Islam

Continuity and Change
in the Modern World

Second Edition

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Dedicated to Sarah, Layla, and Michael,
whose support makes research possible

The Islamic Dimension: Historical Foundations

The history of the Islamic community is a dynamic part of the Islamic experience. The early and continuing success of Islam provided a confirmation for Muslims of the message of the revelation, and the starting point for an understanding of Islam in the modern world must be the historical experience of the *ummah* (the Muslim community). The long interaction between changing conditions and the permanently established Quranic message has set patterns and ideals, and an analysis of the continuing effectiveness of that interaction is a necessary foundation for an understanding of Islam in the contemporary world.

The Islamic dimension involves the complex and rich heritage of the Islamic community. There are many significant elements which can be viewed in terms of three general themes: the historical development of the community, the common elements of the continuity of the Islamic experience, and the basic elements of diversity within the Islamic community.

The Islamic Community in History

The heart of the Islamic faith is the belief in one God who is directly involved in the affairs of humanity. God is seen as requiring submission to His will and as having made that will known to humanity through revelations to a series of prophets. For Muslims, the final and complete form of those revelations was given to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. It is carefully recorded in the Quran and is the foundation of Islam. Muslims, then, are those people who accept the unique oneness of God and recognize that Muhammad was the messenger of God.

This simple foundation for faith and experience has significance for all aspects of life. The revelation did not just define a creed or a set of beliefs; it set forth the basic blueprint by which humanity should live. In this way, the Quran is the foundation for the ideal society, which Muslims believe will result from submission to God and His will. To be a Muslim is not simply a matter of individual belief; it means participating in the effort to implement God's will on earth. As one modern Muslim explains it, "Islam teaches not only that the realization of the good is possible in this world but that to bring it about here and now is precisely the duty of every man and woman."[2] In the broadest sense, the Islamic community is that community which works to implement God's will as defined in the Quran here on earth in the contexts of history and society.

The experience of the Muslim community is a key part of the Islamic message. The foundation for the Islamic awareness of historical experience

is set in the Quran itself, as it "lays great emphasis on the fact that the process of history is not neutral in respect of nations and communities for it says clearly, 'God is on the side of those who fear Him and do good.'"[3] The success or failure of actual communities of Muslims becomes a major concern, with political structures, economic practices, and social customs all being relevant to the historic vocation of faithful Muslims. However, throughout Islamic history, there have been disagreements over the way God's will is to be implemented. These disagreements are the basis for a variety of styles and modes of Islamic experience, and they provide a starting point for understanding the dynamics of Islamic history.

Muhammad and His Community

The Muslim community began during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, and by the time of his death in 632, the basic principles had been established. "The Muslim Community as a fabric of society, with its own principles of internal solidarity, was brought into being under his own hands even though it underwent further important developments later."[4] The Muslim community as it emerged during the life of the Prophet became a model for later Muslims as they attempted to live up to the commands of God and to create a society in accord with revelation.

The early community is not simply an utopian creation of later imagination. It was a functioning, real community, however much subsequent generations may have idealized it. In its actual experience, the community set the patterns that have guided the habits and customs of later Muslims. These patterns have provided an important element of continuity over the centuries of Islamic experience.

The keystone of the new human community in the seventh century was the Prophet. Underlying similarities in leadership styles within the Muslim world down to the present "can be traced to the days of the Prophet Muhammad, himself the model par excellence of political leadership."[5] In Muhammad, there was the distinctive unification of political, social, and religious concerns that characterizes the Islamic tradition.

