# ISLAM

## THE STRAIGHT PATH

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## *The Abbasid Caliphate: The Flowering of Islamic Civilization*

Abbasid rule of the Islamic community ushered in an era of strong centralized government, great economic prosperity, and a remarkable civilization. Abbasid caliphs could be as autocratic and ruthless as many of their Umayyad predecessors. Indeed, Abu al-Abbas did not hesitate to take the title "the blood shedder" (*al-saffah*); he came to be remembered as Abu Abbas al-Saffah. The Abbasid caliphs consolidated their power by crushing their Shii supporters as well as their opponents. This betrayal further alienated the Shii from the Sunni majority. The name "Sunni" comes from their self-designation as *ahl al-sunna wal jamaa,* those who follow the Prophet's example and thus belong to his society or community.

The Abbasids came to power under the banner of Islam. Their seizure of power and continued dynastic reign were Islamically legitimated. However, the Abbasids took great care publicly to align their government with Islam. They became the great patrons of an emerging religious class, the *ulama* (religious scholars). They supported the development of Islamic scholarship and disciplines, built mosques, and established schools.

The Abbasids refined Umayyad practice, borrowing heavily from Persian culture, with its divinely ordained system of government. The caliph's claim to rule by divine mandate was symbolized by the transformation of his title from Successor or Deputy of the Prophet to Deputy of God and by the appropriation of the Persian-inspired title, Shadow of God on Earth. The ruler's exalted status was further reinforced by his magnificent palace, his retinue of attendants, and the introduction of a court etiquette appropriate for an emperor. Thus, subjects were required to bow before the caliph, kissing the ground, a symbol of the caliph's absolute power. Persian influence was especially evident in the government and military. Preempting critics of the previous regime, the Arab Syrian-dominated military aristocracy was replaced by a salaried army and bureaucracy in which non-Arab Muslims, especially Persians, played a major role. The Abbasids explained this change in terms of Islamic egalitarianism. More often than not, however, it was royal favor and fear, symbolized by the royal executioner who stood by the side of the caliph, that brought him prestige and motivated obedience.

The early centuries of Abbasid rule were marked by an unparalleled splendor and economic prosperity whose magnificence came to be immortalized in the *Arabian Nights* (*The Thousand and One Nights*),

with its legendary exploits of the exemplary caliph, Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786–809). In a departure from the past, Abbasid success was based not on conquest, but on trade, commerce, industry, and agriculture. The enormous wealth and resources of the caliphs enabled them to become great patrons of art and culture, and thus create the more significant and lasting legacy of the Abbasid period, Islamic civilization. The development of Islamic law, the Sharia, constitutes their greatest contribution to Islam. Since part of the indictment of the Umayyads had been their failure to implement an effective Islamic legal system, the Abbasids gave substantial support to legal development. The early law schools, which had begun only during the late Umayyad period (ca. 720), flourished under caliphal patronage of the *ulama.* Although Islam has no clergy or priesthood, by the eighth century the *ulama* had become a professional elite of religious leaders, a distinct social class within Muslim society. Their prestige and authority rested on a reputation for learning in Islamic studies: the Quran, traditions of the Prophet, law. Because of their expertise, they became the jurists, theologians, and educators in Muslim society, the interpreters and guardians of Islamic law and tradition. The judge (*qadi*) administered the law as it was developed by the early jurists, firmly establishing the Islamic court system.

In addition to law, the Abbasids were also committed patrons of culture and the arts. The process of Arabization, begun during the late Umayyad period, was completed by the end of the ninth century. Arabic language and tradition penetrated and modified the cultures of conquered territories. Arabic displaced local languages—Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic, and Greek—becoming the language of common discourse, government, and culture throughout much of the empire. Arabic was no longer solely the language of Muslims from Arabia but the language of literature and public discourse for the multiethnic group of new Arabic- speaking peoples, especially the large number of non-Arab converts, many of whom were Persian. Translation centers were created. From the seventh to the ninth centuries, manuscripts were obtained from the far reaches of the empire and beyond and translated from their original languages (Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Persian) into Arabic. Thus, the best works of literature, philosophy, and the sciences from other cultures were made accessible: Aristotle, Plato, Galen, Hippocrates, Euclid, and Ptolemy. The genesis of Islamic civilization was indeed a collaborative effort, incorporating the learning and wisdom of many cultures and languages. As in government administration, Christians and Jews, who had been the intellectual and bureaucratic backbone of the Persian and Byzantine empires, participated in the process as well as Muslims. This "ecumenical" effort was evident at the Caliph al-Mamun's (reigned 813–33) House of Wisdom and at the translation center headed by the renowned scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq, a Nestorian Christian. This period of translation and assimilation was followed by one of Muslim intellectual and artistic creativity. Muslims ceased to be merely disciples and became masters, in the process producing Islamic civilization, dominated by the Arabic language and Islam's view of life: "It was these two things, their language and their faith, which were the great contribution of the Arab invaders to the new and original civilization which developed under their aegis." [13] Major contributions were made in many fields: literature and philosophy, algebra and geometry, science and medicine, art and architecture. Towering intellectual giants dominated this period: al-Razi (865–925), al-Farabi (d. 950), ibn Sina (known as Avicenna, 980–1037), ibn Rushd (known as Averroes, d. 1198), al-Biruni (973–1048), and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Islam had challenged the world politically; it now did so culturally. Great urban cultural centers in Cordoba, Baghdad, Cairo, Nishapur, and Palermo emerged and eclipsed Christian Europe, mired in the Dark Ages. The activities of these centers are reflected in the development of philosophy and science.



