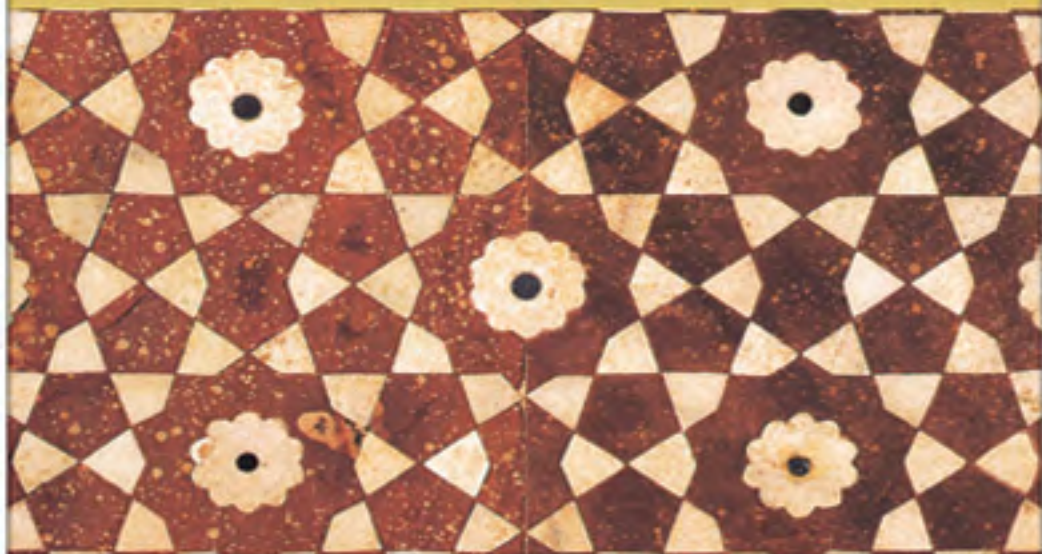


THE  
HEART  
OF  
ISLAM

*Enduring Values for Humanity*

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR



*O n e*

ONE GOD,  
MANY PROPHETS

*The Unity of Truth  
and the Multiplicity of Revelations*

*Say: He, God, is One, God the Self-Sufficient Besought of all.  
He begetteth not, nor is begotten, and none is like Him.*

*Quran 112: v.1-4<sup>1</sup>*



## GOD THE ONE

At the heart of Islam stands the reality of God, the One, the Absolute and the Infinite, the Infinitely Good and All-Merciful, the One Who is at once transcendent and immanent, greater than all we can conceive or imagine, yet, as the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam, attests, closer to us than our jugular vein. The One God, known by His Arabic Name, Allah, is the central reality of Islam in all of its facets, and attestation to this oneness, which is called *tawḥīd*, is the axis around which all that is Islamic revolves. Allah is beyond all duality and relationality, beyond the differences of gender and of all qualities that distinguish beings from each other in this world. Yet He is the source of all existence and all cosmic and human qualities as well as the End to Whom all things return.

To testify to this oneness lies at the heart of the credo of Islam, and the formula that expresses the truth of this oneness, *Lā ilāha illaʾllāh*, “There is no god but God,” is the first of two testifications (*shahādahs*) by which a person bears witness to being a Muslim; the second is *Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*, “Muḥammad is the messenger of God.” The oneness of God is for Muslims not only the heart of their religion, but that of every authentic religion. It is a reassertion of the revelation of God to the Hebrew prophets and to Christ, whom Muslims also consider to be their prophets, the revelation of the truth that “The Lord is one,” the reconfirmation of that timeless truth that is also stated in the Catholic creed, *Credo in unum Deum*, “I

believe in one God.” As the Quran states, “We have never sent a messenger before thee except that We revealed to him, saying, ‘There is no god but I, so worship Me’” (21:25). Like countless Muslims, when I read the names of the prophets of old in the Quran or in the traditional prayers, I experience them as living realities in the Islamic universe, while being fully conscious of the fact that they are revered figures in Judaism and Christianity. I also remain fully aware that they are all speaking of the same God Who is One and not of some other deity.

The One God, or Allah, is neither male nor female. However, in the inner teachings of Islam His Essence is often referred to in feminine form and the Divinity is often mentioned as the Beloved, while the Face He has turned to the world as Creator and Sustainer is addressed in the masculine form. Both the male and the female are created by Him and the root of both femininity and masculinity are to be found in the Divine Nature, which transcends the duality between them. Furthermore, the Qualities of God, which are reflected throughout creation, are of a feminine as well as a masculine nature, and the traditional Islamic understanding of the Divinity is not at all confined, as some think, to a purely patriarchal image.

The Quran, which is the verbatim Word of God for Muslims, to be compared to Christ himself in Christianity, reveals not only the Supreme Name of God as Allah, but also mentions other “beautiful Names” of God, considered by traditional sources to be ninety-nine in number, Names revealing different aspects of the Divinity. The Quran states, “To God belong the most beautiful Names (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*). Call on Him thereby” (7:180). These Names are divided into those of Perfection (*Kamāl*), Majesty (*Jalāl*), and Beauty (*Jamāl*), the first relating to the

essential oneness of God Himself beyond all polarization and the last two to the masculine and feminine dimensions of reality *in divinis* (in the Divine Order). The Names of Majesty include the Just, the Majestic, the Reckoner, the Giver of Death, the Victorious, and the All-Powerful, and those of Beauty, the All-Merciful, the Forgiver, the Gentle, the Generous, the Beautiful, and Love. For Muslims the whole universe consists of the reflection in various combinations of the Divine Names, and human life is lived amid the polarizations and tensions as well as harmony of the cosmic and human qualities derived from these Names. God at once judges us according to His Justice and forgives us according to His Mercy. He is far beyond our reach, yet resides at the center of the heart of the faithful. He punishes the wicked, but also loves His creatures and forgives them.

The doctrine of God the One, as stated in the Quran, does not only emphasize utter transcendence, although there are powerful expressions of this truth such as *Allāhu akbar*, usually translated as “God is great,” but meaning that God is greater than anything we can conceive of Him, which is also attested by the apophatic theology of both the Catholic and Orthodox churches as well as by traditional Judaism. The Quran also accentuates God’s nearness to us, stating that He is closer to us than ourselves and that He is present everywhere, as when it states: “Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115). The traditional religious life of a Muslim is based on a rhythmic movement between the poles of transcendence and immanence, of rigor and compassion, of justice and forgiveness, of the fear of punishment and hope for mercy based on God’s love for us. But the galaxy of Divine Names and the multiplicity of Divine Qualities reflected in the cosmos and within the being of men and women do not distract the Muslim for

one moment from the oneness of God, from that Sun before whose light all multiplicity perishes. Striving after the realization of that oneness, or *tawhīd*, is the heart of Islamic life; and the measure of a successful religious life is the degree to which one is able to realize *tawhīd*, which means not only oneness, but also the integration of multiplicity into Unity.

Moreover, since there is no official sacerdotal authority in Islam like the magisterium in Roman Catholic Christianity, the authenticity of one's faith in Islam has by and large been determined by the testification of *tawhīd*, while the degree of inward realization of this truth has remained a matter to be decided by God and not by external authorities. This has been the general norm in Islamic history, but there have also been exceptions, and there are historical instances when a particular group or political authority has taken it upon itself to determine the authenticity or lack thereof of the belief in *tawhīd* of a particular person or school. But there has never been an Inquisition in Islam, and there has been greater latitude in the acceptance of ideas, especially mystical and esoteric ones, than in most periods of the history of Western Christianity before the penetration of modernism into Christian theology itself.

Now, although Islam is based on the reality of God, the One, in His Absoluteness and Suchness, it also addresses humanity in its essential reality, in its suchness. Man, in the traditional sense of the term corresponding to *insān* in Arabic or *homo* in Greek and not solely the male, is seen in Islam not as a sinful being to whom the message of Heaven is sent to heal the wound of the original sin, but as a being who still carries his primordial nature (*al-fiṭrah*) within himself, although he has forgotten that nature now buried deep under layers of negligence. As the Quran states:

“[God] created man in the best of stature (*ahsan al-taqwīm*)” (95:4) with an intelligence capable of knowing the One. The message of Islam is addressed to that primordial nature. It is a call for recollection, for the remembrance of a knowledge kneaded into the very substance of our being even before our coming into this world. In a famous verse that defines the relationship between human beings and God, the Quran, in referring to the precosmic existence of man, states, “‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes, we bear witness’” (7:172). The “they” refers to all the children of Adam, male and female, and the “yes” confirms the affirmation of God’s Oneness by us in our pre-eternal ontological reality.

Men and women still bear the echo of this “yes” deep down within their souls, and the call of Islam is precisely to this primordial nature, which uttered the “yes” even before the creation of the heavens and the earth. The call of Islam therefore concerns, above all, the remembrance of a knowledge deeply embedded in our being, the confirmation of a knowledge that saves, hence the soteriological function of knowledge in Islam. Islam addresses the human being not primarily as will, but as intelligence. If the great sin in Christianity is disobedience, which has warped the will, the great sin in Islam is forgetfulness and the resulting inability of the intelligence to function in the way that God created it as the means to know the One. That is why the greatest sin in Islam and the only one God does not forgive is *shirk*, or taking a partner unto God, which means denying the Oneness of God, or *tawhīd*.

This direct address from God, the One, to each human being in its primordial state requires total surrender to the Majesty of the Absolute, before whom ultimately nothing can in fact exist. In an ordinary sense it means the surrender



of ourselves to God, and in the highest sense it means the awareness of our nothingness before Him, for, as the Quran says, “All that dwells in the heavens and the earth perishes, yet there abideth the Face of thy Lord, Majestic, Splendid” (55:26–27). The very name of the religion, Islam, comes from this reality, for the Arabic word *al-islām* means “surrender” as well as the peace that issues from our surrender to God. In fact, Islam is the only major religion, along with Buddhism (if we consider the name of the religion to come from *Budd*, the Divine Intellect, and not the Buddha), whose name is not related to a person or ethnic group, but to the central idea of the religion. Moreover, Islam considers all authentic religions to be based on this surrender, so that *al-islām* means not only the religion revealed through the Quran to the Prophet Muḥammad, but all authentic religions as such. That is why in the Quran the prophet Abraham is also called *muslim*, that is, one who is in the state of *al-islām*.

True surrender is not, however, only concerned with our will. It must involve our whole being. A shallow understanding of surrender can lead to either a passive attitude, in which one does not strive in life as one should according to the promulgations of the religion, or to mistaking one’s own imperfect understanding of Islam for the truth and performing acts that are against God’s teachings while claiming that one is acting in surrender to God. Islam states that a person must be the perfect servant (*‘abd*) of God in the sense of following His commands. But since God has given us many faculties, including free will and intelligence, our surrender must be complete and total, not limited to only certain faculties. It must involve the whole of our being. Otherwise, hidden thoughts and emotions as well as false ideas can combine with a fallacious sense of external

surrender of one's will to God to produce acts in the name of religion that can have calamitous consequences.

Such acts have appeared from time to time historically and can be seen especially in this day and age, but they are deviations rather than the norm. The norm by which the vast majority of Muslims have lived over the ages has meant surrender to God with one's whole being, following the Divine Law and the ethical teachings of Islam to the extent possible, striving in life according to religious teachings to the extent of one's ability, and then being resigned to consequences that ensue and accepting what destiny has put before us. It is in this sense that the common Arabic saying *maktūb*, "It is written," marking the sign of resignation to a particular event or results of one's actions, must be understood. This surrender has certainly not meant either fatalism or an individualistic interpretation of Divine norms in the name of surrender. It has, on the contrary, led to an inward and outward striving combined with serenity that characterizes traditional patterns of Islamic life, in contrast to both modernistic and much of the so-called fundamentalist currents found in the Islamic world today.

#### CREATION OF THE WORLD AND OF HUMAN BEINGS

Since the One God is Infinite and Absolute as well as the Infinitely Good, He could not but create. His infinitude implies that He contains within Himself all possibilities, including that of negating Himself, and this possibility had to be realized in the form of creation. Moreover, as St. Augustine also stated, it is in the nature of the good to give of itself, and the Infinitely-Good could not but radiate the reality that constitutes the world and, in fact, all the worlds.