Muhammad was born in Mecca, a commercial and religious center in the western Arabian Peninsula. When he was about forty, he began to have religious experiences, which took the form of visions and revelations from God for the guidance of humanity. The message preached by Muhammad on the basis of these revelations had direct bearing on the social and personal conditions of the time. In a sanctuary center of tribal polytheistic cults, he preached that there are no other gods than the one God, and in a city dominated by wealthy merchants, he preached social responsibility toward the

Ultimately the Umayyads won the war and created an effective imperial organization. The majority of Muslims did not follow either the radicalism of the Kharijites or the legitimacy of the Shi'a. Instead, the majority position, which came to be called Sunni Islam, accepted the customary tradition, practice, and consensus (the *sunnah*) of the early community as being itself guided by God. In this first conflict and definition of positions, one can see the beginnings of the basic styles or modes of Islamic experience: the pragmatic adapters, the conservatives, the fundamentalists, and those who emphasize personal spiritual power.

The first civil war was only a brief pause in the dynamic growth of the Islamic community. Under the Umayyads a vast imperial organization was created with the caliph at the center. The Umayyads faced many challenges and were finally overthrown by the Abbasids in the middle of the eighth century, but this change of caliphal dynasties did not stop the continued expansion and development of the Islamic community. The period of the great caliphates of the Umayyads and the Abbasids was the time of the great flowering of medieval Islamic civilization. The ideal of political unity under the caliph was maintained and closely approximated historical reality. The processes of defining the Islamic tradition and absorbing many cultural elements created the dynamic sociocultural synthesis of Islamic civilization. This era saw the formalization of the great structure of Islamic law (the *shari'ah*), the development of the Islamic philosophical tradition, and the general agreement on the content of the Traditions of the Prophet.

The political unity of the Abbasid caliphate began to crumble by the middle of the tenth century. The empire may have been too large to maintain for long with the available technology. The contradiction between a hierarchically organized imperial structure and the more egalitarian message of the Islamic revelation may also have been a factor. The caliphate was no longer the sole focus of Muslim loyalty. There was now the whole emerging vision of an Islamically based social order with a system of law, philosophy, and personal piety that could function without the direction of an imperial leader. The core group of the community was no longer the group around the caliph, it was the emerging social grouping of those learned in Islamic knowledge, called the *ulama* ("learned people"), and other pious articulaters of the Islamic message.

The Abbasid caliphate continued, fulfilling a generally symbolic role, until the Mongol destruction of their capital, Baghdad, in 1258, but effective leadership in military and political affairs was taken over by military commanders, called sultans. The political system of the Muslim community was gradually transformed from the formal unity of the early caliphate to the political fragmentation of the rule by regional military commanders. Al-

though the political unity of the Abbasid caliphate crumbled, the imperial experience reinforced the enduring feeling of the essential unity of the Islamic community and the importance of the social and political dimensions of the revelation.

The New Islamic Society of the Sultans

The new Islamic society, which emerged in the era of the sultanates, had a number of distinctive features. For all practical purposes, the state passed into the hands of the strongest military commanders. Between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries, a bewildering array of military states emerged. Some were large and others were little more than small garrisoned city-states. Some were built around adherence to Shi'ite Islam, but most ruled under the banner of Sunni Islam. The legacy of this period is a tradition of the firm control of state structures by pragmatic military commanders. The state was not, however, a secular institution; it was subordinate to the ideals of the Islamic faith and part of a broader sense of Islamic community involving a cosmopolitan social order that transcended the boundaries of any particular state.

The development of this cosmopolitan Islamic social order involved the emergence of important groupings and institutions not directly tied to the state. The ulama assumed an increasingly influential position as a professional class within the community. There is no specially ordained clergy in Islam, but the learned people have a distinctive position on the basis of their knowledge. The formalization of Islamic law standardized the Islamic learning that identified the ulama, but the structure of the law was not monolithic. In the Sunni tradition, four systems of legal thought—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—were recognized as valid. During the sultanate period, special educational institutions (*madrasahs*) became focal points for the ulama. Scholars traveling from school to school and from region to region provided a cosmopolitan sense of unity. A scholar like Abu Abdallah ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century could travel through many different states from west Africa to southeast Asia and still maintain a "consciousness . . . of the entire Dar al-Islam [House of Islam] as a social reality."[6]

A second important social organization is related to the development of the piety and religious practices of the masses. In the early days of Islam, there were mystics who had lived reclusive lives of piety and asceticism. The tradition of personalized, mystic piety, which is called Sufism, gradually developed a theological-philosophical structure of thought. At first, most ulama were suspicious of Sufism but the teachings of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) integrated Sufism into mainstream Sunni thought. This

was followed by the articulation of a full-scale elaboration of Sufi theology along monistic or pantheistic lines by Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240).