Islamic philosophy was the product of a successful transplant from Greek to Islamic soil, where it flourished from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Muslim philosophers appropriated Hellenistic thought (Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus), wrote commentaries on and extended the teachings and insights of Greek philosophy within an Islamic context and worldview. The result was Islamic philosophy, indebted to Hellenism but with its own Islamic character. Its contribution was of equal importance to the West. Islamic philosophy became the primary vehicle for the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Europe. The West reappropriated its lost heritage as European scholars traveled to major centers of Islamic learning, retranslating the Greek philosophers and learning from the writings of their great Muslim disciples: men like al-Farabi, who had come to be known as "the second teacher or master" (the first being Aristotle), and ibn Sina (Avicenna), remembered as "the great commentator" on Aristotle. Thus we find many of the great medieval Christian philosophers and theologians (Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Abelard, Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus) acknowledging their intellectual debt to their Muslim predecessors.

The enormous accomplishments of Islamic philosophy and science were the product of men of genius, multitalented intellectuals (who often mastered the major disciplines of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy). They were the "renaissance" men of classical

Islam. Avicenna's reflections on his own training typifies the backgrounds of many of the great intellectuals of this period:

> I busied myself with the study of the *Fusus al-Hikam* [a treatise by al-Farabi] and other commentaries on physics and mathematics, and the doors of knowledge opened before me. Then I took up medicine . . . Medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and in a very short time I undoubtedly excelled in it, so that physicians of merit studied under me. I also attended the sick, and the doors of medical treatments based on experience opened before me to an extent that can not be described. At the same time I carried on debates and controversies in jurisprudence. At this point I was sixteen years old.
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> Then, for a year and a half, I devoted myself to study. I resumed the study of logic and all parts of philosophy. During this time I never slept the whole night through and did nothing but study all day long. Whenever I was puzzled by a problem . . . I would go to the mosque, pray, and beg the Creator of All to reveal to me that which was hidden from me and to make easy for me that which was difficult. Then at night I would return home, put a lamp in front of me, and set to work reading and writing. . . . I went on like this until I was firmly grounded in all sciences and mastered them as far as was humanly possible. . . . . Thus I mastered logic, physics, and mathematics.
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> The Sultan of Bukhara . . . was stricken by an illness which baffled the physicians. . . . . I appeared before him and joined them in treating him and distinguished myself in his service.
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> One day I asked his permission to go into their library, look at their books, and read the medical ones. . . . I went into a palace of many rooms, each with trunks full of books, back-to-back. In one room there were books on Arabic and poetry, in another books on jurisprudence, and similarly in each room books on a single subject. I . . . asked for those I needed . . . read these books, made use of them, and thus knew the rank of every author in his own subject. . . . When I reached the age of eighteen, I had completed the study of all these sciences. At that point my memory was better, whereas today my learning is riper.[14]

Islamic science was an integrated and synthetic area of knowledge. It was integrated in that Muslim scientists, who were often philosophers or mystics as well, viewed the physical universe from within their Islamic worldview and context as a manifestation of the presence of God, the Creator and source of unity and harmony in nature.[15] Islamic science was also a grand synthesis informed by indigenous and foreign sources (Arab, Persian, Hellenistic, Indian) and transformed by scholars and scientists in urban centers throughout the world of Islam. Thus, it constituted a major component of Islamic civilization, and in the eyes of many Muslims, a worthy complement to Islam's international political order. As one Muslim intellectual observed:



> Islamic science came into being from a wedding between the spirit that issued from the Quranic revelation and the existing sciences of various civilizations which Islam inherited and which it transmuted through its spiritual power into a new substance, at once different from and continuous with what had existed before it. The international and cosmopolitan nature of Islamic civilization, derived from the universal character of the Islamic revelation and reflected in the geographical spread of the Islamic world, enabled it to create the first science of a truly international nature in human history.[16]

The legacy of Islamic civilization was that of a brilliant, rich culture. Its contributions proved to be as significant for the West, which in subsequent centuries appropriated and incorporated its knowledge and wisdom.

