the world to come. The law is there both for the purpose of upholding the good of society and for helping human beings attain salvation. Interpretations of the law may vary in accordance with time and place, but the Shari'a itself is considered to be a timeless manifestation of the will of God, subject neither to history nor circumstance.

Much of Shari'a law developed rather quickly in the three centuries after Muhammad's death. It was based on about 63 specific verses from *al-Qur'an*, plus inferences from about another 550 verses, on the developing *hadith* literature, on traditions that were thought to trace back to Muhammad, and on the religious insights of the Muslim leaders who organized it. Ultimately, community consensus based on these factors was used as the deciding determinant for what the law requires. Thus, Islamic law – i.e., shari'a – is not to be found as a set of writings dictated by God or an angel to Muhammad. Instead, it is the product of development within the Islamic community. Perhaps that would come as a surprise to many relatively uneducated Muslims today, who are simply told that the shari'a law is the Muslim way, determined by God. (Lack of reliable religious education is a serious problem within Islam. There are many legitimate Islamic scholars, but there is not an effective method for teaching the results.)

From the *Qur'an* itself, one can gather that God prohibits the eating of certain foods such as pork, and the drinking of wine. One can also derive some ideas about marriage (such as the rule that a man may have up to four wives if he can treat them all fairly) and what counts as basic criminal behavior and how it should be punished. The *hadith* literature contains much more detail, but is not consistent, and so requires considerable discussion and interpretation before a consensus on a legal system can be obtained. Once consensus within an Islamic community was reached, a *hadith* of the Prophet was used to justify its legitimacy: "My community will never agree upon an error." For example, on the basis of consensus (not on the basis of *al-Qur'an* or *hadith*) circumcision for males became the general rule, and in some communities female "circumcision" also became accepted practice.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The remaining quotations on shari'a law come from Ruthven, Chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup>You may have heard of the Islamic practice, followed in limited, mostly "backward" regions of the Islamic world, of female circumcision. The basic idea appears to me to be the limitation or elimination of sexual pleasure for women, so as to prevent them from promoting sexual contact with anyone other than their husbands. To accomplish this

Gradually, a more or less consistent set of principles emerged as the core of shari'a, with considerable latitude for local customs. This core was seen as deriving from Muhammad's own practice, as represented in the most reliable *hadith* literature. The legal scholars were essentially then discouraged from rocking the boat, and the shari'a became more or less fixed in place by the year 1000 or so. Traditionalist and fundamentalist Muslims see no need to update it even now, since it has taken on the status of God's law.

What does the core of the shari'a require? Some of it has already been mentioned – no adultery, men are limited to four wives, no alcohol drinking, no pork eating. But there is much more. Women are required to dress modestly so as not to arouse men sexually (what modest dress means is open to local debate). In some versions of the shari'a, women are also not to be in situations in mixed company without their husbands or male guardians. There is the matter of divorce procedures (in which men have the distinct upper hand), and rules of inheritance. There are penalties for adultery, murder, theft, and homosexual behavior (which is punishable by death). There is a requirement to pay taxes to support the poor, and a prohibition against charging interest on a loan (probably motivated by the social situation in which only the wealthy made loans to poor people, and charging interest amounted to creating indentured servanthood). To me, one of the more interesting features of the law is something we now take for granted in the US: in order to be punished for a crime, there is a requirement that people be convicted in a formal proceeding in which evidence is offered and testimony given before the judges determine a verdict. But also it is significant that there are no provisions at all for anything like corporations or public bodies like municipalities. The law is all about individuals and their obligations to each other and to society, and ultimately to God.

There are, however, some rules about how groups of Muslims should behave. Muslims have the obligation to defend the Muslim community against attack, but they are not to wage aggressive wars. Defensive wars are acceptable, and strong violence in defense of the Islamic community is allowed. This principle does not have the force of law, but is clearly stated in *al-Qur'an*. Of course, there is often debate about what constitutes a defensive war. The US invasion of Iraq was represented by the US government as a defensive war, but hardly anyone in the Muslim world sees it that way. The original expansive raiding conducted by Muslim tribes against their neighbor tribes can hardly be seen as defensive by an objective observer, but those Muslims might have tried to say they felt threatened by their neighbors and so needed to protect themselves from potential trouble. Militant anti-Western Muslims today see themselves engaged in a defensive war against the US and Israel.