Sufi social organizations, called *tariqah*s, began as informal groups of disciples gathered around particularly famous Sufi guides. By the twelfth century, these groups became more formally organized, and *tariqah*s became large-scale, popular associations based on pious devotional traditions. There was no central organization for all *tariqah*s, but many individual orders, like the Qadiriyyah, spread throughout the Islamic world. Like the networks of schools and traveling scholars, the *tariqah*s provided a means of integration and identity that transcended the boundaries of the separate military states and helped to give a cosmopolitan structure to the transcontinental social order of Islam.

The evolution of the Islamic social order emphasized the ideal of a community that is integrated as a whole through personalized associations. Although there were rich and poor, leaders and followers, elites and masses, the social groupings did not create entities (like class, church, or state) that stood "between the individual and the community of the faithful" as a whole.[7] The sense of belonging to the *ummah* became a central feeling, and for the Sunni majority, that sense had a higher claim than loyalty to a particular state. That tradition of social order has helped to shape modern sociopolitical development in the Islamic world.

Islamic Dynamism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

The development of the new cosmopolitan social order was accompanied by dramatic expansion so that by the end of the fifteenth century the world of Islam had doubled in size since the days of the Umayyads. The global Islamic community experienced a brilliant political and cultural florescence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the most visible aspect of which was a broad band of militarily strong, wealthy, and expansive imperial systems. The largest of these states have been called "gunpowder empires" because they were the product of harnessing gunpowder technology for military and political goals. That technology involved a transformation of government that "led to the rise of central governments and the decline of feudal lords . . . The states that successfully made the transition to the gunpowder age were those that strengthened their administrative and commercial classes at the expense of the landowning aristocracy."[8] The special structure of the new Islamic society initially aided that transition since the landowning aristocracy had less power in the sultanate system of rule.

The largest of the gunpowder sultanates were the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean region, the Safavid state in Iran, and the Moghul Empire of

India. However, the network of Islamic states spread from Philippines and southeast Asia to the city-states of the east African coasts and the large states of central and west Africa, like the Songhai Empire. Coping with the diversity of peoples and cultures that had become part of the Islamic world set the tone for this era. Each region had its own distinctive ways of dealing with sociocultural pluralism, but the overall sense of Islamic community provided a common foundation. The two alternative approaches were a tolerant openness and a more strict exclusivism. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both approaches were used but there was a gradual shift in emphasis. The expansion and early consolidation of the great states were associated with a more tolerant acceptance of diversity. By the end of the seventeenth century, there was a reaction to the compromises that were involved, and the dominant mood began to shift in the direction of greater exclusivism.

This shift can be seen in the development of the different states. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Sultan Mehmet II gave special recognition to the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, giving him civil as well as religious authority over Orthodox Christian subjects of the empire. In this way, the *millets* or religious communities began to be organized in a "system of autonomous self-government under religious leaders" that eventually was extended to all major non-Muslim groups in the empire.[9] There was a similar openness among Muslim in the empire. Popular Sufi orders allowed practices that were not strictly Islamic but these orders were usually suppressed only if they engaged in antigovernmental activities. Within the schools of the ulama, a wide range of intellectual subjects was covered, thus following "the most broadminded traditions of sunni Islam."[10]

During the sixteenth century, an effort was made to organize and codify the system more formally. Suleyman I, the great sultan of the century, centralized the system while the ulama, fearing that the openness was diluting the Islamic message, began to limit intellectual speculation in the schools. On the popular level, heterodox religious groups came under tighter controls both out of a desire to purify popular practice and to defend the empire from the threat of internal subversion in the face of the growing Shi'ite power of the Safavid state in Iran.