But creation or radiation implies separation, and it is this ontological separation from the Source of all goodness that constitutes evil. One might say that evil is nothing but separation from the Good and privation, although it is real on its own level, in a sense as real as our own existential level on which we find it.<sup>1</sup> And yet the good belongs to the pole of being and evil to that of nonbeing.

Throughout the history of Islam there have been numerous profound metaphysical and theological discussions concerning the question of evil, as there have been in other religions, especially Christianity. But in contrast to the modern West, in which many people have turned away from God and religion because they could not understand how a God who is good could create a world in which there is evil, in the Islamic world this question of theodicy has hardly ever bothered the religious conscience of even the most intelligent people or turned them away from God. The emphasis of the Quran upon the reality of evil on the moral plane combined with the sapiential and theological explanations of this question have kept men and women confronted with this problem in the domain of faith. The strong emphasis in Islam on the Will of God has also played a role in resigning Muslims to the presence of evil in the world (which they must nevertheless combat to the extent possible), even when they cannot understand the causes involved.

In any case, God has created the world, in which there is imperfection and evil, but the world itself is considered by the Quran to be good, a view corresponding to that found in the book of Genesis. And creation has a purpose, for, as the Quran says, "O Lord, Thou didst not create this [the world] in vain" (8:190). The deepest purpose of creation is explained by a famous *ḥadīth qudsī* (a sacred saying of the

Prophet not part of the Quran in which God speaks in the first person through the mouth of the Prophet): “I was a hidden treasure. I loved to be known. Therefore, I created the creation so that I would be known.” The purpose of creation therefore is God’s love for the knowledge of Himself realized through His central agent on earth, humanity. For a human being to know God is to fulfill the purpose of creation. Moreover, God loved to be known. Hence, the love of God and by God permeates the whole universe, and many Islamic mystics of Sufis over the ages have spoken of that love to which Dante refers at the end of the *Divine Comedy* when he speaks of “the love that moves the sun and the stars.”

This sacred *ḥadīth* (*ḥadīth qudsī*) also speaks of God’s being “a hidden treasure,” which is a symbol of the truth that everything in the universe has its origin in the Divine Reality and is a manifestation of that Reality. Everything in the total cosmos both visible and invisible is a theophany, or manifestation, of the Divine Names and Qualities and is drawn from the “treasury” of God. The Wisdom of God thus permeates the universe, and Muslims in fact see the cosmos as God’s primordial revelation. Everything in the universe, in reflecting God’s Wisdom, also glorifies Him, for, as the Quran says, “There is nothing but that it hymns His praise” (17:44). In fact, the very existence of beings is nothing but their invocation of God’s Names, and the universe itself is nothing but the consequence of the breathing upon the archetypal realities of all beings in the Divine Intellect of the Breath of the Compassionate (*nafas al-Raḥmān*). It is through His Name *al-Raḥmān*, which means the Infinitely-Good and also Merciful, that the universe has come into being. It is significant to note that much of the Quran is devoted to the cosmos and the world

of nature, which play an integral role in the traditional life of Muslims. All Islamic rites are harmonized with natural phenomena, and in general Muslims view the world of creation as God's first revelation, before the Torah, the Gospels, the Quran, and other sacred scriptures were revealed. That is why in Islam, as in medieval Judaism and Christianity, the cosmos is seen as a book in which the "signs of God," the *vestigia Dei* of Christian authors, are to be read.

The Islamic understanding of anthropogenesis, the creation of human beings, resembles those of Judaism and Christianity in many ways, but also differs on certain significant issues. In fact, there are also important differences between Judaism and Christianity when it comes to the question of original sin. As for Adam's original creation, the Quran speaks of God creating Adam from clay and breathing His Spirit into him, "And I breathed into him My Spirit" (15:29). The Quran continues:

And when thy Lord said unto the angels: "Verily! I am about to place a vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth," they said, "Wilt Thou place therein one who will bring corruption therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee?" He said: "Surely, I know that which ye know not."

And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: "Inform me of the names of these, if ye are truthful."

They said: "Be glorified! We have no knowledge save that which Thou hast taught us." (2:30-32)<sup>2</sup>

The angels were then asked by God to prostrate before Adam, and all did so except Iblis, that is, the Devil or Satan, who refused because of pride. God placed Adam and his

wife in paradise and permitted them to eat of the fruits there, except the fruit of the forbidden tree. But Satan “caused them to deflect therefrom,” and the Fall ensued. But a revelation was sent to Adam. He repented and became the first prophet as well as the father of humanity.

The Quranic account contains all the main features of the sacred anthropology of Islam and its view of the nature of men and women. First of all, God chose the human being as His vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth, which means that He has given human beings power to dominate the earth, but on the condition that they remain obedient to God, that is, being God’s servant, or *‘abd Allāh*. There are numerous Quranic references to this truth. The two primary features of being human are servanthood and vicegerency: being passive toward Heaven in submission to God’s Will, on the one hand, and being active as God’s agent and doing His Will in the world, on the other. Moreover, Adam was taught all the names, which means that God has placed within human nature an intelligence that is central and the means by which he can know all things. It also means that human beings themselves are the theophany, or visible manifestation, of all of God’s Names. There is in principle no limit to human intelligence in knowing the nature of things (the question of knowing the Divine Essence is a different matter) unless there is an obstacle that prevents it from functioning correctly. That is why Muslims believe that any normal and wholesome intelligence will be naturally led to the confirmation of Divine Oneness and are at a loss when rationalist skeptics from the West refuse to accept the One (most Muslims are unaware of the obstacles in the soul of such a skeptic that reduce the intelligence to analytical reason and prevent it from functioning in its fullness). Adam, the prototype of humanity, is superior to the angels by virtue of his knowledge of the names of all things

as well as by being the reflection of all the Divine Names and Qualities.

As for Iblīs, his rebellion comes from pride in considering his nature, which was made of fire, superior to that of Adam, who was made of clay. He refused to prostrate himself before Adam, because fire is a more noble element than earth or clay. He could not see the effect of the Spirit that God had breathed into Adam. Satan was therefore the first to misuse analogy, to try to replace intelligence with ordinary logical reasoning. His fall was thus also connected to the domain of knowledge. The lack of total knowledge on his part created the sense of pride, which in Islam, as in Christianity, is the source of all other vices.

The Quran mentions Adam's wife, but not her name. *Hadith* sources however confirm that her name was Ḥawwā', or Eve. In fact, the Islamic names for the first parents of humanity, Ādam and Ḥawwā', are the same as in Judaism and Christianity. The Quran, however, does not mention how she was created. Some traditional commentators have repeated the biblical account of her creation from Adam's rib, while other authorities have mentioned that she was created from the same clay from which God created Adam. It is important to note for the Islamic understanding of womanhood and women's roles in both religious and social life that, in contrast to the biblical story, Eve did not tempt Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Rather, they were tempted together by Iblīs and therefore Eve was not the cause of Adam's expulsion from paradise. He was also responsible; they shared in performing the act that led to their fall, and therefore both men and women are faced equally with its consequences. As far as the forbidden fruit is concerned, again, the Quran does not mention it explicitly, but according to traditional commentaries it was not an apple, as believed by Christians and Jews, but wheat.

The creation of human beings complements the creation of the cosmos and adds to the created order a central being who is God's vicegerent, capable of knowing all things, of dominating the earth, given the power to do good, but also to wreak havoc and, in fact, corrupt the earth. According to a famous *ḥadīth*, "God created man upon His form," although here form does not mean physical image, but rather the reflection of God's Names and Qualities. But human beings are also given the freedom to rebel against God, and Iblis can exercise power over them. The human being contains, in fact, all possibilities within himself or herself. The soul itself is a vast field in which the signs of God are manifested. As a Quranic verse states, "We shall show them our signs (*āyāt*) upon the horizons and within their souls until it becomes manifest unto them that it is the truth" (41:53). Therefore, in a sense, the human being is itself a revelation like the macrocosm.

It might be said that from the Islamic point of view creation and revelation are inseparable, and that there are in fact three grand revelations: the cosmos, the human state, and religions—all three of which Islam sees as "books." There is, first of all, the cosmic book to be read and deciphered. Then there is the inner book of the soul, which we carry within ourselves. And finally there are sacred scriptures, which have been sent by God through His Mercy to guide humanity throughout the ages and which are the foundations of various religions and keys for reading the other two books, that of the cosmos and that of the soul.

### MANY REVELATIONS, MANY PROPHETS

In the Islamic perspective, the oneness of God has as its consequence not the uniqueness of prophecy, but its multiplicity, since God as the Infinite created a world in which



there is multiplicity and this includes, of course, the human order. For Islam, revelation and prophecy are both necessary and universal. Humanity, according to the Quran, was created from a single soul, but then diversified into races and tribes, for, as the Quran states, “He created you [humanity] from a single soul” (39:6). The single origin of humanity implies the profound unity within diversity of human nature, and therefore religion based on the message of Divine Oneness could not have been only meant for or available to a segment of humanity. The multiplicity of races, nations, and tribes necessitates the diversity of revelations. Therefore, the Quran, on the one hand, asserts that “To every people [We have sent] a messenger” (10:48), and, on the other hand, “For each [people] We have appointed a Divine Law and a way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you concerning that wherein ye differed” (5:48). According to these and other verses, not only is the multiplicity of religions necessary, but it is also a reflection of the richness of the Divine Nature and is willed by God.

Religion (*dīn*), revelation (*wahy*), and prophecy (*nubuwwah*) have a clear meaning in the context of the Islamic worldview and therefore need to be carefully defined in the modern context, where all of these terms have become ambiguous in ordinary discourse. The closest word to the English term “religion” in Arabic is *dīn*, which is said by many to have been derived from the root meaning “to obey, submit, and humble oneself before God.” *Al-dīn* means religion in the vastest sense as the sacred norm into which the whole of life is to be molded. It is the total way of life grounded in teachings that have issued from God.

These teachings reach humanity through revelation, which means the direct conveying of a message from Heaven (revelation being understood apart from all the psychological entanglements it has acquired in much of modern Western religious thought). Revelation, moreover, must not be confused with inspiration (*ilhām*), which is possible for all human beings.

Islam sees revelation not as incarnation in the Hindu or Christian sense, but as the descent of the Word of God in the form of sacred scripture to a prophet. In fact, the Quran uses the term “Book” (*kitāb*) not only for the Quran, but also for all other sacred books and the totality of revelations. The Quran considers all revelations to be contained in that “archetypal book,” or *Umm al-kitāb* (literally, “the Mother Book”), and the sacred scriptures to be related in conveying the same basic message of the primordial religion of unity in different languages and contexts. As the Quran states, “We never sent a messenger save with the language of his people” (14:4). Even when the Quran states that “the religion with God is *al-islām*” (3:19) or similar statements, *al-islām* refers to that universal surrender to the One and that primordial religion contained in the heart of all heavenly inspired religions, not just to Islam in its more particular sense. There is, moreover, a criterion of truth and falsehood as far as religions are concerned, and the Quran’s confirmation of the universality of revelation does not mean that everything that has passed as religion yesterday or does so today is authentic. Throughout history there have been false prophets and religions, to which Christ also referred, as well as religions that have decayed or deviated from their original form.

Islam sees itself as heir to this long chain of prophets going back to Adam and believes all of them, considered to be 124,000 according to tradition, to be also its own. It

does not believe, however, that it has inherited their teachings through temporal and historical transmission, for a prophet owes nothing to anyone and receives everything from Heaven, but it does believe that its message bears the finality of a seal. Islam sees itself as at once the primordial religion, a return to the original religion of oneness, and the final religion; the Quran itself calls the Prophet of Islam the "Seal of Prophets." And, in fact, fourteen hundred years of history have confirmed Islam's claim, for during all that time there has not been another plenary manifestation of the Truth like the ones that brought about the births of Buddhism and Christianity, not to speak of the earlier major religions. The two characteristics of primordially and finality have bestowed upon Islam its trait of universality and the capability to absorb intellectually and culturally so much that came before it. It has also made spiritually alive the prophetic presences that preceded it, so that, for example, such figures as Abraham, Moses, and Christ play a much greater role in the spiritual universe of Islam than Abraham and Moses do in the Christian universe.