Although the Sunnis agreed with each other a thousand years ago to stop developing new interpretations and versions of shari'a, the Shi'ites were not party to that agreement. Accordingly, Shi'ites still remain at least theoretically open to the possibility of producing new interpretations and additions by using careful logical procedures that build upon the existing shari'a. It is not acceptable that each individual Muslim should develop his own version of the law. So, senior clerics are to practice careful logical analysis, and each

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“circumcision”, the clitoris is damaged or cut off. “Genital mutilation” might be a better term. The practice is not now common in Islam, except in limited regions among the lower classes.

ordinary Muslim is to place himself under the guidance of one such cleric. A concrete example of recent Shi'ite claims to be able to develop new interpretations comes out of Iran, when the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini in the early 1980's openly stated that he was close enough to God to be able to add to the shari'a for Iran. Presumably, the openness of the Shi'ite approach could prove to be very helpful in adapting to the modern world. It also lends itself to abuse of clerical power.

But even for the Sunnis, there is more than one version of shari'a, because at the time of the consensus to stop developing new versions, there were already at least four main schools of shari'a thought. However, given that any flexibility within these schools supposedly ended a thousand years ago, Sunni Muslim activists who want to make Islam relevant to modern issues have been doing an end run around the Sunni religious establishment, using their own political skill and rhetorical abilities to gather supporters for their causes, without much regard to how any of this fits with traditional shari'a. Although they always claim to be wanting to reinstitute the shari'a, they are not generally experts on it, and are not interested in the finer points of traditional legal scholarship.

The shari'a law is seen as the whole of what is needed to guide Islamic life. There is not a distinction to be made between the law and the code of morality not governed by the law – it is all shari'a.

Not everyone agrees that the traditional shari'a is workable in a large, modern society. Some point to its lack of ability to speak about corporations and public bodies. Others suggest that it requires far too much proof before a conviction can be obtained (for example, adultery is supposed to be proved only by the eyewitness testimony of four persons). Still others complain that the commercial world has changed so much in the last thousand years that the law needs serious rethinking. And, of course, there is the matter that the original Sunni shari'a came in four flavors; there is no one existing set of rules that are agreed upon throughout the Muslim world as being the correct set. There has always been local variation, as noted above, and that variation continues today. Should an adulteress be stoned to death in public? Some say shari'a law requires it; some say it does not. Should women be covered in public from head to toe, except for the hands? Or may the face show? And so on.

### **Islam, Shari'a law, and the place of women**

Islamic fundamentalists generally urge that shari'a law (in whatever version they prefer) become the sole legal framework within Muslim countries. One way of understanding what this would mean in practice is to look at the place of women in Islam, for two reasons. One reason is that the place of women in Islam today is contested by insiders, and misunderstood by outsiders. The other reason is that looking at this important question provides a more concrete understanding of what shari'a is like. I will let Ruthven explore this topic for us.<sup>19</sup>

No subject is more fraught with controversy than the relation of women and Islam. On one side of the debate there exists the widespread perception that the faith oppresses and even persecutes women; at the other there are arguments

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<sup>19</sup>Ruthven, Chapter 5.

about cultural authenticity, about the rights of women to assert themselves in ways that differ from the modes of female self-assertion current in non-Muslim societies. The issue is complicated by the interaction of history, religion, culture, and politics. Historically the patriarchal family and the extended networks of kinship connected with it have proved to be among the most durable social structures in Muslim societies, far more durable than structures built around professional association or class interest. The role of religion in sustaining these structures is not entirely clear. Islamic law privileges the family over other institutions: the laws of inheritance, favouring males over females, are written in the Quran along with other discriminatory provisions, such as the testamentary inferiority of females in certain court proceedings. The law, however, is not always a reliable guide to actual social practice: slavery and concubinage, widely practised in pre-colonial times, are also the subject of detailed legal provisions and though permitted under the Shari'a, both have disappeared (in theory if not always in practice) from Muslim societies....

Protection of the patriarchal family and the symbolic capital it holds in the shape of female chastity is deeply embedded in the semantics of Islam....Restrictions on women are intimately bound up with notions of the sacred.... But an obsession with gender and status and its corollary, the assertion of masculine power through violence, is by no means exclusively Islamic. The same patriarchal assumptions are found in non-Muslim Mediterranean societies as well as others further afield. Conversely there are Muslim communities in West Africa and south-east Asia where matrilineal systems of ownership and inheritance predominate. All of this calls into question the view that Islamic texts and the values they enshrine are of themselves responsible for types of behaviour underpinning male supremacism. At the same time there can be no doubt that the public and symbolic role of women lies at the heart of the Islamist discourse. In one polemic after another Islamist writers contrast the virtuous Muslim woman to her Western or Westernized counterpart – naked, unchaste, and corrupt, a potent source of ... strife.