Thus during the Abbasid period, the comprehensiveness of Islam was clearly manifested and delineated:

> Islam—the offspring of Arabia and the Arabian Prophet—was not only a system of belief and cult. It was also a system of state, society, law, thought and art—a civilization with religion as its unifying, eventually dominating factor.[17]

For Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the political and cultural life of a vast empire, consisting of many tribal, ethnic, and religious groups, was brought within the framework of the Arabic language and Islamic faith.[18] Islamic civilization was the result of a dynamic, creative process as Muslims borrowed freely from other cultures. It proceeded from a sense of mission, power, and superiority. Muslims were the dominant force—masters not victims, colonizers not the colonized. The new ideas and practices were Arabized and Islamized. It was a process of change characterized by continuity with the faith and practice of Muhammad. Unlike the modern period, Muslims controlled the process of assimilation and acculturation. Their autonomy and identity were not seriously threatened by the specter of political and cultural domination. As with the early conquests and expansion of Islam, Muslims then (and now) regarded this brilliant period as a sign of God's favor and a validation of Islam's message and the Muslim community's universal mission.

The extraordinary spread and development of Islam was not without its religious conflicts. The same concern that had motivated the attempt by the *ulama* to preserve Islam in the face of caliphal whim and uncritical adoption of foreign, un-Islamic practices, led to conflicts between the *ulama* and those whom they sometimes regarded as their competitors, the Sufis and the philosophers. The *ulama* delineation of

law as the embodiment of the straight path of Islam set the criteria for belief and behavior in intellectual, social, and moral life and the pattern for orthodoxy (correct belief) or, perhaps more accurately, orthopraxy (correct practice). This vision of Muslim life as the observance of God's law did not always coincide comfortably with the Sufi emphasis on the interior path of contemplation and personal religious experience or the tendency of philosophy to give primacy to reason over the unquestioned acceptance of revelation. The tension between religious scholars on the one hand and philosophers and Sufis on the other was reflected in the life and work of a towering giant in the history of Islam, indeed in the history of religions, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.

Ironically, the golden age of Islamic civilization paralleled the progressive political fragmentation of the universal caliphate. The relative peace, prosperity, and unity of the Islamic community, epitomized during the rule of Harun al-Rashid, was challenged internally by competing groups and externally by the Fatimids and the Crusades.

Governing a vast empire extending from the Atlantic to central Asia proved impossible. Abbasid political unity deteriorated rapidly from 861 to 945 as religious (Khariji and Shii) and regional differences, and particularly competing political aspirations, precipitated a series of revolts and secessionist movements. In Morocco, Tunisia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq itself, local governors, who were often army commanders, asserted their independence as heads of semiautonomous states. These regional rulers (amirs, or commanders), while continuing to give formal, nominal allegiance to the caliph, exercised actual rule over their territories, establishing their own hereditary dynasties. By 945, the disintegration of the universal caliphate was evident when the Buyids (Buwayhids), a Shii dynasty from Western Persia, invaded Baghdad and seized power, and their leader assumed the title commander-in-chief or commander of the commanders. Although Shii, they did not change the Sunni orientation of the empire and left the caliph on his throne as a titular leader of a fictionally unified empire. The Abbasids continued to reign but not rule. With an Abbasid on the throne as a symbol of legitimate government and Muslim unity, real power passed to a series of Persian (Buyid) and Turkic (Seljuq) military dynasties or sultanates. The sultan ("power," ruler), as chief of the commanders, governed a politically fragmented empire as the caliph helplessly stood by.

Sunni Islam was also threatened by two other developments during the Abbasid caliphate—the rise of the Fatimid dynasty and the Crusades. The Ismaili rebellion in Tunisia and subsequent establishment of a Shii imamate in Egypt constituted a serious religiopolitical challenge. The Fatimids claimed to be Imams and were not content to simply govern Egypt, but, as we have seen, followed other Ismaili groups in sending their missionaries to spread their Shii doctrine. This Shii challenge elicited a religious as well as a military response as Sunni *ulama* moved to protect their version of orthodoxy in the face of Shii innovations. They were supported in their endeavors by the royal court, which wished to counter Shii anticaliphal sentiments. This contributed to a growing tendency among the Sunni *ulama* to preserve the unity of Islam through greater self-definition and standardization. In the face of the internal breakup of the central empire, this meant achieving a consensus on the corpus of Islamic law in order to protect and maintain the sociopolitical order.