While speaking of the finality of the Islamic revelation for this cycle of human history, which will last until the eschatological events at the end of historic time, something must be said, from the Islamic point of view, about the "order" and "economy" of revelation. Muslims believe that each revelation takes place through the Divine Will, but also on the basis of a spiritual economy and is not by any means ad hoc. Each revelation fulfills a major function in human history seen from the religious point of view. For example, around the sixth to fifth century B.C. which also marks the transition from mythological time to historic time, a qualitative change took place in the march of time, which for Islam, as for Hinduism, is not simply linear. This

is the period when the myths of Homer and Hesiod recede as Greek history flowers and the stories of mythical Persian dynasties are left behind as the Persian Empire takes shape. From the human point of view, this qualitative change in the terrestrial life of humanity required new dispensations from Heaven, and from the metaphysical perspective, these new dispensations themselves marked the new chapter that was to begin in human history.

This period, which philosophers such as Karl Jaspers have called the Axial Age, was witness to the appearance of Confucius and Lao-Tze in China and the new crystallization of the primal Chinese tradition into Confucianism and Taoism, and the appearance of Shintoism in Japan and the beginning of the terrestrial life of the solar emperors, who marked the beginning of historical Japanese civilization. This age was also witness to the life of the Buddha, whose teaching spread throughout India and Tibet and soon transformed the religious life of East and Southeast Asia. At nearly the same time, we see the rise of Zoroaster, who established Zoroastrianism in Persia and whose teachings greatly influenced later religious life in western Asia. Finally, around the same time we have the rise of Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, which was central to the spiritual life of ancient Greece and from which Platonism was born. This remarkable cluster of figures, which also includes some of the Hebrew prophets, figures whom Muslims would call prophets, transformed the religious life of humanity, although the still living and viable religions of the earlier period such as Judaism and Hinduism survived. Moreover, this list of figures does not exhaust all the notable sages and prophets of the Axial Age.

One would think that the cycle of revelation would have been terminated in the Axial Age. But the decadence of the

Greek and Roman religions around the Mediterranean Basin and the weakening of the northern European religions created a vacuum that only a new revelation could fill. Therefore Christianity was revealed by God. Although originally a Semitic religion, providentially it soon became, to some extent, Hellenized, and Christ was transformed almost into an “Aryan” solar hero for the Europeans, who were destined to find the path of salvation through this new dispensation from Heaven. It certainly was no accident that in Europe Christianity remained strong and unified, while in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, destined to become part of the future “Abode of Islam,” it splintered into numerous small denominations fighting among themselves as well as against Byzantium.

This latter situation, added to the inner weakness of Zoroastrianism in the Persian Empire and certain other religions elsewhere, created another vacuum to be filled, this time by a new Semitic religion—Islam. Islam, like Judaism, remained faithful to its Semitic origin, but, like Christianity, was not confined to a particular ethnic group. Islam thus came to reassert the full doctrine of Divine Oneness on a universal scale after the Axial Age and the appearance of Christianity, placing in a sense the last golden brick in that golden wall that is revelation. With it, the structure of the wall became complete, and, as far as Muslims are concerned, although small religious movements may take place here and there, there is to be no plenary revelation after Islam according to the Divine Providence and the spiritual economy of God’s plans for present-day humanity. When asked how they know such a truth, Muslims point to the Quran itself and the fact that no previous revelation had ever made such an explicit claim. Being the final religion of this cycle, Islam is not only closely related to its sister

monotheisms, Judaism and Christianity, but also possesses an inward link to the religions of the Axial Age as well as to Hinduism. It is this link that made it easier for Islam than for Christianity to incorporate so much of the wisdom Hinduism and of the religions of the Axial Age, from Buddhism and Pythagoreanism to Zoroastrianism and even later to Confucianism, within its sapiential perspective.

Paradoxically, the insistence of Islam upon God as the One and the Absolute has had as its concomitant the acceptance of multiplicity of prophets and revelations, and no sacred scripture is more universalist in its understanding of religion than the Quran, whose perspective concerning the universality of revelation may be called “vertical triumphalism.” In contrast, in Christianity, because of the emphasis on the Triune God, God the One is seen more in terms of the relationality of the three Hypostases, what one might call “Divine Relativity”; the vision of the manifestation of the Divine then became confined to the unique Son and Incarnation, in whom the light of all previous prophets was absorbed. In Christianity the vision is that of the Triune God and a unique message of salvation and savior, hence *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church), whereas in Islam there is the One God and many prophets. Here is to be found the major difference between how Muslims have viewed Jews and Christians over the centuries and how Christians have regarded Jews and Muslims as well as followers of other religions. For Muslims, the Quran completes the message of previous sacred texts without in any way denigrating their significance. In fact, the Torah and the Gospels are mentioned by name as sacred scriptures along with the Quran in the text of the Quran. Likewise, although the Prophet terminates the long chain of prophecy, the earlier prophets lose none

of their spiritual significance. Rather, they appear in the Islamic firmament as stars, while the Prophet is like the moon in that Islamic sky.

## THE QURAN

The sacred scripture of Islam, known in Arabic by many names, of which the most famous is *al-Qur'ān*, “the Recitation,” is considered by all Muslims, no matter to which school they belong, as the verbatim revelation of God’s Word made to descend into the heart, soul, and mind of the Prophet of Islam through the agency of the archangel of revelation, Gabriel, or Jibra’īl in Arabic. Both the words and meaning of the text are considered to be sacred, as is everything else connected with it, such as the chanting of its verses or the calligraphy of its phrases. Muslims are born with verses of the Book, which Muslims call the Noble Quran, read into their ears, live throughout their lives hearing its verses and also repeating certain of its chapters during daily prayers, are married with the accompaniment of Quranic recitations, and die hearing it chanted beside them.

The Quran (also known as the Koran in English) is the central theophany of Islam, the fundamental source of its metaphysics, cosmology, theology, law, ethics, sacred history, and general worldview. In a way the soul of the traditional Muslim is like a mosaic made up of phrases of the Quran, which are repeated throughout life, such as the *bas-malah*, “In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful,” with which all legitimate acts begin and are consecrated; *alḥamdulī’Llāh*, “Praise be to God,” with which one terminates an act or event in the attitude of gratefulness; *inshā’a’Llāh*, “If God wills,” which accompa-

nies every utterance concerning the future, for the future is in God's Hands and nothing takes place save through His Will. Even the daily greeting of Muslims, *al-salāmu 'alaykum*, "Peace be upon you," which the Prophet taught to his companions as the greeting of the people of paradise, comes from the Quran. As some Western scholars of Islam have noted, there is perhaps no single book that is as influential in any religion as the Quran is in Islam.

To fully understand the significance of the Quran, a Westerner with a Christian background should realize that, although the Quran can in a sense be compared to the Old and New Testaments, a more profound comparison would be with Christ himself. In Christianity both the spirit and body of Christ are sacred, and he is considered the Word of God. The Quran is likewise for Muslims the Word of God (*kalimat Allāh*), and both its inner meaning, or spirit, and its body, or outer form, the text in the Arabic language in which it was revealed, are sacred to Muslims. Arabic is the sacred language of Islam and Quranic Arabic plays a role in Islam analogous to the role of the body of Christ in Christianity. Moreover, as Christians consume bread and wine as symbols of the flesh and blood of Christ, Muslims pronounce, using the same organ of the body, that is, the mouth, the Word of God in the daily prayers. The rationalist and agnostic methods of higher criticism applied by certain Western scholars to the text of the Quran, which was not compiled over a long period of time like the Old and the New Testaments, is as painful and as much a blasphemy to Muslims as it would be to believing Christians if some Muslim archeologists claimed to have discovered some physical remain of Christ and were using DNA analysis to determine whether he was born miraculously or was the son of Joseph.



In any case, for Muslims themselves, Sunni and Shī'ite alike, there is but a single text of the Quran consisting of 114 chapters of over 6,000 verses revealed to the Prophet of Islam in Mecca and Medina over the twenty-three years of his prophetic mission. As verses were received and then uttered by him, they would be memorized by companions, who were Arabs with prodigious memories. The verses were also written down by scribes. The order of the chapters of the Quran was also given by the Prophet through Divine command. During the caliphate of the third caliph, 'Uthmān, some twenty years after the death of the Prophet, as many of those who had memorized the Quran were dying in various battles, the complete text of the Quran was copied in several manuscripts and sent to the four corners of the Islamic world. Later copies are based on this early definitive collection.

It is said in Islam that God gives to each prophet a miracle corresponding to what was important in his time. Since magic was so significant in Egypt, God gave Moses the power to turn his staff into a serpent. Since medicine was such an important art at the time of Christ, God gave him the miracle of raising the dead to life. And since poetic eloquence was the most prized of all virtues for pre-Islamic Arabs, God revealed through the Prophet by far the most eloquent of all Arabic works. In fact, the greatest miracle of Islam is said to be the eloquence of the Quran. Its eloquence not only moved the heart and soul of those Arabs of the seventh century who first heard it, but also moves to tears Muslim believers throughout the world today, even those whose mother tongue is not Arabic, although Arabic is the language of daily prayers for all Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike. The grace, or *barakah* (corresponding both etymologically and in meaning to the Hebrew *barak*), of the text transcends its mental message and moves souls

toward God in much the same way that hearing Gregorian chant in Latin would for centuries in the West deeply affect even those who did not understand the Latin words. Of course, the same can be said for the Latin Mass itself, whose beautiful liturgy was of the deepest significance for some fifteen hundred years even for those Catholics who did not know Latin.

The Quran has many names, each revealing an aspect of its reality. It is *al-Qur'ān*, or “recitation,” which also means “gathering” or “concentration.” It is *al-Furqān*, or “discernment,” because it provides the criteria for discerning between truth and falsehood, goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness. It is *Umm al-kitāb*, the archetypal book containing the root of all knowledge, and it is *al-Hudā*, the guide for the journey of men and women toward God. For Muslims, the Quran is the source of all knowledge both outward and inward, the foundation of the Law, the final guide for ethical behavior, and a net with which the Divine Fisherman ensnares the human soul and brings it back to Unity.

The Quran contains several grand themes. First of all, it deals with the nature of reality, with the Divine Reality and Its relation to the realm of relativity. Second, the Quran says much about the natural world, and in a sense the Islamic sector of the cosmos participates in the Quranic revelation. Then the Quran contains many pages on sacred history, but the episodes of this history are recounted more for their significance as lessons for the inner life of the soul than as historical accounts of ages past. Sacred history in the Quran contains, above all, moral and spiritual lessons for us here and now.

The Quran also deals with laws for the individual and society and is the most important source of Islamic Law, or the *Shari'ah*. Furthermore, the Quran comes back again

and again to the question of ethics, of good and evil, of the significance of living a virtuous life. Finally, the Quran speaks, especially in its last chapters, in majestic language about eschatological events, about the end of this world, about the Day of Judgment, paradise, purgatory, and hell. The language of the Quran, especially in dealing with eschatological realities, is concrete and symbolic, not abstract, or descriptive in the ordinary sense, which would in any case be impossible when one is dealing with realities our earthly imaginations cannot grasp. This trait has caused many outsiders to criticize the Quran for its sensuous description of the delights of paradise as if they were simply a sublimation of earthly joys and pleasures. In reality every joy and delight here below, especially sexuality, which is sacred for Islam, is the reflection of a paradisaal prototype, not vice versa.

According to the Prophet and many of the earliest authorities such as 'Alī and Ja'far al-Šādiq, the Quran has many levels of meaning, of which the highest is known to God alone. In the same way that God is both the Outward (*al-Zāhir*) and the Inward (*al-Bāṭin*), His Book also has an outward and an inward dimension or, in fact, several levels of inner meaning. Throughout Islamic history, Quranic commentaries have been written from both points of view, the outward and the inward. The first is called *tafsīr* and the second *ta'wīl*. Works of both categories are crucial for the understanding of the text of the Quran, each word and letter of which is like a living being with many levels of significance, including a numerical symbolism, which is studied in the science called *jafr*, corresponding to Jewish and Christian Kabbala.