#### *Women and the Shari'a*

As with other politically charged issues in contemporary Islam the debate surrounding the veil is fuelled by diverging perspectives upon an exemplary past. Traditionalists, most of them men, argue that the Prophet of Islam greatly improved the position of the Arabian women of his time, guaranteeing them basic rights in marriage that were denied to the women of the time of ignorance.... Meccan suras of the Quran refer with abhorrence to the custom of female infanticide and the neglect of widows and orphans. After Islam, women were given guaranteed rights of inheritance under the protective umbrella of the family. A woman's husband was obligated to provide for her and her children. Although polygyny (one man and a plurality of wives) was permitted the man was limited to four wives, each of whom had to be treated equally. No spiritual inequality is implied.

The Quran explicitly addresses itself to females as well as males and morally women will be as answerable for their actions on the Day of Judgement as men.

That said, however, there are particular verses which testify to the legal inferiority of women. A sister shares only half the portion of her brothers under the Quranic laws of inheritance – the assumption being that her husband will maintain her. A husband may physically chastise a recalcitrant or disobedient wife as a final resort when other measures have failed. In certain legal proceedings a woman's testimony is only worth half that of a man: it is assumed that she will be unfamiliar with business matters and that she will need a friend to jog her memory. In the context of seventh-century Arabia these Quranic rubrics are not necessarily incompatible with the argument that Islam substantially improved the status of women, not least by improving their security in marriage and property. Modern [Muslim] feminists wishing to move beyond these positions, however, face a theological obstacle. As the unalterable speech of God the Quran is deemed to be non-negotiable: for the majority of Muslims, the spirit is firmly anchored in the letter. To argue that modern conditions demand an end to the Quran's discriminatory provisions is to challenge the dogma that the text is fixed for eternity. Feminist writers are forced by the logic of their position to de-couple the text from the spirit in favour of a flexible doctrine that leads inevitably to the recontextualization of Islam's holy book. The issue of women's rights is inexorably caught up in the issue of modernism.

As modernists<sup>20</sup> see it, the Quran was revealed at a specific time and in a specific social context. Their task is to reinterpret the spirit of its provisions in the light of modern realities. The difficulty facing modernists is that those who take the text at face value, refusing to deconstruct it to suit current social trends or fashions, are often closer to its original meaning and purpose. To take a well-known example, the verses allowing polygyny require that each wife be treated equally. Traditionalists interpreted equality in legalistic terms: the right of each wife to her own household, to equality of material provision. Modernists undermine the whole institution by adding an emotional and psychological dimension to the notion of equality, arguing that since no man can be expected to be equally emotionally involved with all his wives, polygyny is effectively ruled out. ...

If theory is sometimes harsher than practice in upholding marital fidelity, the converse can apply with regard to inheritance. In many Muslim lands women have been systematically denied their inheritance rights under Islamic law, either by family pressures or by legal devices such as the family *waqf* or trust. Marriage between first cousins, permitted under Islamic law, is often converted into a positive injunction, with girls obliged to marry their first cousins. The aim of such customs has been to keep property in the patriarchal family, countering the

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<sup>20</sup>These would be what I term "liberal reformers".

distributive effects of the laws of inheritance which allow women to inherit a portion of their parents' wealth. ...

### *Marriage and Divorce*

Marriage is positively enjoined in Islam, and young people are urged to marry with the explicit objective of avoiding exposure to sexual temptation. ...Under the Shari'a the marriage contract ...is a legal contract sanctioned by the divine law. ... According to most legal authorities the woman's ...guardian (usually her father) enters into the marriage on her behalf and most agree that a virgin may be forced to marry a man of her father's choice. Only the Shi'is view the woman 'as a full legal entity coequal with her male counterpart'. A Muslim woman's interest is supposed to be secured by the...dowry provided by her husband, a sum of money or its equivalent in household goods and chattels, which remains in her possession should her husband initiate divorce.

The husband has the right of divorce by *talaq* – repudiation or unilateral declaration. He must pronounce the formula 'I divorce you' three times; the first two declarations are followed by the so-called *idda*, or waiting period of three menstrual cycles to ensure that the woman is free from pregnancy, or, if pregnant, to ensure the husband's paternity. During this period family and friends are encouraged to effect a reconciliation. If this fails the third declaration finalizes the divorce, without recourse to a court. ... Muslim men are permitted to marry non-Muslim women from the People of the Book – i.e. Jews and Christians. The reverse does not apply. ...