In the Ottoman experience, the continuing interaction of the different styles of Islam is visible. The pragmatic adaptationists created new ways of action, the conservatives preserved the gains that had been made in the past, and the fundamentalists kept the responses to change within the bounds of what was clearly Islamic. In the centuries of great dynamism, there was a gradual shift in emphasis from the flexibility of the early days to a more

conservative and sometimes fundamentalist vision of the Ottoman Empire as the greatest Sunni state.

The same general dynamic is visible elsewhere in the Islamic world. The sixteenth century was a time of great Islamic expansion in India under the Moghul sultans. Babur, a central Asian military adventurer, defeated the medieval sultanates of northern India, partly by using gunpowder technology. His grandson, Akbar, who became emperor in 1556, built an effective administrative structure, which combined the diverse elements within his empire. The majority of the population in the new empire was non-Muslim, and Akbar's state was built on a tolerant acceptance of religious diversity. Akbar even attempted to create an eclectic court religion, which would combine the teachings of the major religious traditions of his subjects. This effort paralleled a popular religious trend that worked within the framework of local devotional practice and Sufi pantheism to combine Hindu and Muslim ideas and practices.

Some Muslims saw these developments as a threat to the basic Islamic message and the ability to create a truly Islamic social order. Some ulama and other teachers responded in a variety of ways. One of the most important responses was the activism of the leaders of a noncompromising *tariqah*, the Naqshbandiyyah. A major figure in this *tariqah*'s revivalism was Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), who lived at the end of the tenth century of Islamic history and became known as the Renewer (*Mujaddid*) of the second thousand years. From its base in India, the Naqshbandiyyah revivalist spirit spread throughout much of the Islamic world, and it may have played a role in inspiring revivalist feelings in Ottoman areas.

The reaction against the eclecticism of Akbar and the syncretism of the popular devotional movements spread to the highest levels of government. Sultan Aurangzeb (1618–1707) made the exclusivist spirit the basis for Moghul imperial policy. During his reign, the transition from a dominant spirit of accommodation to a fundamentalist spirit reached a climax.

This transition took a variety of forms throughout the Islamic world. In the far west of the Islamic world, there was the transition from the relatively open, cosmopolitian court of the Moroccan sultan Ahmad al-Mansur (r. 1578–1603) to the more fundamentalist attitudes of Moroccan rulers like Muhammad ibn Abdallah (r. 1757–1790) and Mawlay Suleyman (r. 1792–1822). At the other end of the Islamic world, in the East Indies, the relatively syncretist mood of southeast Asian Sufism was challenged by more strict teachers like Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili (d. after 1693).[11]

The nature of the great flourishing of Islam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was not radical innovation, nor were the old traditions ultimately questioned. Marshall G. S. Hodgson suggests that "it was a florescence within established lines of tradition, rather perfecting than launch-

ing them. . . . Perhaps we may say that this florescence was not one of *origination* . . . but rather one of *culmination* in a culture already long mature."[12] In the context of the continuing visible success of the Islamic community, there was little need to question the basic traditions.

Common Themes and Diverse Interpretations

Islam is a distinctively identifiable part of world history, but it is not monolithic. While the most visible aspect of the Islamic dimension is the experience of the Sunni-dominated community, as articulated by the political and cultural elites, it is not the totality of the experience of Muslims. Within the broad framework of the shared basic Islamic message, there is a luxuriant diversity. Part of the dynamism of the Islamic experience has been the continuous interaction between common themes and diverse interpretations and applications of those themes.

Common Themes

All Muslims, regardless of their particular interpretations, accept certain common elements of faith. The first of these is symbolized in the acceptance of the statement that "there is no god but the one God." However it may be defined, Islam means submission to the divine, and that principle is expressed in a clear monotheism.