## Islam and the West: The Crusades and Muslim Response to Militant Christianity

Despite their common monotheistic roots, the history of Christianity and Islam has more often than not been marked by confrontation rather than peaceful coexistence and dialogue. For the Christian West, Islam is the religion of the sword; for Muslims, the Christian West is epitomized by the armies of the Crusades. From the earliest decades of Islamic history, Christianity and Islam have been locked in a political and theological struggle, because Islam, unlike other world religions, has threatened the political and religious ascendancy of Christianity. Muslim armies overran the Eastern Roman empire, Spain, and the Mediterranean from Sicily to Anatolia. At the same time, Islam challenged Christian religious claims and authority. Coming after Christianity, Islam claimed to supersede Christian revelation. While acknowledging God's revelation and revering God's messengers, from Adam through Jesus, as prophets, Islam rejected the doctrine of Christ's divinity, the finality of Christian revelation, and the authority of the church. Instead, it called on all, Jews and Christians as well, to accept finality of revelation and prophecy in Islam, to join the Islamic community, and to live under Islamic rule. Islam's universal mission had resulted in the spread of Muslim rule over Christian territories and Christian hearts. While conversions were initially slow, by the eleventh century large numbers of Christians living under Muslim rule were converting to Islam. Even those who had remained Christian were becoming Arabized, adopting Arabic language and manners. The European Christian response was, with few exceptions, hostile, intolerant, and belligerent. Muhammad was vilified as an imposter and identified as the anti-Christ. Islam was dismissed as a religion of the sword

led by an infidel driven by a lust for power and women. This attitude was preserved and perpetuated in literature such as the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante consigned Muhammad to the lowest level of hell. Christian fears were fully realized as Islam became a world power and civilization while Christianity staggered and stagnated in its Dark Ages.

By the eleventh century, Christendom's response to Islam took two forms: the struggle to reconquer (the *Reconquista*) Spain (1000–1492) and Italy and Sicily (1061), and the undertaking of another series of Christian holy wars—the Crusades (1095–1453).

Two myths pervade Western perceptions of the Crusades: first, that the Crusades were simply motivated by a religious desire to liberate Jerusalem, and second, that Christendom ultimately triumphed.

Jerusalem was a sacred city for all three Abrahamic faiths. When the Arab armies took Jerusalem in 638, they occupied a center whose shrines had made it a major pilgrimage site in Christendom. Churches and the Christian population were left unmolested. Jews, long banned from living there by Christian rulers, were permitted to return, live, and worship in the city of Solomon and David. Muslims proceeded to build a shrine, the Dome of the Rock, and a mosque, the al-Aqsa, near the area formerly occupied by Herod's Temple and close by the Wailing Wall, the last remnant of Solomon's temple.

Five centuries of peaceful coexistence elapsed before political events and an imperial-papal power play led to centuries-long series of so-called holy wars that pitted Christendom against Islam and left an enduring legacy of misunderstanding and distrust.

In 1071, the Byzantine army was decisively defeated by a Seljuq (Abbasid) army. The Byzantine emperor, Alexius I, fearing that all Asia Minor would be overrun, called on fellow Christian rulers and the pope to come to the aid of Constantinople by undertaking a "pilgrimage" or crusade to free Jerusalem and its environs from Muslim rule. For Pope Urban II, the "defense" of Jerusalem provided an opportunity to gain recognition for papal authority and its role in legitimating the actions of temporal rulers. A divided Christendom rallied as warriors from France and other parts of Western Europe (called "Franks" by Muslims) united against the "infidel" in a holy war whose ostensible goal was the holy city. This was ironic because, as one scholar has observed, "God may indeed have wished it, but there is certainly no evidence that the Christians of Jerusalem did, or that anything extraordinary was occurring to pilgrims there to prompt such a response at that moment in history." [19] In fact, Christian rulers, knights, and merchants were driven primarily by political and military ambitions and the promise of the economic and commercial (trade and banking) rewards that would accompany the establishment of a Latin kingdom in the Middle East. However, the appeal to religion captured the popular mind and gained its support.