### *Temporary Marriage*

Patriarchal assumptions pervade the Shari'a as interpreted by most traditionalists. A man's right to sexual satisfaction is divinely instituted: the wife does not have the right to refuse her husband's sexual demands. Among the Twelver Shi'a men's sexual privileges are taken a stage further, with the temporary marriage contract..., which may be signed for a fixed period of time ranging from one hour to ninety-nine years. While critics see the institution as a form of legalized prostitution, leading figures in the Islamic Republic of Iran have actively promoted it, arguing that it constitutes 'an ethically and morally superior alternative to the "free" relations between the sexes prevalent in the West'.

### *Women in Social and Religious Life*

In the classical traditions the positive value of sexuality is affirmed, but it is also perceived as dangerous and potentially destructive of the social order determined by God. ... The sense that good social order is contingent on regulating sexuality – particularly female sexuality – becomes institutionalized. The seclusion of women is justified by fear of female sexual power....

Gender differences are strongly emphasized, God having created humans male and female, and any aspect of behaviour in dress or comportment that clouds the

distinction is discouraged or forbidden. Homosexuality, in this view, is a major sin, 'a reversal of the natural order, a corruption of man's sexuality and a crime against the rights of females'. Men should grow beards in order to distinguish themselves from infidels. ...

Apart from her husband, if she is married, a woman's social circle must be confined, according to traditional interpretations of the law, to female friends and...those male members of her extended family whom she cannot marry by law. ... Among Muslims in south east Asia there are no traditions of seclusion and elements of matrilineal customs survive even in pious communities.

Some Muslim countries today overtly employ mixed systems of law, incorporating some elements of shari'a and some elements of locally-devised rules. Malaysia, for example, uses *sharia* for family law and secular approaches for criminal law.

A properly trained Muslim scholar/leader can issue a formal opinion, termed a *fatwah*, about how a good Muslim would behave in a specific situation. But there is no formal certification process for Sunni Muslims to determine who is qualified to issue a *fatwah*, and even for Shi'ite Muslims, where there is a formal process to determine who is a qualified leader (an Ayatollah), individual Muslims don't necessarily agree with the opinions that are issued. So, the situation is something like that in American Protestantism, in which people switch loyalties if they don't agree with a particular preacher, or American Catholicism, in which individuals may go their own way despite what the Pope may say. In a country in which shari'a has legal standing, however, the rulings of legally established Islamic courts will have the force of law.

There is a big difference between being an Islamic state and being a Muslim country. A Muslim country is simply a country in which most of the citizens are Muslims (whether or not they are practicing Muslims). The European country of Albania, for example, is a Muslim country (in the ethnic sense of "Muslim"), but it is not an Islamic state. What it means exactly to be an Islamic state is a contested concept, but roughly speaking in order for a country to be an Islamic state at a minimum it should be ruled according to Islamic law. However, Islamic law by itself does not specify how the government is chosen, and leaves out many other details; so it will need to be supplemented in order to create a modern nation-state. Iran is the only example of a prominent nation-state that is trying to be an Islamic state top to bottom. (Afghanistan under the brief Taliban rule was intended as well to become an Islamic state.) Iran is an interesting ongoing experiment in mixing shari'a with many modern additions, such as an elected parliament, while still claiming no constitution except *al-Qur'an*. So, in theory anyway, Iran is a theocracy – a modern nation-state ruled by God.

### **The structure of Islam today**

The split between Sunni and Shi'ite forms of Islam goes back to quarrels over how the leadership of the early successors of Muhammad should be selected, and that split actually led to a considerable amount of violence within the movement. It is important, though, to recall that the split had little to do with doctrines or practices, and that is still largely the case. However, the split over leadership has produced a different social structure for the

continuing leadership of the Shi'ites, that could affect the shape of the debate over reform and fundamentalism within Islam.