The chapters (*sūrah*s) and verses (*āyah*s) of the Quran are both the path and the guidepost in the Muslim's earthly journey. The root of everything Islamic, from metaphysics

and theology to law and ethics to the sciences and arts, is to be found in it. Every movement that has begun in Islamic history, whether religious, intellectual, social, or political, has sought legitimization in the Quran, and the permanent flow of the daily life of traditional Muslims unaffected by such movements has also been marked in the deepest sense by the presence of the Quran. Jurists have sought to interpret its legal verses and Sufis its inner meaning. Philosophers have drawn from its philosophical utterances and theologians have debated its assertions about the nature of God's Attributes and His relation to the world. Today, as when it was revealed, the Quran remains the central reality of Islam and the heart of Muslim life in both its individual and social aspects.

### THE PROPHET OF ISLAM

The Prophet of Islam, to whom we shall henceforth refer simply as the Prophet, is for the West the most misunderstood reality within the Islamic universe. For over a millennium he has been maligned in various European sources as an apostate, a pretender, and even the Antichrist, and one has had to wait well over a thousand years until the twentieth century to see fair treatments of him appear in European languages. Until recently, Christians usually compared him, of course very unfavorably, to Christ, assuming that he holds the same position in Islam as Christ does in Christianity. Westerners therefore called Islam Mohammadanism until a few decades ago, a term detested by Muslims, and concentrated their attacks against him in order to vilify Islam. Even those who admitted to his remarkable achievements in this world refused to accept him as a prophet. Christian attacks against him were, in fact, the most painful and divisive element in Islam's relationship with Christianity

over the centuries. Even today the general misunderstanding of the Prophet in the West remains a major obstacle to mutual understanding. In modern times certain Western writers opposed to Christianity tried to use the Prophet as an instrument in their attacks on Christianity without any real appreciation or understanding of the Prophet himself. Rarely does one find in earlier Western history a figure such as the German poet Goethe, who harbored deep respect and even love for the Prophet.

To understand the heart of Islam it is, therefore, essential to understand the significance of the Prophet from the point of view of traditional Muslims—not that of either Muslim modernists who neglect his spiritual dimension or the so-called puritan reformers who for other reasons belittle his significance in the total religious economy of Islam. The Quran asserts clearly that the Prophet was a man and not divine, but also adds that God chose him as His final messenger, the “Seal of Prophets,” that he was given the most exalted and noble character, and that he was chosen as a model for Muslims to emulate as mentioned in the verse, “Verily you have in the Messenger of God an excellent exemplar for him who looks to God and the Last Day and remembers God often” (32:21). This verse is the basis for the emulation of the *Sunnah*, or wonts (in the sense of actions and deeds) of the Prophet, that is central to the whole of Islam. For Muslims, the Prophet is a mortal man (*bashar*), but also God’s most perfect creature, or what the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, call the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). As a Sufi poem recited often throughout the Islamic world asserts,

Muḥammad is a man, but not like other men.

Rather, he is a ruby and other men are like stones.

The Prophet was born in Mecca in the “Year of the Elephant,” that is, 570 C.E., into an aristocratic branch of a major tribe of Mecca known as the Quraysh. His own family descended from Hāshim, and so he and his descendants are known as Hāshimites, which was a branch of the Quraysh. His father, ‘Abd Allāh, died before he was born and his mother, Āminah, also died when Muḥammad, whose most famous name means “the most praised one,” was very young, leaving him an orphan. He was brought up in the household of his uncle Abū Ṭālib, the father of ‘Alī, the fourth Sunni caliph and the first Imām of Shi‘ism. The young Muḥammad also spent some time with the Bedouins in the desert to master Arabic eloquence and to learn their ways, which had been the custom of the people of Mecca from ancient times. From his early days he was known for his honesty and sincerity and given the title of al-Amin, “the Trusted One.” He also had a strong contemplative tendency, which caused him to retreat often into the desert for prayer. Although the Meccans at that time practiced a crass form of idolatry, there were among them those who still followed the primordial monotheism of Abraham and are referred to in the Quran as the *ḥunafā’*, the primordialists. The Prophet was one such person and believed in the one God even before being chosen as prophet.

As a young man Muḥammad began to travel with caravans to Syria, and Muslims believe that it was during one of these trips that a Christian monk, Baḥīrah, predicted that he would become a prophet. Because of his honesty and earnestness, which had become famous, he attracted the attention of a wealthy businesswoman of Mecca, Khadijah, who was fifteen years his senior, but who proposed marriage and asked him to manage her business affairs. Muḥammad accepted and had a very happy marriage, from which issued

four daughters, the most famous of whom is Fāṭimah. She later married ‘Alī and is the mother of all the descendants of the Prophet, who are called *sayyids* or *sharīfs* and who have played an extraordinary role in Islamic history. The Prophet had a monogamous marriage until Khadijah died when he was fifty years old. It was only in the last years of his life that he contracted other marriages, mostly for the political purpose of unifying the various tribes of Arabia.

When Muḥammad was forty years old and praying in a cave called al-Ḥirā’ near Mecca, the archangel Gabriel came to him with the first verses of the revelation that constitutes the beginning of Surah 96, “The Clot.” Thus began his prophetic mission, which was to be carried out in the most difficult situation conceivable, for the message was one of uncompromising monotheism in a city that was the center of Arabian idolatry. The Ka‘bah, or the House of God, which stands at the center of Mecca and is the most holy site in Islam, was built originally, according to Muslim belief, by Adam himself and rebuilt by Abraham. But this primordial sanctuary had now become filled with the idols of various tribes who would regularly visit Mecca for the purpose of pilgrimage. Mecca had therefore also become a major center for trade, and much of the power and wealth of Meccans derived from the presence of the Ka‘bah in their city. The message of the Prophet struck therefore at the heart of not only the religion, but also the source of power and wealth of the people of his own city, including his family.

At first only Khadijah, ‘Alī, and the Prophet’s old friend Abū Bakr accepted the message that was revealed to him. Gradually, however, a number of others, including such eminent personalities as ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was later to become the second caliph after Abū Bakr, and

‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, the future third caliph, embraced Islam. The very success of the Prophet’s mission made the opposition to him and his followers more severe every day. There were several attempts on his life until, in the year 622 C.E., after agreements made with emissaries sent from the city of Yathrib to the north to Mecca, he migrated by Divine command to that city along with his followers. That migration, called *al-hijrah* in Arabic, marks the major turning point in Islamic history, when Islam was transformed from a small group of devotees to a full-fledged community. Yathrib became known as *Madīnat al-nabī*, the City of the Prophet, and is known to this day as Medina. Here the first Islamic society, which has remained the ideal model for all later Islamic societies, was founded.

Shortly before the migration, an event of supreme spiritual and religious significance took place in the Prophet’s life, an event that is also mentioned in the Quran. According to Islamic tradition, he was taken on what is called the Nocturnal Journey, or *al-mi‘rāj*, on a supernatural horse, called al-Burāq, by Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem. Then, from the place where the mosque of the Dome of the Rock is now located, he was taken through all of the heavens, that is, all the higher states of being, to the Divine Presence Itself, meeting on the journey earlier prophets such as Moses and Jesus. The *mi‘rāj* is the prototype of all spiritual wayfaring and realization in Islam, and its architecture even served as a model for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The experiences of this celestial journey, moreover, constitute the inner reality of the Islamic daily prayers and also the bringing to completion the performance of their outward form.

It was during this journey that the Prophet reached the Divine Presence, beyond even the paradisaical states at the station that marks the boundary of universal existence;



beyond this station, which the Quran calls the Lote Tree of the Uttermost End, there is only the hidden mystery of God known to Himself alone. It was in this most exalted state that the Prophet received the revelation that contains what many consider to be the heart of the credo of Islam: "The Messenger believeth, and the faithful believe, in what has been revealed unto him from his Lord. Each one believeth in God and His angels and His books and His messengers: we make no distinction between any of His messengers. And they say: we hear and we obey: grant us, Thou our Lord, Thy forgiveness; unto Thee is the ultimate becoming" (2:285).<sup>3</sup>

Jerusalem had been the first direction that Muslims faced when praying (*qiblah*), before it was replaced by Mecca by Divine order, and is also considered to be the site of the eschatological events at the end of time according to Islamic tradition. But the Nocturnal Journey made Jerusalem even more significant for Muslims. In fact, the three holy cities of Islam, namely, Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, are inextricably intertwined with the life of the Prophet.

In Medina the nascent community was confronted immediately with attacks from the Meccans, and several wars called *maghāzī* were fought in which the Muslims prevailed usually against unbelievable odds. Finally, the message of Islam spread throughout Arabia. The Prophet returned in triumph to Mecca, forgiving all those who had done so much to harm him and his followers. He purified the Ka'bah of the idols in and on top of it and then performed, along with other rites, circumambulations of the House of God, following the footsteps of Abraham, a pilgrimage called *hajj*, which continues to this day, being one of the "pillars," or fundamental elements, of the religion. But he did not remain in the city of his birth and upbringing.

Rather, he returned to Medina, where he died in 632 after three days of illness. He was buried in his own apartment, which was adjacent to the mosque he had built. Called the Mosque of the Prophet, or Masjid al-nabī, it is the original model of all later mosques and is visited to this day by millions of Muslim pilgrims every year from all over the world.

The Prophet died having unified Arabia, ended the prevalent violence, and created peace among tribes that had been fighting each other since time immemorial. With few means, a man who had been an orphan and who had suffered in countless ways, laid the foundations for a new religious society and civilization that was soon to make its mark upon a large portion of the world and begin a new chapter in human history. This summary account of the life of the Prophet brings into focus the way in which Muslims view the life of the founder of their religion. In order to understand Islam, it is essential to grasp the significance of this account for Muslims and not to accept blindly what earlier revisionist Christian polemicists or contemporary agnostic historians may have written in the West about him.

To comprehend the significance of the Prophet in Islam, it is necessary to remember that the great founders of religions are of two types. The first constitutes the category of those figures who preach detachment from the world and a spiritual life that does not become entangled with ordinary worldly matters with all their ambiguities and complexities. Supreme examples of this type are found in Christ and the Buddha, both of whom founded what were originally small spiritual communities divorced from and not integrated into the political, social, and economic conditions of the larger society. Christ who said that his kingdom was not of this world did not marry and was not the leader and ruler of a whole human society, and the Buddha left the married

life of a prince to devote himself to the monastic life and the attainment of illumination.

The second type is exemplified by Moses, David, and Solomon in the Abrahamic world and by Rama and Krishna in Hinduism. Such figures, whether seen as prophets or avatars, entered into the complexity of the ordinary human order to transform and sanctify it. The Hebrew prophets as well as some avataric figures from Hinduism were also political leaders and rulers of a human community. They were married and had children and therefore appear to those who have been brought up gazing upon the dazzling spiritual perfection of Christ or the Buddha as being too immersed in the life of the world and therefore less perfect. Such a judgment neglects the truth that once Christianity and Buddhism became religions of a whole society, they too had to deal with the earthly realities of human society, with justice, war and peace, and the question of family and sexual relations.

In any case, the Prophet must be seen as belonging to the second category. His contemplativeness was inward, while outwardly he had to face nearly every possible human situation. He experienced being an orphan, living the life of a merchant, suffering persecution. He grieved deeply the loss of his beloved wife Khadijah and his two-year-old son Ibrāhīm, but he also knew the happiness of family life and of final triumph in the world. He, who loved solitude and contemplation, had to deal with the affairs of men and women, with all their frailties and shortcomings. He had to rule over a whole society and to sit as judge in cases of one party's complaints against another. One might say that his mission was to sanctify all of life and to create an equilibrium in human life that could serve as the basis for surrender and effacement before the Divine Truth.