The contrast between the behavior of the Christian and Muslim armies in the First Crusade has been etched deeply in the collective memory of Muslims. In 1099, the Crusaders stormed Jerusalem and established Christian sovereignty over the Holy Land. They left no Muslim survivors; women and children were massacred. The Noble Sanctuary, the Haram al-Sharif, was desecrated as the Dome of the Rock was converted into a church and the al-Aqsa mosque, renamed the Temple of Solomon, became a residence for the king. Latin principalities were established in Antioch, Edessa, Tripoli, and Tyre. The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted less than a century. In 1187, Salah al-Din (Saladin), having reestablished Abbasid rule over Fatimid Egypt, led his army in a fierce battle and recaptured Jerusalem. The Muslim army was as magnanimous in victory as it had been tenacious in battle. Civilians were spared; churches and shrines were generally left untouched. The striking differences in military conduct were epitomized by the two dominant figures of the Crusades: Saladin and Richard the Lion-Hearted. The chivalrous Saladin was faithful to his word and compassionate toward noncombatants. Richard accepted the surrender of Acre and then proceeded to massacre all its inhabitants, including women and children, despite promises to the contrary.

By the thirteenth century the Crusades degenerated into intra-Christian wars, papal wars against its Christian enemies who were denounced as heretics and schismatics. The result was a weakening, rather than a strengthening, of Christendom. As Roger Savory has observed:

> An ironical but undeniable result of the Crusades was the deterioration of the position of Christian minorities in the Holy Land. Formerly these minorities had been accorded rights and privileges under Muslim rule, but, after the establishment of the Latin Kingdom, they found themselves treated as "loathsome schismatics." In an effort to obtain relief from persecution by their fellow Christians, many abandoned their Nestorian or Monophysite beliefs, and adopted either Roman Catholicism, or—the supreme irony—Islam.[20]

By the fifteenth century, the Crusades had spent their force. Although they were initially launched to unite Christendom and turn back the Muslim armies, the opposite had occurred. Amid a bitterly divided Christendom, Constantinople fell in 1453 before Turkish Muslim con-

querors. This Byzantine capital was renamed Istanbul and became the seat of the Ottoman empire.

## The Sultanate Period: Medieval Muslim Empires

By the thirteenth century, the Abbasid empire was a sprawling, fragmented, deteriorating commonwealth of semiautonomous states, sultanates, governed by military commanders. It was an empire in name only. The fictional unity of a united Islamic community symbolized by the caliph in Baghdad, stood in sharp contrast to the underlying reality of its political and religious divisions. Invaded and ruled successively by the Buyids and then the Seljuks, Baghdad was completely overrun in the thirteenth century by the Mongols. Pouring out of Central Asia, the armies of Genghis Khan had subjugated much of Central Asia, China, Russia, and the Near East. In 1258, the Mongol army under Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, captured Baghdad, burned and pillaged the city, slaughtered its Muslim inhabitants, and executed the caliph and his family. Only Egypt and Syria escaped the Mongol conquest of the Muslim empire. In Egypt, the Mamluks ("the owned ones"), Turkish slave soldiers who served as a sort of praetorian guard, seized power from their Ayyubid masters. The Mamluk sultanate successfully resisted the Mongols and ruled until 1517.

Although the destruction of Baghdad and the abolition of the Abbasid caliphate brought an end to the caliphal period and seemed to many an irreversible blow to Muslim power, by the fifteenth century Muslim fortunes had been reversed. The central caliphate was replaced by a chain of dynamic Muslim sultanates, each ruled by a sultan, which eventually extended from Africa to Southeast Asia, from Timbuktu to Mindanao, as Islam penetrated Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. Among the principal missionaries of Islam were traders and Sufi brotherhoods.

Muslim power peaked in the sixteenth century. Three major Muslim empires emerged in the midst of the many sultanates: the Ottoman Turkish empire, centered in Istanbul but encompassing major portions of North Africa, the Arab world, and Eastern Europe; the Persian Safavid empire, with its capital in Isfahan, which effectively established Shii Islam as the state's religion; and the Mughal empire, centered in Delhi and embracing most of the Indian subcontinent (modern-day Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh).[21] Baghdad's successors were the imperial capitals of Istanbul, Isfahan, and Delhi. Political ascendancy was accompanied by a cultural florescence. As in Abbasid times, great sultans, such as the Ottoman Sulayman the Magnificent (reigned 1520–66), Shah Abbas in Persia (reigned 1587–1629), and the Mughal emperor Akbar (reigned 1556–1605) in India, were patrons of learning and the arts.



The Ottoman empire was the heir to the Mongol-Turkish legacy of Ghengis Khan and his successors. The fall of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453 to the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II and the conquest of Byzantium realized the cherished dream of Muslim rulers and armies since the seventh century. The acknowledgment of Mehmet as "The Conqueror" throughout the Islamic world and his cosmopolitan capital at Istanbul, which sat astride both Europe and Asia, symbolized the power and mission of an emerging imperial giant.