There is no 'church' in Islam, no formally instituted body empowered to supervise or dictate the religious agenda, to articulate an 'official' Islamic view comparable to that of the Papacy or the appointed or elected leadership of Protestant denominations. ... [R]eligious authority [is] entrusted to the *'ulama*..., a class of scholars...interpreting and administering the divine law according to complex rules developed in the academies. ... Mass education policies undertaken by most post-colonial governments have led to a relative decline in the prestige and authority of the *'ulama* as graduates with mainly secular educational backgrounds forge their own interpretations of Islam's sacred texts, short-circuiting the traditional body of scholarship. Alternatively, in countries which have been less subject to modernizing influences, such as Afghanistan or the rural parts of Pakistan, *'ulama* or aspiring *'ulama* may seek to exercise power directly, oblivious of the modern world's complex realities. In either case, the crisis of intellectual authority is ultimately the same: the traditionally trained *'ulama* have failed to incorporate contemporary modernist or reformist thinking into their discourse. Activists seeking to 'Islamize' their societies, bringing them more closely into line with what they perceive to be Islamic law, ignore the centuries of nuanced and qualifying scholarship by which the *'ulama* reconciled the demands of the divine law with the realities of political power and the exigencies of everyday life.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the *'ulama*, who traditionally are to be the intellectual leaders of the movement, and who were commonly expected to have undergone serious training, there are the local leaders of an Islamic congregation or group of believers, referred to as "Imams". These men may be trained, or not, as the case might be, particularly among the Sunnis. Some are self-taught. (In some ways, this situation is similar to that of the independent Protestant Christian Bible churches in the U.S., in which a person can serve as a minister without any formal training or certification, so long as there are people willing to recognize him or her as leader.)

If Ruthven has it right, in the Sunni community today there is little in the way of leadership structure to promote modernized interpretations or to challenge traditional understanding. Institutionally, Sunni Islam does appear to me to be very traditional – its critics would say "stuck in the Middle Ages". One way to see fundamentalism within the Sunni movement is as a response to this "stuckness" – the fundamentalists are interested in making Islam respond to modern conditions, and they see the *'ulama* as out of touch with modern issues, and have little respect for them.

But for Shi'ites the leadership situation is different. The Shi'ite tradition recognizes a need for trained leaders who can speak with some authority, and indeed even be seen to speak for God in interpreting the Islamic law for new situations in potentially new ways. Shi'ite leadership is most prominent now in Iran, where a particular version of Shi'a Islam

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<sup>21</sup>Ruthven, pp. 9 -10.

rules the country. In Iran, the authority of the clergy is enhanced by the fact that they control the traditional religious taxes. This has resulted in religious endowments that own large quantities of property in Iran. Mashhad is a regional capital city of over one million inhabitants, but more than half of its property is owned by these endowments. Reformers in Iran who protest the influence of the entrenched clerics have this power structure to contend against.

However, none of this means that the Shi'i clerics necessarily agree with one another. Given that they have a recognized right to independently interpret Islam, there is always a real possibility of serious differences. The more hard-line clerics in Iran today have the upper hand, having found ways to outvote and outvoice those who disagree. The clerical establishment is self-perpetuating, since one may join its ranks only after sufficient training, and one can be advanced to the rank of Ayatollah and beyond to the rank of Grand Ayatollah only by sufficient consensus of the existing Ayatollahs. Many senior clerics in Iran nevertheless remain opposed to the active role the hard-line Ayatollahs have taken in Iranian politics. A large proportion of the younger population of Iran agrees, and remains restive under what they perceive to be corrupt and anti-democratic domination of the country's government by the hard-liners, who still control the military and the council that determines whether any law passed by the parliament is sufficiently Islamic to take effect.

In short, it appears that within the Shi'ite tradition there is more room at present within its structure for debate over what Islam should mean today. It is conceivable although unlikely that a sufficiently bold mullah – let's say, maybe, a Grand Ayatollah – could claim to be close enough to God to be able to issue a new interpretation of Islamic law that amounted to something genuinely different from the traditional interpretation. In fact, I have read seemingly reliable reports that Grand Ayatollah Khomeini (the former political strongman in Iran) made just such claims for himself when challenged over some of his fundamentalist policies.

### **Sufism**

Before moving on, it might be useful to note that another, very different, strain of Islam developed during the Golden Age. Some Muslims felt compelled to move away from the rather worldly concerns of their fellows which seemed to them to interfere with a life of devotion to Allah. Rather than being focused on the laws of Islam, or on success in the affairs of daily life, these Muslims sought an inner connection with Allah. It was not that they rejected the basic Islamic ideas about what rules of life to follow, but rather that these seemed not to be the heart of Islam. A deep, mystical connection to Allah through prayer, meditation, and spiritual devotion was far more important. Ultimately, the movement that emerged became known as Sufism (although this label was actually created by European non-Muslims), and some Sufis began even to reject the standard interpretations of Islamic law. Sufi missionaries apparently were responsible for spreading Islam far to the east, through Southeast Asia. The popularity of Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines today apparently owes much to the Sufi movement, even though these Muslims today identify with the Sunni brand of Islam. Sufism continues as a viable movement in various parts of the world, although viewed by traditional Muslims as a distinct religion, a heresy, not part of Islam.