In every religion all the virtues of its adherents derive from those existing in the founder of the religion. In the same way that no Christian can claim to have any virtue that was not possessed to the utmost extent by Christ, no Muslim can have any virtue that was not possessed in the most eminent degree by the Prophet. More specifically, the Prophet exemplifies the virtues of humility; nobility, magnanimity and charity; and truthfulness and sincerity. For Muslims, the Prophet is the perfect model of total humility before God and neighbor; nobility and magnanimity of soul, which means to be strict with oneself but generous, charitable, and forgiving to others; and finally, perfect sincerity, which means to be totally truthful to oneself and to God. This crowning Islamic virtue requires the melting of our ego before God, for, as a Sufi saying asserts, “He whose soul melteth not away like snow in the hand of religion [that is, the Truth], in his hand religion like snow away doth melt.”<sup>4</sup>

Love for the Prophet is incumbent upon all Muslims and in fact constitutes a basic aspect of Islamic religious life. It might be said that this love is the key for the love of God, for in order to love God, God must first love us, and God does not love a person who does not love His messenger. The Prophet is also held in the greatest esteem and respect. He has many names, such as Aḥmad (“the most praiseworthy of those who praise God”), ‘Abd Allāh (“servant of God”), Abu’l-Qāsim (“Father of Qāsim”), and al-Amīn (“the Trusted One”), as well as Muḥammad. Whenever any of these names are mentioned, they are followed with the formulaic phrase, “May peace and blessings be upon him.” It is considered a sign of disrespect to mention his name or the name of any of the other prophets without invoking the benediction of peace upon them.

The invocation of benediction upon the Prophet is so central for Muslims that it might be said to be the only act that is performed by both God and human beings, for, as the Quran says, “Verily, God and His angels shower blessings upon the Prophet. O ye who have faith! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation” (33:56).

The love and respect for the Prophet also extends to other prophets who remain spiritually alive in the Islamic universe. In fact, Muslims do not consider the fact that the message of the Prophet was conclusive to mean that it was also exclusive. The Prophet is for them both the person they love and admire as God’s most perfect creature and the continuation of the long chain of prophets to whom he is inwardly connected. A pious Muslim would never think of praising the Prophet while denigrating the prophets who came before him, particularly those mentioned in the Quran. In the metaphysical sense, the Prophet is both a manifestation of the Logos and the Logos itself, both the beginning of the prophetic cycle and its end, and, being its end and seal, he contains from an essential and inward point of view the whole prophetic function within himself. It is in this sense that Maḥmūd Shabistārī sang of the Prophet, using his esoteric name Aḥmad, in his *Gulshan-i rāz* (“The Secret Garden of Divine Mysteries”):

Since the number hundred has come, ninety is also  
with us.

The name of Aḥmad is the name of all the prophets.

The love for the Prophet, therefore, far from diminishing respect for other prophets, has only increased the admiration of Muslims for the prophets who preceded the Prophet of Islam and for whom he himself held the greatest

respect, as reflected in the many traditions, or sayings, transmitted from him.

These sayings, called in the plural *ahādīth*, were assembled after his death and, after much critical study, collected in canonical collections by both Sunni and Shi'ite scholars. They form, after the Quran, the most important source of everything Islamic and constitute, in fact, the first commentary upon the Quran. Technically, the *Ḥadīth* is part of the *Sunnah*, which means all the doings or wonts of the Prophet. The *Sunnah* is the model upon which Muslims have based their lives, including the rituals ordained by the Quran. Along with the teachings of the Quran, the *Sunnah* is the primary cause for the unity so observable among Muslims from so many diverse ethnic groups and cultures. As for the *Ḥadīth*, some deal with the most sublime spiritual truths and others with everyday aspects of life, such as how to carry out an economic transaction justly or how to deal fairly with one's family. They include such sayings as:

“No person is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.”

“Illumine your hearts by hunger, and strive to conquer your ego by hunger and thirst; continue to knock at the gates of Paradise by hunger.”

“To honor an old person is to show respect for God.”

“There are heavenly rewards for every act of kindness to a live animal.”

“God is beautiful and He loves beauty.”

“Charity is a duty for every Muslim. He who has not the means thereto, let him do a good act or abstain from an evil one. That is his charity.”

“When the bier of anyone passes by you, whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, rise to your feet.”

“God is pure and loves purity and cleanliness.”

“The best *jihād* is the conquest of the self.”

“Heaven lies at the feet of mothers.”

“The key to Paradise is prayer.”

“God saith, ‘I fulfill the faith of whosoever puts his faith in Me, and I am with him, and near him, when he remembers Me.’”

The spiritual reality of the Prophet is ever present in Islamic society through the living character of his *Sunnah* and the authority of his *Ḥadīth*. It is moreover experienced through the grace that emanates from his spiritual reality and is called “Muḥammadan *barakah*,” a grace that is ever present in the life of Sufism, in the litanies chanted in honor of the Prophet, in the visitation to holy sites throughout the Islamic world, which are like so many extensions of Medina, and in the heart of all Muslims for whom the love of the Prophet is both the necessary concomitant and means of access to the love of God. This love for the Prophet also entails love and respect for other messengers, to which the Quran refers so frequently. Even the Islamic definition of faith (*al-īmān*) states the necessity of having faith in God, His angels, and His *messengers*, not only His *messenger*. As the Quran states, “O ye who believe! Believe in God and His messenger and the Scripture which He has revealed unto His messenger and the Scripture which He revealed before. Whosoever disbelieves in God, His angels and His Scriptures and His messengers and the Last Day, he verily has wandered far away” (4:136). It is not only disbelief in the *messenger*, but in all of God’s *messengers* that leads a person away from the path of correct belief and faithful-

ness. But, of course, to be a Muslim requires specifically the acceptance of the messengership and prophethood of Muḥammad; hence the second testification (*shahādah*) of Islam, *Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh* (“Muḥammad is the Messenger of God”). Through this pronouncement along with the first *shahādah* a person formally becomes a Muslim. The first *shahādah*, *Lā ilāha illa’Llāh* (“There is no god but God”) is by itself in fact universal testimony to the acceptance of religion as such, to *al-dīn*, which lies at the heart not only of Islam, but of all the authentic religions revealed before the descent of the Quran.

#### ISLAM’S ATTITUDE TOWARD OTHER RELIGIONS IN HISTORY

In light of what has been said of the Islamic conception of revelation and religious diversity, it is important to mention that before modern times Islam was the only revealed religion to have had direct contact with nearly all the major religions of the world. It had met Judaism and Christianity in its birthplace in Arabia and afterward in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt; the Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism after its conquest of Persia in the seventh century; Hinduism and Buddhism in eastern Persia and India shortly thereafter; the Chinese religions through the Silk Route as well as through Muslim merchants who traveled to Canton and other Chinese ports; the African religions soon after the spread of Islam into Black Africa some fourteen hundred years ago; and Siberian Shamanism in the form of the archaic religions of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples as they descended into the Islamic world. Centuries ago Zoroaster and the Buddha were common household names among Muslims of the eastern lands of the Islamic



world, especially Persia. Indian Muslims had come to know of Krishna and Rama a thousand years ago. The Persian polymath al-Bīrunī had composed a major work on India in the eleventh century, one that is still a valuable source of knowledge for medieval Hinduism. Furthermore, numerous works of classical Hinduism and some of Buddhism were translated into Persian centuries ago, including the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Chinese Muslim scholars knew the Confucian classics and many considered Confucius and Lao-Tze prophets.

The global nature of the religious knowledge of a learned Muslim sitting in Isfahan in the fourteenth century was very different from that of a scholastic thinker in Paris or Bologna of the same period. On the basis of the Quranic doctrine of religious universality and the vast historical experiences of a global nature, Islamic civilization developed a cosmopolitan and worldwide religious perspective unmatched before the modern period in any other religion. This global vision is still part and parcel of the worldview of traditional Muslims, of those who have not abandoned their universal vision as a result of the onslaught of modernism or reactions to this onslaught in the form of what has come to be called “fundamentalism.”

Within this global religious context, it is, of course, the Jewish and Christian traditions with which Islam has the greatest affinity. The Hebrew prophets and Christ are deeply respected by Muslims. The Virgin Mary is considered by the Quran to hold the most exalted spiritual position among women. A chapter of the Quran is named after her, and she is the only woman mentioned by name in Islam’s sacred scripture. Moreover, the miraculous birth of Christ from a virgin mother is recognized in the Quran. Respect for such teachings is so strong among Muslims that

today, in interreligious dialogues with Christians and Jews, Muslims are often left defending traditional Jewish and Christian doctrines such as the miraculous birth of Christ before modernist interpreters who would reduce them to metaphors and the sacred history of the Hebrew prophets to at best inspired stories.

The sacred figures of Judaism and Christianity are often mentioned in the Quran and even in prayers said on various occasions. The tombs of the Hebrew prophets, who are also Islamic prophets, are revered and visited in pilgrimage by Muslims to this day. One need only recall the holiness for Muslims of the tomb of Abraham in al-Khalīl, or Hebron, in Palestine, of that of Joshua in Jordan, and of Moses' resting place on Mt. Nebo, also in Jordan. Some Muslims have occasionally criticized intellectually and also engaged militarily Jews and Christians, but they have not criticized the Jewish prophets or Christ (even if certain theological differences with followers of Judaism and Christianity did exist), at least not those who have heeded the call of the Quran and understood its message. Islam sees itself as the third of the Abrahamic religions, which are bound together by countless theological, ethical, and eschatological beliefs even though they are marked by differences willed by God.

To speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition against which Islam is pitted as the "other" is an injustice to the message of Abraham and also theologically false, no matter how convenient it might be for some people. There is as much difference between Judaism and Christianity as there is between Christianity and Islam. In certain domains Judaism is closer to Islam than it is to Christianity: it has a sacred language, Hebrew, like Arabic in Islam, and it has a sacred law, the *Halakhah*, corresponding to the *Shari'ah*.

Furthermore, they share an opposition to all forms of idolatry and to the creation of iconic sacred art, which would allow an image of the Divinity to be painted or sculpted. In certain other ways Islam is closer to Christianity: both emphasize the immortality of the soul, eschatological realities, and the accent on the inner life. Then there are those basic principles upon which all three religions agree: the Oneness of God, prophecy, sacred scripture, much of sacred history, and basic ethical norms such as the sanctity of life, reverence for the laws of God, humane treatment of others, honesty in all human dealings, kindness toward the neighbor, the application of justice, and so forth. Islam is an inalienable and inseparable part of the Abrahamic family of religions and considers itself to be closely linked with the two monotheistic religions that preceded it. Islam envisages itself the complement of those religions and the final expression of Abrahamic monotheism, confirming the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, but rejecting any form of exclusivism.

#### WHO IS A BELIEVER AND WHO IS AN INFIDEL?

With this framework in mind, it will be easier to understand the categorization in Islam of people into believers (*mu'mins*) and what has been translated in the West as "infidels" or "nonbelievers" (*kāfirs*), which means literally "those who cover over the truth." Every religion has a way of distinguishing itself from the other religions. Judaism speaks of Jews and Gentiles, and Christianity of the faithful and the heathens or pagans. Each of these categorizations has both a theological and a popular and historical root related to the self-understanding as well as the history of

that religion. In the case of Islam, the distinction is based more on the question of faith, or *īmān*, and less on the more general term *islām*. In the Quran faith implies a higher level of participation in the religion, as we shall discuss in the next chapter, and even today only those who take their religion very seriously and are virtuous are called *mu'min* (or possessors of *īmān*). And yet the Quran does not limit the term *mu'min* only to those who follow the Islamic religion; it includes the faithful of Islam along with followers of other religions, as is evidenced by the Quranic assertion, “Verily, those who have faith [in what is revealed to the Prophet] and those who are Jews and Christians and Sabaeans—whosoever has faith in God and the Last Day and does right—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall overcome them and neither shall they grieve” (2:62). In this verse as well as verse 69 of Surah 5 (“The Table Spread”), which nearly repeats the same message, recognition of other religions is extended even beyond Judaism, Christianity, and Sabaeism to include “whosoever has faith in God,” and the possibility of salvation is also made explicitly universal. Likewise, the boundary between the Muslim faithful and the faithful of other religions is lifted. One could therefore say that in the most universal sense whoever has faith and accepts the One God, nor the Supreme Principle, is a believer, or *mu'min*, and whoever does not is an infidel, or a *kāfir*, whatever the nominal and external ethnic and even religious identification of that person might be.