The Ottomans drew on their Mongol-Turkish and Islamic roots and traditions, combining a warrior heritage with an Islamic tradition that believed in Islam's universal mission and sacred struggle (jihad), to establish themselves as worldwide propagators and defenders of Islam. They became the great warriors of Islamic expansion through military conquest. The titles taken by Ottoman sultans, such as "Warrior of the Faith" and "Defender of the Sharia," reflected this religiopolitical justification and rationale. Ottoman suzerainty was extended to the Arab Middle East and North Africa, incorporating such major Islamic cities as Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Damascus, and Tunis along with great centers of Islamic learning like Egypt's Al-Azhar and Tunisia's Zaytouna Mosque-University. Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Tripoli, the Balkans, and much of Eastern Europe were also absorbed. A besieged Europe struggled for its existence. After two centuries of confrontation, Ottoman forces were decisively turned back by the navies of Christian Europe at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The Ottoman defeat and the truce of 1580 in the Mediterranean "confirmed the frontier between Christian and Muslim civilizations that has lasted to the present day." In 1683 Ottoman expansion in Eastern Europe was checked by the failure of the siege of Vienna.

During the 1600s the Ottoman empire fully evolved. Istanbul, whose population of 500,000 was more than twice the size of any European capital, became once again an international but now Islamized center of power and culture. Scholars, artists, and architects from all over the Islamic world and Europe were commissioned, as Muslim conquerors also proved to be great builders of civilization as well. The skyline of Istanbul was transformed by the distinctive cupolas of palaces and mosques. The royal family lived in splendor in the Topkapi

palace, preserved today as a great museum. An imperial monarchy governed subjects of many tribal, ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds from the Mediterranean to Iran.

Both Byzantine and Turkish-Muslim influences informed the development of the political, legal, economic, and social institutions of the state. The ruling class comprised the Ottoman family and a special cadre of Balkan slaves who had been Turkified and Islamized through a sophisticated educational system so that they might serve as government administrators and members of the elite military, the Janissaries. Ottoman sultans relied on a strong military of slave-soldiers supported by gunpowder technology; the empire was governed by means of a centralized administration and a well-organized bureaucracy. Alongside the political establishment was a structured religious establishment. The *ulama*, schools, and the courts were brought within the state's bureaucracy. Through royal patronage, the empire developed a hierarchy of Islamic institutions: local Quran schools, mosque-universities (*madrasas*), and courts. At the apex of the state's religious bureaucracy was the *shaykh al-Islam*, who like the chief *qadi* (judge), was appointed by the sultan. Thus, Ottoman *ulama* families became a religious aristocracy.

A distinctive feature of the Ottoman sultanate was the millet system, a variation on the earlier Islamic institution of the *dhimmi*, or protected non-Muslim peoples, which recognized and regulated the rights and duties of religious communities. (Whatever the Ottoman desire was to forge a broader identity, the basic units of society were the empire's religious communities, which provided the primary source of identity and loyalty.) Leaders of religious communities (Christian patriarchs and chief rabbis) were appointed by the sultan to collect the taxes due the royal household and to rule over their communities. Religious communities enjoyed limited autonomy. They could operate their own churches and synagogues, schools, and domestic religious courts, train and govern their clergy, and oversee their charitable institutions.

As the Ottoman empire prospered in its imperial fortunes, new rival Muslim empires were emerging in the sixteenth century: the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) in Iran and the Moghul empire (1520–1857) in the Indian subcontinent. The Safavids had begun as a revivalist Sufi brotherhood in the thirteenth century, calling for a restoration of a purified Islam. By the fifteenth century, the brotherhood was transformed into a religiopolitical movement, combining Shii messianism and a call for armed struggle (jihad) against other Muslim regimes, which it denounced as un-Islamic. In 1501, Ismail (1487–1524), head of the Safavid family, invaded and occupied Tabriz, proclaiming himself shah of Iran.



Within a decade, he had conquered the rest of Iran, rapidly building an empire east of the Ottoman frontier. The creation of the Safavid dynasty made Shii Islam the official religion of an Islamic empire.