Sufism certainly does not lend itself to anything like fundamentalism, because of its focus on personal spiritual connection to God, rather than on reacting to modern developments in the culture that others see as threats, and because of its tendency to avoid literalistic and legalistic approaches. Sufism is far less concerned with doctrine, law, and traditional scholarship, and far more concerned with meditation, quietude, and personal connection with God. It is far more interested in following the lead of individual charismatic spiritual guides than in implementing shari'a. Its origins may well not have been purely Islamic, since there is reason to believe that mystical tendencies among Christians, Zoroastrians, and others in the Middle East played a significant role in its formation.

When the public face of Islam in today's world is so often harsh, or legalistic, it may pay to remember that Islam has another, more spiritual side that helped give birth to Sufism.

## **Jihad**

In recent years, the news media have been filled with reports of Islamic militants issuing threats to wage *jihad* against the United States, or against the West, or against infidels more generally. These reports frequently translate *jihad* as meaning "Holy War". Because such reports connect emotionally with the fears of the public, it is important to get clear about the Islamic notion of *jihad*.

The word *jihad* simply means "struggle" or "endeavor". However, in the context of Islam, *jihad* is struggle against evil. It is the obligation of every faithful Muslim to engage in *jihad* at all times. This struggle may take place primarily within the heart of the individual, or within one's neighborhood. It may also take place on the grander scale of one tribe or nation against another. Thus, when President Bush announced that Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, was in the grip of an evil regime, and that the United States would take action to oust that regime because of its evil, if President Bush were a Muslim, he would have been announcing a *jihad* against the government of Iraq.

The struggle against evil is, according to Muhammad, primarily an individual matter, involving inner struggle against evil temptations. This inner struggle is sometimes referred to as the "greater *jihad*." When the struggle turns outward, it might turn violent, but is certainly not limited to violent, warlike action. It could be that one speaks out against evil in one's community – that would be *jihad*. Writing a letter to the editor to promote reform or root out corruption – that would be *jihad*. But, yes, when a group of Muslims work together to take violent action against a perceived evil force, then that is also *jihad*. Muhammad referred to this latter sort of *jihad* as the "lesser" type, although it is not clear that uneducated Muslims in the hands of radical preachers are aware of that.

In particular, *jihad* cannot legitimately mean simply a war against non-Muslims. But it can mean a war against a government or a nation perceived to be a major evil threat to the faithful. In the minds of many anti-Western Muslims, the United States is exactly such a threat because of its policy of supporting Israel against the Palestinians, and because of its attempts to culturally and militarily dominate the world, spreading non-Islamic values that promote materialism and socially destructive ideas of personal freedom, including sexual promiscuity that leads to the disintegration of the traditional family.

Built into the notion of this struggle against evil, whether personal or collective, inner or outer, is the idea that Allah's side will eventually win out, one way or another if the

faithful remain faithful in waging the battle. The believer who falls away and gives up the struggle will be punished. The community of the faithful will in the end, in God's own good time, prevail against the forces of evil. Islam will in some sense triumph because it is the will of Allah. However, this does not mean that Christians and Jews will be killed. It means that Allah's will eventually prevails, for in the struggle against evil, Allah cannot be defeated.

When it comes to violent defense of Islam and the side of Allah against the forces of evil, those faithful who are killed in the cause become martyrs, and are transported immediately into Paradise, without having to wait for Judgment Day at the end of the world like everyone else. In describing Paradise, *al-Qur'an* waxes poetic, promising flowing rivers, fresh fruit, and for the men, plentiful sex with virtuous virgins (presumably available for marriage). (Sura 55: 47 - 78.) In recruiting potential "martyrs" for suicide missions against the evil West, these images appear to be taken quite literally, as the ranks of the fundamentalists are of course filled with scriptural literalists.

### **Suggestions for further reading on Islam**

The following are in addition to the works by Ruthven and Zepp quoted extensively above. *al-Qur'an*, transl. by Ahmed Ali (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1984). John L. Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999).