As a result of this explicit universality of the Quranic text, the use of the terms “believer” or “faithful” and “infidel” or “nonbeliever” is much more complicated than what we find in Christianity. In Islam there is, first of all, the Sufi metaphysical view of absolute Truth, which is seen to be beyond

all duality, even beyond the dichotomy of *īmān* and *kufr*, or faith and infidelity; yet, to reach that transcendent Truth beyond all duality one must begin with faith and start from the formal foundations of Islam, which distinguishes itself clearly from *kufr*. The esoteric understanding of *kufr* and *īmān*, so prevalent in classical Sufi poetry, especially among the Persian poets such as Rūmī, Shabistārī, and Ḥāfiẓ must not, therefore, be confused with the prevalent idea in certain Western circles that one can reach the absolute Truth by simply avoiding the world of faith as well as infidelity. On the levels of external religious forms, *īmān* has to do with truth and *kufr* with falsehood. This dichotomy is not destroyed by the exhortation of the Sufis to go beyond *kufr* and *īmān*, which means to reach *tawḥīd*, or oneness beyond all oppositions and dichotomies.

On the formal and popular plane, traditional Muslims have often used the category of “believer” or “faithful” for Muslims as well as followers of other religions, especially Christians and Jews. But there have been also historical periods in which the term “faithful” was reserved for Muslims and *kāfir*, or “infidel,” was used for non-Muslims, as in the Ottoman Empire, where Europeans were called *kuffār*, infidels. The situation is, however, made even more complicated by the fact that throughout Islamic history certain Muslim groups have called other Muslim groups infidels, some even going to the extent of treating them in practice as enemies. For example, during early Islamic history the Khawārij, who opposed both the Sunnis and Shī‘ites as infidels, attacked both groups physically and militarily. Later, Ismā‘īlis were considered *kuffār* by many Sunni scholars, and even in mainstream Islam over the centuries some Sunni and Twelve-Imām Shī‘ite scholars have called each

other *kāfir*. In the eighteenth century the Wahhābī movement, which began in Najd in Arabia, considered orthodox Sunnis and Shī'ites both not to be genuine Muslims, and often cast the anathema of being infidels, or what is called *takfir*, upon them, while many Ottoman Ḥanafī scholars considered the Wahhābīs themselves to be *kuffār*.

The prevalent image in the West that all Muslims are united as the faithful against the infidels—even if some well-known Christian preachers repeat to their flocks this assertion made by some extremists within the Islamic world—is simply not true. There have always been those who have spoken of the necessity of the unity of Muslims as the faithful, and in a certain sense that unity has been always there despite diversity on many levels. But the whole question of who is a believer, or a person of faith, and who is an unbeliever, or infidel, requires a much more nuanced answer than is usually given in generally available sources.

Moreover, the term *kāfir* has both a theological and judicial definition and a popular political and social definition, and the two should not be confused. In the conscience of many devout Muslims, a pious Christian or Jew is still seen as a believer, while an agnostic with an Arabic or Persian name is seen as a *kāfir*. And the anathema of *kufir*, far from involving only outsiders, has also concerned various groups within the Islamic world itself. Today, even while some Muslims hold “infidels” responsible for the onslaught of a secularist culture from the West, they also use the same characterization for those within the Islamic world itself who, while still formally Muslim, accept and preach secularist ideas that negate the very foundations of the Islamic revelation. As a matter of fact, secularism is the common enemy of all the Abrahamic traditions, and the erosion of

moral authority in secular societies that we observe today poses as many problems for Jews and Christians as it does for Muslims.

### ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM TODAY

Muslims today continue to experience the presence of other religions in their midst as they have done over the centuries. In the middle part of the Islamic world there are Christian minorities, the largest being in Egypt, and still some Jews, especially in Iran and Turkey, although most of the Jews from Arab countries migrated to Israel after 1948. There are still Zoroastrians in Iran, and Muslims live with Hindus in India, of course, but also in Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and with Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Ladakh, Burma, China, and elsewhere. They also live with Confucians and Taoists not in only China, but also in Malaysia and Indonesia. By and large, through most periods of Islamic history, the relation between Muslims and religious minorities living in their midst has been peaceful. Exceptions have arisen when severe political issues, such as the partition of Palestine or India, have altered ordinary relations between Muslims and followers of other religions. Today, despite some abuses here and there issuing from so-called fundamentalist currents in various Islamic countries, religious minorities in the Islamic world usually fare better than Muslim minorities do in other lands, except in America and some Western countries, where they have been able to practice their religion until now without manifest or hidden restrictions. All one has to do is to compare the situation of the Christian minorities of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, three states not known for their leaning toward the West, with Muslim minorities in China, the Philippines, India,

*T w o*

# THE SPECTRUM OF ISLAM

*Sunnism, Shi'ism, and Sufism  
and Traditional, Modernist, and  
“Fundamentalist” Interpretations  
of Islam Today*

*O, mankind! Verily We have created you male  
and female, and have made you nations and  
tribes that ye may know each other.*

*(Quran, XLIX:13)*

*Differences between the scholars of  
my community are a mercy from God.*

*Hadīth*





## ISLAMIC PATTERNS

Often in the West Islam is depicted as a monolith, and little attention is paid to the rich diversity within both the religion and civilization of Islam. Recent events, however, have made the Islamic world the focus of much attention. Although the attempt by the media to deal more with Islam is laudable, what is presented is usually highly selective and politically charged, dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict and extremism manifesting itself in threats or acts of terror. Therefore, despite greater interest in covering matters pertaining to Islam, the reductionist message associated with extremism continues to dominate the scene, hiding from the Western public the great diversity of the Islamic world and the multiple interpretations of the Islamic religion.

The vast world of Islam is actually like a Persian medallion carpet; it has incredible diversity and complexity, yet it is dominated by a unity into which all the complex geometric and arabesque patterns are integrated. This complexity can be better understood if one views it as the superimposition of a number of patterns upon the plane of the carpet. In the vast world of Islam also, one can gain a better grasp of the whole by separating the patterns and seeing how each is related to vertical and horizontal dimensions of the religion of Islam itself as well as to cultural, ethnic, and linguistic factors. Then reuniting the patterns and seeing how they all fit together yields a vision of the total spectrum of Islam, in which unity leads to diversity and diversity is integrated into unity.

## FACTORS THAT CREATE UNITY

Before turning to the components of the Islamic spectrum and the question of diversity, let us first ask which factors have created and sustain unity in the Islamic world. Despite political fragmentation, theological differences, and ethnic distinctions, there is a strong sense of the unity of the Islamic community (*ummah*) and a constant desire for greater political unity within the “Abode of Islam” (*dār al-islām*) in the hearts of all Muslims, and there is, of course, a visible unity in Islamic civilization.

The central factor in the creation of unity among Muslims is the Quran. For all Muslims, it is the very Word of God, with the same text, which is chanted as well as read and written, and the same message for all Muslims, although interpretations of that message differ among various Muslim groups and there are levels of meaning to the text. Then there are the *Sunnah* and *Ḥadīth* of the Prophet, which are very powerful unifying factors, although again there are local variations of interpretation of certain facts and features of the Prophet’s life, actions, and words. Despite these variations in the understanding of the twin sources of the Islamic religion, that is, the Quran and the *Sunnah* (along with the *Ḥadīth*), there are three central doctrines upon which all schools of Islam agree, namely *tawḥīd*, or Divine Oneness, *nubuwwah*, or prophecy, and *ma‘ād*, or eschatology, to which we shall turn in Chapter 6. Only very small groups here and there have deviated from these basic principles, which are the source of Islam’s sapiential and practical teachings and whose unifying power can hardly be overestimated. Those who have deviated from these basic doctrines have sometimes brought about civil and religious crises within the community and sometimes even violence.

Another unifying factor is Islamic Law, or the *Shari'ah*, which is interpreted according to different schools but the basic elements of which are the same throughout the Islamic world, especially as they concern the rites of the religion. These rites, which consist of the five daily prayers performed in Arabic whether one is in Malaysia or Bosnia, the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) made from all parts of the Islamic world, the fast of the month of Ramaḍān carried out by all healthy adult Muslims throughout the seven climes, the tithe paid to the poor, and other religious acts, bind Muslims together wherever they might be. Over the ages the ethical norms related to the *Shari'ah*, the injunctions of the Quran and *Sunnah*, and the spiritual etiquette, or *adab*, associated with ethics and based on the Prophetic model have also acted as powerful integrating forces. To these must be added the presence of Sufi orders, which cut across confessional and ethnic boundaries and which, basing themselves by definition on the Unity that transcends all multiplicity, have been a major factor in the integration of Islamic society. Finally, on the plane of forms, one must mention Islamic art, from the chanting of the Quran to geometric patterns found on articles and structures, an art that, despite local differences, has its own unique genius and has played a very important role in bringing about unity on the physical plane while permitting local variations and cultural diversity.

SOURCES OF DIVERSITY:  
THE HIERARCHICAL LEVELS OF MEANING  
AND INTERPRETATION OF THE TRADITION

To understand the sources of diversity in the Islamic world, one must first of all turn to the hierarchy within the religion

of Islam itself. The total religion called Islam may be said to consist of the levels of *islām*, *īmān*, and *ih̄sān*, or surrender, faith, and spiritual beauty. The Quran refers often to the *muslim*, the possessor of surrender, the *mu'min*, the possessor of faith, and the *muḥsin*, the possessor of virtue. Although the Quran emphasizes that all Muslims stand equally before God, it also insists that human beings are distinguished in rank according to their knowledge of the truth and virtue, as in the verses, "Are those who know equal with those who know not?" (39:9), to which the Quran gives the resounding answer of no, and, "Verily, those of you most close to God are those who are the best in conduct" (59:13). These verses refer to degrees of perfection of believers, as one sees also in Christianity, and do not imply in any way exclusion, ostracism, or support for violence against certain groups.

Later Islamic sages, especially the Sufis, have also spoken of the hierarchy of the *Sharī'ah*, or the Divine Law, the *Ṭarīqah*, or the spiritual path, the *Ḥaqīqah*, or the Divine Truth, which is the origin of both. Islam is then envisaged as a circle whose center is the *Ḥaqīqah*. The radii of the circle are the *ṭuruq* (plural of *Ṭarīqah*), later identified with the Sufi orders, and the circumference is the *Sharī'ah*. Each Muslim is like a point on the circumference, whose totality composes the Islamic community, or *ummah*. To reach the *Ḥaqīqah*, one must first stand on the circumference, that is, practice the *Sharī'ah*, and then follow the *Ṭarīqah*, or Path to God, whose end is the Center, God Himself, or the *Ḥaqīqah*.

In a famous tradition of the Prophet known as the *ḥadīth* of Gabriel, this primary vertical structure and hierarchy, which does not in any way obviate the reality that each

Muslim stands as his or her own priest before God, is made evident:

‘Umar said, “One day when we were sitting with the Messenger of God there came unto us a man whose clothes were of exceeding whiteness and whose hair was of exceeding blackness, nor were there any signs of travel upon him, although none of us knew him. He sat down knee unto knee opposite the Prophet, upon whose thighs he placed the palms of his hands, saying: ‘O Muḥammad, tell me what is the surrender (*islām*).’ The Messenger of God answered him saying: ‘The surrender is to testify that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is God’s Messenger, to perform the prayer, bestow alms, fast Ramaḍān and make, if thou canst, the pilgrimage to the Holy House.’ He said: ‘Thou hast spoken truly,’ and we were amazed that having questioned him he should corroborate him. Then he said: ‘Tell me what is faith (*īmān*).’ He answered: ‘To believe in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers and the Last Day, and to believe that no good or evil cometh but by His Providence.’ ‘Thou hast spoken truly,’ he said, and then: ‘Tell me what is excellence (*iḥsān*).’ He answered: ‘To worship God as if thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not, yet seest He thee.’ ‘Thou hast spoken truly,’ he said. . . . Then the stranger went away, and I stayed a while after he had gone; and the Prophet said to me: ‘O, ‘Umar, knowest thou the questioner, who he was?’ I said: ‘God and His Messenger know best.’ He said: ‘It was Gabriel. He came unto you to teach you your religion.’”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from this *ḥadīth* clarifying *dīn*, or religion, for Muslims that *islām* encompasses what is expected of all Muslims in the acceptance and performance of the “pillars” (*arkān*) of Islam, with which we shall deal later. *Īmān*, or faith, involves not only belief in the ordinary sense in God, His angels, messengers, His revealed books, and the eschatological (end-time) realities, but also knowledge of these matters, and it was into this dimension of the Islamic tradition that intellectual disciplines such as theology and traditional philosophy were integrated. As for *iḥsān*, it is obvious that not everyone can worship God as if they saw Him. This is the station of the saintly, and *iḥsān*, which means both “virtue” and “beauty,” is associated with the spiritual path that leads to sanctity and is considered practically a definition of Sufism.