Shii Islam was effectively imposed in Iran through a process of persecution and doctrinal interpretation. Shah Ismail imposed Twelver Shii Islam upon Iran's Sunni majority to unify his rule. He sought religious legitimacy and leadership by asserting that he was a descendant of the twelfth (hidden) imam and a *mahdi*, or divinely guided reformer. Thus, the shah was both temporal and spiritual ruler, emperor and messianic messenger. The religious pretensions of Safavid rulers were symbolized by their title, "Shadow of God on Earth." Rival Islamic groups or interpretations of Islam (Sunni and Sufi) as well as non-Muslim communities were suppressed. The Safavids enforced their own brand of Shii religiopolitical ideology and identity in an attempt to legitimate their political authority and to forge a new Safavid Shii Iranian bond of solidarity. A full-blown Shii alternative to Sunni Islam was skillfully developed. Sufi ideas, philosophical doctrines, and popular religious practices such as saint veneration were selectively appropriated. Emphasis was placed on the veneration of sacred "Shii" persons: Husayn, the imams, and their families. Visits to their shrines replaced popular Sufi village shrines. Sunni persecution of Ali and his family was commemorated, while the first three caliphs were ritually cursed as usurpers. The martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala, the scene of the original massacre of Husayn and his followers by Sunni forces, became a central religious symbol, ritually reenacted during the sacred month of Muharram in passion plays which emphasized mourning, self-sacrifice and atonement. Karbala served as an alternative pilgrimage site to Mecca, which was under Ottoman control. Shii *ulama* from Iraq, southern Lebanon, and Bahrain were brought to Iran as missionaries and became part of the state-created and controlled Shii religious establishment, responsible for preaching Shii doctrine and manning the schools, universities, seminaries, and courts.

The Safavid empire reached its zenith guided by the genius of its most celebrated sultan, Shah Abbas (1588–1629). From his capital in Isfahan, he oversaw an ambitious program of state building, implementing administrative, military, economic, and religious reforms. Generous religious endowments supported the building of major religious monuments, schools, mosques, and hospitals. As with the Ottomans, the *ulama* and their educational and judicial institutions were brought within the Safavid state bureaucracy.

The splendor and accomplishments of the Ottomans in the Arab Middle East and Eastern Europe and the Safavids in Iran were matched

by those of India's Mughal dynasty, which was founded in the sixteenth century. North India had long been the scene of Muslim penetration and conquest, with the invasions of Arab soldiers in the seventh century and the establishment of the Turkish and Afghan dynasties of the Delhi sultanate (1211–1556). Muslims in the Indian subcontinent were a minority ruling a vast Hindu majority. In fact, Muslims never actually ruled all of India.

The Emperor Akbar (1565–1605) made the Mughal empire a reality. During his long reign, through conquest and diplomacy he significantly extended Muslim rule into major areas of the subcontinent. The emperor initiated policies to foster greater political centralization and the social integration of his Muslim and Hindu subjects. Religious learning, tolerance, harmony, and syncretism were hallmarks of Akbar's reign. Royal patronage sponsored the building of schools and libraries. A policy of universal tolerance and abolition of the poll tax as well as a tax on Hindu pilgrims fostered loyalty among Hindus, who constituted the majority of his subjects. Akbar encouraged the study of comparative religions and built a House of Worship, where religious scholars from various faiths engaged in theological discussion and debate. Sufi brotherhoods who followed a more flexible, eclectic approach in their encounter with other faiths enjoyed court favor. Their emphasis on religious synthesis, which stressed similarities rather than religious differences, was preferred to the rigid legalism of the more conservative *ulama*. The power of the *ulama* was circumscribed, and their ire incurred by a state-sponsored religious cult, the religion of God or divine religion (*din illahi*), which emphasized the truth to be found in all religions. They took special offense at the Infallibility Decree of 1579, which recognized the emperor, rather than the *ulama*, as the final authority in religious matters.

*Ulama* opposition to Akbar's eclectic religious approach and legacy was joined to that of religious reformers such as Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), a member of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood, who rejected religious assimilation and advocated a more pronounced emphasis on the Islamic basis and character of state and society. However, it was the emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707) who dismantled Akbar's pluralistic system of governance. Aurangzeb implemented the *ulama*'s more exclusive (rather than Akbar's inclusive) religiopolitical order, which emphasized implementation of Islamic law (including the prohibition of alcohol and gambling), a subordinate political and social status for non-Muslims, reimposition of the poll tax, and the destruction of Hindu temples.



The political and religious accomplishments of Akbar and his successors were accompanied by the florescence of Mughal art. Mughal painting and architecture reflected both Persian and Ottoman influences. As with its Safavid and Ottoman counterparts, Mughal art reached great heights in manuscript illustration and miniature paintings as well as the design and building of religious and public monuments—grand mosques, forts, and palaces. Perhaps the most famous product of this period is the Taj Mahal, built in Agra by Shah Jahan, a grandson of Akbar, as a memorial to his beloved wife.

Despite the division of the Muslim world into separate sultanates, a Muslim traveler across this vast area could experience an international Islamic order that transcended state boundaries, particularly in the urban/intellectual culture of cities and towns. All Muslim citizens were members of a transnational community of believers, citizens of the *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) who, despite differences of interpretation, professed faith in one God, His Prophet, and revelation. All were bound by the Sharia, Islamic law, and obligated to observe the Five Pillars of Islam. The Islamic city reflected this common framework and culture in its organization and institutions (mosques, legal codes and courts, schools and universities, Sufi convents, religious endowments, a political establishment of sultans, military commanders, and soldiers as well as a religious establishment of *ulama* and Sufi shaykhs or *pirs*—scholars and mystics).

Despite variations and the individual policies of some rulers, the imperial Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal sultanates demonstrated a somewhat common Islamic ideological outlook and approach to state organization, support, and use of Islam. Rulers bore the title "sultan" (the one who possesses power or authority). Their rule was based on a blend of military strength and religious legitimacy. The sultan appropriated the caliph's charge as defender and protector of the faith. Islamic law continued to enjoy pride of place as the official law of the state. Religion not only supported the state but was itself supported by state patronage. In particular, many of the *ulama* became part of a prosperous religious establishment that assisted the sultan's attempt to centralize and control the educational, legal, and social systems. They educated the military, bureaucratic, and religious elites in their schools, supervised and guided the interpretation and application of Islamic law in the Sharia courts, and oversaw the disbursement of funds from religious endowments (*waqf*) for educational and social services from the building of mosques and schools to hospitals and lodges for travelers. During this time, a number of the nonofficial

*ulama* in particular developed strong international linkages. Many people came from far and wide to study at Mecca and Medina or at the renowned al-Azhar University in Cairo. After years of study and interchange, they returned to their home territories or took up residence in other parts of the Islamic world. Scholars, in particular, often traveled throughout the Muslim world to study with great masters and collect Prophetic traditions and reports about the Prophet's words and deeds. Islamic learning and interpretation possessed truly international character due to the sacrifice and commitment of these learned men. As the *ulama* developed and prospered, so too did the Sufis. Their eclectic, syncretistic tendencies enabled Islam to adapt to new environments and absorb local religious beliefs and customs. This complemented and enhanced the general process of adaptation pursued by the sultans and attracted droves of converts as Islam spread at an astonishing rate in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Established Sufi orders, like the Naqshbandi, spread from the Indian subcontinent to the Mediterranean, becoming vast international networks, and new orders sprang up and prospered.

Within the diversity of states and cultures, Islamic faith and civilization provided an underlying unity, epitomized by a common profession of faith and acceptance of the Sharia, Islamic law. Islam provided the basic ideological framework for political and social life, a source of identity, legitimacy, and guidance. A sense of continuity with past history and institutions was maintained. The world was divided into Islamic (*dar al-Islam*, the abode of Islam) and non-Islamic (*dar al-harb*, the abode of warfare). All Muslims were to strive to extend Islam wherever possible. Thus, merchants and traders as well as soldiers and mystics were the early missionaries of Islam. The sultan was the protector and defender of the faith charged with extending the Islamic domain. Citizenship, taxation, law, education, social welfare, defense, and warfare were based on Islam. The *ulama* for their part successfully asserted their role as protectors and interpreters of the tradition. Thus, both the political and the religious authorities, the "men of the sword" and the "men of the pen," appealed to Islam to legitimate their authority. For the majority of believers, there was a continuum of guidance, power, and success that transcended the contradictions and vicissitudes of Muslim life, and validated and reinforced the sense of a divinely mandated and guided community with a purpose and mission.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, the power and prosperity of the imperial sultanates were in serious decline. The decline of the great Muslim gunpowder empires coincided with the Industrial Revolution and modernization in the West. The emergence of modern Europe as a major military, economic, and political power ushered in the dawn of European colonialism. Internal political disintegration (the rise of semiautonomous regional and provincial governments), military losses, a deteriorating economy affected by European competition in trade and manufacturing, and social disruption signaled the dénouement of Muslim imperial ascendancy. The Safavid empire fell in 1736; dynastic rule would not be reestablished until the end of the century under the relatively weak Qajar dynasty. The Mughal empire lingered on in name only, subservient to Britain, until 1857, when India was formally declared a British colony. Only the Ottoman empire survived into the twentieth century, when it collapsed and was dismembered by the British and the French during the post–World War I Mandate period. As we shall see, the social and moral decline of these great Muslim empires would contribute to a wave of Islamic revivalist movements throughout much of the Muslim world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.