Not everyone who is a *muslim* is a *mu'min* and not everyone who is a *mu'min* is a *muḥsin*, but a *muḥsin* must also be a *mu'min* and a *mu'min* a *muslim*. Reference to this hierarchical distinction is also made in some sources as the exoteric, or outward (*ẓāhir*), and esoteric, or inward (*bāṭin*), dimensions of the tradition. In any case, throughout Islamic history there have been the ordinary believers, or *muslims*, those of intense piety, or *mu'mins*, and those who have sought God here and now, or *muḥsins*, about whom the Quran says, “God loves the *muḥsinīn*” (3:133, and many other verses). *Iḥsān* later became crystallized almost completely but not exclusively in Sufism, which can still be found throughout the Islamic world. Serious attachment to Sufism also requires attachment to the *Sharī'ah*, and therefore a person who is a Sufi must also be the follower of this or that school of Law. Some *Sharī'ite* Muslims may reject Sufism, especially today among both modernized and so-called fundamentalist or reformist circles, but

the Sufis show the greatest attachment to the *Sharī'ah*, whose inner significance they seek to reach. And they must of necessity follow one of its schools.

It is meaningless to ask, as many Western scholars and especially anthropologists have done, whether a particular Muslim is a Sunni or a Sufi, or for that matter a Shī'ite or a Sufi. A Sunni or a Shī'ite can be a Sufi or not a Sufi, but the situation is not one of alternatives, because these dimensions of the religion are not situated on the same level of reality. That is why the presence of Sufism has never been a cause for division in traditional Islamic society. In contrast, it has been a cause of integration and the return to that inner unity whose attainment is the goal of Islam. The first division in the structure of the religion must, in fact, be sought not in the difference between *Sharī'ite* Islam and Sufism, but in the separation of Sunnism and Shi'ism from each other in the first century of Islamic history. The Sunni-Shī'ite division is the most important in the formal structure of Islam, although even this division does not destroy the unity of Islam and both share the unifying elements already mentioned. Moreover, Sufism, representing the inner dimension of the religion, transcends this dichotomy. Not only are there Sunnis as well as Shī'ites who are Sufis, but Shī'ism and Sufism also share together the original inner message of the Prophet and the power of spiritual and initiatic guidance (*walāyah/wilāyah*), so that the situation is somewhat more complex than stated. But for the present discussion it suffices to say that Sufism, or the *Tarīqah*, belongs to the inner dimension of Islam and transcends *Sharī'ite* differences, and Sunnism and Shī'ism mark a division within Islam on the formal and legal level.

While on the subject of Sufism, it must be recalled here that Sufism has had the greatest role in the spread of



Islam itself, in addition to its vital function in the preservation and purification of ethical life, the creation of the arts, and the exposition of unitive knowledge (*maʿrifah*) and metaphysics within Islamic society. From the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward, Sufism became organized in orders usually named after their founders; older ones, such as the Rifāʿiyyah and Qādiriyyah, which still survive, were followed by many later ones, such as the Shādhiliyyah, the Khalwatiyyah, the Mawlawiyyah, the Chishtiyyah, the Naqshbandiyyah, and the Niʿmatullahiyyah. Some of the orders have died out over time and occasionally new ones are created, but they all rely on the continuity of the “initiativ” chain, or *silsilah*, which goes back to the Prophet. There is hardly an Islamic country in which Sufi orders are not to be found, and since the beginning of the twentieth century some orders, beginning with the Shādhiliyyah, have spread into Europe and America. In some countries, such as Senegal and the Sudan, the Sufi orders are so popular that people’s identification on the *Sharīʿite* level is often combined with their *Ṭarīqah* affiliation. Such a situation is found, however, only in Sunnism and not in Shīʿism, unless one identifies the Ismāʿīlī branch of Shīʿism as a *Ṭarīqah* in itself, as many Ismāʿīlīs themselves tend to do.

It is important to recall here the fact that, in contrast to the claim of those who only look at the quantitative aspects of things and consider the esoteric element of religion to be marginal and peripheral, the esoteric dimension actually lies at the heart of religion and is the source of both its endurance and renewal. We observe this truth not only in Islam, but also in the Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions in Judaism and various mystical currents in Christianity. In Islam itself, Sufism has been over the centuries the hidden heart that has renewed the religion intellectually, spiritually, and ethi-

cally and has played the greatest role in its spread and in its relation with other religions.

### SUNNISM AND SHĪ'ISM AND THEIR BRANCHES

Today about 87 percent of all Muslims are Sunnis and about 13 percent are Shī'ite. The Sunni majority within Islam is the largest in comparison with any denomination in other religions, such as Catholicism within Christianity and Mahāyāna within Buddhism. But the Shī'ite population is located almost completely in the heartland of Islam, that is, in the area between Egypt and India. Such countries as Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Islamic Lebanon have majority Shī'ite populations, and India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states, and East Africa have notable Shī'ite minorities. Both intellectually and historically, Shī'ism has played a much greater role in the Islamic world than its number might warrant, and the accord or discord between Sunnism and Shī'ism today is one of the most important factors in contemporary Islamic society.

The word *sunni* in Arabic comes from the term *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*, that is, people who followed the *Sunnah* of the Prophet and the majority, while Shī'ism comes from the Arabic term *shī'at 'Alī*, meaning partisans of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. After the death of the Prophet, while 'Alī, his son-in-law and first cousin, and the rest of the family were burying him, the rest of the community gathered in Medina and chose Abū Bakr as the Prophet's successor, not in his prophetic function but as ruler of the newly established Islamic community. He was thereby given the title of *khalīfah rasūl Allāh*, or the vicegerent of the Messenger of God, from which comes the title caliph, taken not

only by the first four caliphs, who are called the “rightly guided” (*rāshidūn*), but also by later Muslim rulers of the Umayyad, ‘Abbāsīd, and Fāṭimid dynasties and even by the Ottomans. A number of people thought that ‘Alī should have become the Prophet’s successor and rallied around him, forming the first nucleus of Shī‘ism. ‘Alī himself refused to oppose Abu Bakr and in fact worked closely with him and his two successors, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān, until he himself became the fourth of the “rightly guided” caliphs of Sunni Islam. It was only after his death at the hands of a member of the Khawārij, an extremist group that rejected the claims of both Mu‘āwiyah, who had contested the caliphate of ‘Alī, and ‘Alī himself, that Shī‘ism became an organized religio-political movement in Iraq.

The major point of contention between Sunnism and Shī‘ism was not only the question of who should succeed the Prophet, but the question of what the qualifications of such a person had to be. For Sunnism, the function of the caliph was to protect the borders of Islam, keep security and peace, appoint judges, and so forth. For the Shī‘ites, such a person also had to have the deepest knowledge of Islamic Law as well as esoteric knowledge of the Quran and Prophetic teachings. He could therefore not be elected, but had to be chosen by the Prophet through Divine command. The Shī‘ites believe that this investiture did in fact occur at the pool of water called Ghadīr Khumm when the Prophet was returning to Medina from pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Shī‘ites, the person chosen by him was ‘Alī, whom they consider their first Imām, using this term in the special sense of someone who bears the Muḥammadan Light (*al-nūr al-muḥammadī*) and the power of initiation within himself and who is master of both the exoteric and the esoteric sciences. Otherwise the

term *imām*, coming from the root meaning “standing before or in front,” is used in general for the person who leads the daily prayers, and in Sunni Islam also as an honorific title given to great religious scholars such as, for example, Imām al-Ghazzālī, one of the foremost theologians and Sufis in Islamic history. Sunni authors have also occasionally referred to the caliph as *imām*, but all of these meanings must be distinguished from the specific Shī‘ite usage of the term.

The understanding of the term *imām* therefore differs greatly in Sunnism and Shī‘ism. In Sunni Islam the term has many uses, but it is never used in the mystical and esoteric sense given to it in Shī‘ism. In Shī‘ism, the Imām, like the prophets, is inerrant (*ma‘ṣūm*) and protected from sin by God. He possesses perfect knowledge of both the Law and the Way, both the outer and inner meaning of the Quran. He also possesses the power of initiation (*walāyah/wilāyah*) and is the spiritual guide par excellence, like the Sufi masters within their orders. In fact, the first eight Shī‘ite Imāms are also central spiritual authorities or poles of Sufism and appear in the initiatic chain of nearly every Sufi order. ‘Alī, who is the representative par excellence of Islamic esoteric teachings, is not only the first Imām of Shī‘ism, but also at the origin of the initiatic chain of nearly all Sufi orders. There are in fact many Sunnis, such as the majority of Egyptians, almost all of whom are Sunnis, who have the same love and respect for the Shī‘ite Imāms and the *Ahl al-bayt*, that is, members of the family of the Prophet with whom the Imāms and Shī‘ism itself are associated, as do Persian or Iraqi Shī‘ites.

As far as Sunnism is concerned, its followers are divided according to the schools of Law (*madhhab*) they follow. In the eighth and ninth centuries the schools of *fiqh*, or

jurisprudence, were codified by the doctors of the Law. Some of these codifications or schools died out, but four have survived during the past millennium and constitute the main body of traditional Sunnism. They are the Ḥanafī, Mālīkī, Shāfi‘ī, and Ḥanbalī.

Ḥanafism was founded by a Persian, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 768), who was a student of Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d.757), the sixth Imām of Shī‘ism and founder of Twelve-Imām Shī‘ite Law, which is called Ja‘farī Law. Imām Abū Ḥanīfah sought to create possibilities for the integration of local practices into the Law as much as possible. His school held great attraction from the beginning for Turks as well as Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Today the Ḥanafī School has the largest number of followers in the Sunni world, including most Sunni Turks, the Turkic people of Caucasia and Central Asia, European Muslims, and the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. As for the Sunni part of Afghanistan, its people are, like the Sunnis of Pakistan, mostly Ḥanafī, and this is one of the elements that especially links the eastern part of Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Mālīkism, founded by Imām Mālīk ibn Anas (d. 795), is based mostly on the practice of Medina and is very conservative in its approach to the Law. There have been some Mālīkīs in the Arab East and especially in Egypt, but the heart of Mālīkism is North Africa. In fact, the whole of Islamic North and West Africa outside of Egypt is solidly Mālīkī, and this legal homogeneity has made an important contribution to the cultural unity of the area, which in traditional Islamic geography is called al-Maghrib, or the West, the name that is now used for the “Far West” of the Islamic world, that is, Morocco.

The Shāfi‘ī School was founded by a student of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, Imām Muḥammad al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820). It is

he who completed and perfected the methods of jurisprudence in Islamic Law. In many ways, of the different Sunni schools of Law, his school is the closest to the Ja'fari School. Buried in Cairo, he is greatly loved and admired by Egyptians, nearly all of whom are Shāfi'is, as are many others south of Egypt as well as most of the Malays in Southeast Asia, whether they are in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand.

The Ḥanbalī School, founded by Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) from Baghdad, based itself solely on the Quran and *Ḥadīth* and gave a very strict interpretation of the *Shari'ah*. Although in days of old it had many followers in Iraq, Persia, and other lands, in recent times its adherents have been confined mostly to Syria. Wahhābism, which is dominant in Saudi Arabia, is an offshoot of Ḥanbalism, but must not be simply identified with it. Wahhābism, which arose as a reformist movement in the eighteenth century in Najd in southern Arabia, opposed the later refinements of Islamic culture in the form of philosophy and theology as well as the arts; in the domain of religion itself it strongly opposed both Sufism and Shī'ism, the visit to the tombs of saints, and intercession by saints before God for an individual believer. It was opposed not only by Shī'ites, but also by orthodox Sunnis, and in the nineteenth century the Ottoman caliph even sent an army to defeat the movement. But through an alliance made between the Wahhābī scholars and the House of Sa'ūd, the movement was kept alive in Najd until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it began to consolidate political power. After World War I it captured Hijaz, where Mecca and Medina are located, and created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As a result of this historical process, Wahhābism became accepted throughout Saudi Arabia as the official interpretation of Islam. Despite

its opposition to mainstream Sunni Islam, Shī'ite, and Sufism, however, Wahhābism was not in itself always violent, although it was quite exoteric and exclusivist in its interpretation of Islam. Its influence remained, however, confined to Saudi Arabia until the increased wealth in the kingdom due to income from oil made it possible for Wahhābī schools and mosques to be established in many other areas of the world. But even then its influence remained limited, and today the vast majority of Sunnis cannot in any way be described as Wahhābī, not to speak of Shī'ites, who have always opposed Wahhābism. Within Arabia itself during the past two decades there has been a notable opening in certain religious circles toward other schools of Islam, both Sunni and Shī'ite, although the influence of Wahhābism is still dominant.

The four founders of the traditional schools of Sunni Law mentioned above are highly respected and revered by all Sunnis. Converting from one school to another takes place occasionally, and in modern times some governments have drawn from various schools, including the Shī'ism, to create civil laws in their countries. The difference between the Sunni schools of Law and the Ja'fārī or other Shī'ite schools of Law is minor, especially when it comes to the practice of rites. In certain fields, such as laws of inheritance or the legality of temporary marriage, there are, however, notable differences.

As for Shī'ism, although one could distinguish the various schools from each other on the basis of their legal orientation, a more telling criterion for distinction, used by Muslims themselves as well as by Western scholars, is the position each branch of Shī'ism takes on the Imāms. After 'Alī, his son Ḥasan became Imām. He lived a quiet, politically inactive life in Medina disseminating knowledge of the

Quran, but his brother Ḥusayn, who became the third Imām, arose against Yazīd, the son of Mu‘āwīyah, who had opposed ‘Alī and who had founded the Umayyad caliphate with its capital in Damascus. Ḥusayn was invited to go to Iraq by the people of the Iraqi city of Kufa, who promised to support him. And so in the year 680 he set out with his family and many followers from Medina for Iraq. Before reaching Kufa, however, he was met by the army of Yazīd in Karbalā’, where he and all the male members of the family of the Prophet, save Zayn al-‘Ābidīn, who was ill, were killed. Ḥusayn’s body was interred in Karbalā’ and his head brought to Damascus, but Yazīd, afraid of the reactions that might follow, tried to distance himself from the incident and exiled Zaynab, the sister of Ḥusayn, to Egypt with the head of her brother. According to Sunni tradition, she buried the head at a site that became the heart of what was later to become the city known as al-Qāhirah, or Cairo. This tragic event crystallized the Shī‘ite movement in Iraq and later elsewhere, especially in Persia, and finally led to the downfall of the Umayyads. To this day the tragedy of Karbalā’ is commemorated on the tenth of Muḥarram in many countries, especially Iran, Iraq, the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, and Lebanon, and these events are the most notable popular religious ceremonies in Islam after the annual pilgrimage, or *ḥajj*. Recollection of vast religious processions, sermons, and passion plays of Muḥarram, which dominated the life of Tehran during my childhood spent in that city, are still indelibly etched in my memory.

All other Imāms of Shī‘ism were descendants of Ḥusayn through his one son who survived, Zayn al-‘Ābidīn al-Sajjād, who became the fourth Imām. The main branch of Shī‘ism, which includes the vast majority of Shī‘ites, is called Ithnā ‘ashariyyah, or Twelve-Imām Shī‘ism, which



is dominant in Iran and is a majority in Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and among the Muslims of Lebanon. The Twelvers accept a chain of Imāms descending from the fourth, including his son, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the fifth Imām, and his son, Ja‘far al-Šādiq, the sixth Imām, down to the Twelfth, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, whom they believe to have been given a mysteriously long life by God, but who is in occultation (*ghaybah*). He is alive like Elijah, who was taken to Heaven alive according to Jewish belief. But the Twelfth Imām is also the secret master of this world and can appear to those who are in the appropriate spiritual state to see him. He will appear publicly before the end of time, when inequity and oppression have become dominant, to reestablish justice and peace on earth, and he will prepare for the second coming of Christ, an event in which Muslims have as firm a belief as Christians. This eschatological expectation is therefore called Mahdīism and is by no means confined to Shī‘ism. Sunnism also contains such teachings, the difference being that Shī‘ites claim to know here and now who the Mahdī is, whereas Sunnis expect a figure with such a name to appear in the future.

Apocalyptic thought, although present in Islam, does not, however, play the same role there as it does in contemporary Christianity, especially among certain televangelists in America who have commercialized their contentious interpretations of the Book of Revelation and other Christian sources on the basis of an exclusivism that is utterly astounding. In the Islamic world, although the idea of the coming of the Mahdī exists, there is much less public talk about it, especially on television, and there is little emphasis on creating an exclusive club of those who will be saved while the rest will be damned. Although in Black Africa there have been a few Mahdīist leaders with followers willing to die for them, in the heartland of Islam phenomena

such as Waco and Jonestown have not existed, except for the one episode in Mecca in 1980 when a person claiming to be the Mahdī entered the Holy Mosque with his followers and was finally killed when government forces attacked the group inside the mosque.

The second most important branch of Shī‘ism is Ismā‘īlism, which separated from the main body of Shī‘ism over the question of the identity of the seventh Imām. The sixth Imām, Ja‘far al-Šādiq, had chosen, by Divine command according to Shī‘ite belief, his son Ismā‘īl as the seventh Imām, but Ismā‘īl died while his father was still alive. Subsequently, Imām Mūsā al-Kāzim was chosen as the seventh Imām, but a number within the Shī‘ite community refused to accept this investiture and continued to consider Ismā‘īl their imām, hence the name Ismā‘īlism. For some time their imāms were not present in public, until suddenly in the tenth century the Ismā‘īlis arose in Tunisia to declare themselves rulers and were able to extend their domination to Egypt, much of the rest of North Africa, and even as far as Syria. They established the Fāṭimid caliphate, which vied with and opposed the Sunni ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, which had its capital in Baghdad. They made Cairo their capital and built it into a great center of the sciences and the arts. Al-Azhar University, over a thousand years old and the most important seat of Sunni learning in the Islamic world today, was built by the Fāṭimids, whose rulers were also Ismā‘īli imāms.

Fāṭimid Ismā‘īlism was its most moderate form, but other more radical movements followed from it. The Fāṭimid caliph Mustanšir bi’Llāh had transferred the investiture of the imamate from his older son, Nizār, to his younger son, Musta‘lī. Upon his death in 1094, some Ismā‘īlis followed Nizār and others Musta‘lī. The Musta‘lis, or followers of Musta‘lī, continued the moderate teachings of the

earlier Fāṭimids, but those who followed Nizār became more radical. In Iran the Nizārīs created fort cities on top of mountains, of which the most famous was Alamūt. The Persian Ismā‘īlī Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ had a major role to play in the creation of these forts and the propagation of the Nizārī cause. In 1164 the Ismā‘īlī imām of the time, Ḥasan, declared the “Great Resurrection” and proclaimed that henceforth only the spiritual and esoteric aspect of Islam mattered and the legal and formal aspect was to be put aside. Nizārī Ismā‘īlism became a radical and revolutionary force until finally defeated by the Mongols. It is said that Ismā‘īlī devotees, who would sacrifice their lives as martyrs and were called *fadā’iyān*, assassinated their Sunni opponents who were oppressing them. The English word “assassin,” in fact, comes most likely from the name Ḥasan, although some Western scholars have claimed that it derives from *ḥashīsh*, which the assassins are said by their enemies to have taken before committing acts of assassination.

The revolutionary character of Ismā‘īlism died down after the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, and in Persia itself most Ismā‘īlīs went underground. Meanwhile, the Musta‘līs were flourishing in the Yemen. There was also a third group of Ismā‘īlīs, who had settled in Sindh and Gujrat in India in early Islamic history and also converted some Hindus to Ismā‘īlism. This community was split later and the major group came to be known as the Sat Panth (True Path). This branch of Ismā‘īlism was very eclectic in its practices, incorporating many Hindu themes. Its religious poetry, called the *Ginān*, has verses in which the major figures of Islamic sacred history such as ‘Alī are compared to and even identified with various Hindu avatars. By the nineteenth century the Persian and Yemeni branches of Ismā‘īlism, known as the Ṭayyibiyah, were also centered in India, especially with the migration of the Aga Khan from

Persia to India. One now has primarily two branches of Ismā‘īlism, the Aga Khanid and the Bohras, both having their concentration of followers in India and to some extent Pakistan. But there are also notable Ismā‘īlī communities in Central Asia, Persia, Syria, East Africa, and Canada, to which many Ismā‘īlīs from East Africa migrated after the political tragedies of the 1960s and 1970s.

No one outside of the Ismā‘īlī community knows the exact number of Ismā‘īlīs, although, since their imām is alive and functioning as the head of the community, they are well organized and have a strong global network that embraces the whole community. Although their number is relatively small in comparison to the Ithnā ‘ashariyyah, Ismā‘īlīs have played an important role in Islamic history, intellectually, artistically, and politically, and constitute, despite their relatively small number, a notable part of the Islamic spectrum.

Finally, the third branch of Shī‘ism, the Zaydī, chose Zayd, the son of the fourth Imām, as its leader. The Zaydīs represent a moderate form of Shī‘ism and, in contrast to the Ismā‘īlīs, do not emphasize the esoteric over the exoteric dimension of the religion. They had many followers in Persia and the Arab East in the tenth century, but gradually they receded to the Yemen, where they constitute almost half the population today and where they ruled for a thousand years until 1962, following the Egyptian invasion of the Yemen. Zaydīism has its own school of law and theology as well as a political philosophy according to which any Muslim who is pious and learned and can defend the country and preserve peace and security can be accepted as imām and ruler.

Although the Zaydīs and Ismā‘īlīs number in the few millions, Twelve-Imām Shī‘ism has some 150 million followers. The history of its early expansion was less connected to

political institutions than to the spread of its teachings by individual adherents. In fact, its political expression came later than both Zaydīism and Ismāʿīlism. It was not until 1499 that the Safavids established themselves as rulers of Persia, which included not only present-day Iran, but also Afghanistan as well as parts of Pakistan, Caucasia, and Central Asia. They established Twelve-Imām Shīʿism as the state religion and gave support to Shīʿism elsewhere, especially in Iraq, over which they ruled for some time before losing it to the Ottomans. There were also local dynasties in India that were Twelve-Imām Shīʿite. Consequently, the number of Twelve-Imām Shīʿites rose considerably during the past few centuries and today it constitutes the vast majority of Shīʿites throughout the world.

#### RELIGIOUS SECTS WITHIN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

There is a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet according to which his community would become divided into seventy-two groups, of which only one would possess the Truth, but this saying pertains more to theological (*kalām*) differences rather than to *Sharīʿite* ones. In practice there are far fewer sects in Islam than there are in Christianity, which has experienced continuous fragmentation and division within Protestantism since the Reformation. First of all, Sunnism and majority Shīʿism must be understood as the orthodox mainstream and not as sects as this term is used in English. In the context of Islam, the term “sect” (*fiṛqah*) can be used in its classic sense to refer to small groups entertaining particular theological views that deviate from the general norm, or one can use this term in its current English usage to mean “a dissenting denomination” or “a schismatic