The full statement of Islamic belief that is accepted by all Muslims adds the affirmation, "and Muhammad is the messenger of the one God." This addition has two important corollaries. It means that God's revelation through Muhammad is the real word of God and that Muhammad is in some ways a significant person in the history of the world.

This revelation in its exact words is believed to be recorded in the Quran. Although there are diverse interpretations, there are no disagreements over the wording of the Quran. The Quran is the crucial sign of the revelation. In the revelation, Muhammad is instructed to say, "Even if humanity and the spiritual forces joined together, aiding each other, in order to produce something like this recitation [the Quran], they would not produce anything like it."[13]

The experience of the Quran surrounds Muslims in a variety of ways. Its recitation is a common sound in the Islamic world; it is visually present in the decoration of buildings; and its phrases are a part of the long literary tradition. Indeed, its very syntax and grammar are the basis for linguistic study and usage. The Quran overrides sectarian and geographic divergences and is a vital element in the continuity of Islamic history.

The second corollary involves the definition of Muhammad's role. The revelation is in the word, not specifically in the person of the Prophet. The tone is set in the Quran by the statement: "And what is Muhammad, except simply a messenger? Before him there have been other messengers who have passed away."[14] The role of the messenger is, however, crucial when the message is from God. As a modern Arab writer notes, "recourse to testimony is one, if not the only, foundation of the Muslim religion; for the word of God is transmitted by a witness, the veracious Prophet."[15] Without a full acceptance of the integrity of Muhammad, the validity of the Quran would be suspect. The continuing strength and power of this position could be seen in the near universal condemnation by Muslims of the novel by Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses,* in 1989, because the novel was seen as questioning the integrity of the Prophet and the authenticity of the Quran.[16]

Another common theme is the idea of unity (*tawhid*), which, on the most general level, is the principle of the unitary nature or oneness of God. In specific terms, there may be disagreement over the implications of *tawhid,* but Muslims across a full spectrum of views see the principle as a key one in terms of human life. A modern Shi'i philsopher states, "To the Muslim, the idea of unity does not just mean the assertion that there is only one God sitting in heaven instead of two or three . . . On the social plane Unity expresses itself in the integration of human society."[17] Similarly, a major Sunni fundamentalist thinker says that "*Tawhid* is that which gives Islamic civilization its identity, which binds all its constituents together and thus makes of them an integral, organic body which we call civilization."[18]

These common themes emphasize the moral and ethical dimensions of the revelation. Muslims are to build and work in a moral, divinely guided community, and the *ummah* (the Islamic "community") is an important focus of Muslim identity and loyalty. Although there are disagreements over specific aspects of the nature of the community, the moral dimension of Islam and the critical importance of the community of believers are common themes within the Islamic tradition.

The oneness of God, the Quran, the significance of Muhammad, and the community are basic elements in the continuity and unity of the Islamic dimension. Different perceptions of these elements and diverse historical experiences create varying manifestations of Islam. However, this diversity is more often expressed in local variations and overlapping interpretations than in formal schisms and sectarian distinctions.

Diversity Within the Sunni Tradition

The ideals and organizations of the majority of Muslims fit within the broad patterns of Sunni Islam. However, within these boundaries there is

great scope for diversity of approach and emphasis. Even on the basic question of the meaning of the oneness of God, differing aspects of the divine are emphasized by different Sunni groups. Two poles of the interpretive spectrum are emphasis on the immanence of God and emphasis on God's transcendence. Although no Muslim loses all sense of either aspect of God, there is a tendency to focus on one or the other. The Sufi traditions concentrate on the closeness of God to the individual believer and the legalistic ulama place greater weight on divine transcendence. Within the Sunni community, when Sufism has moved in the direction of a more overt pantheism, there has been resistance, just as extreme legalism has often aroused a more mystical response. A similar diversity can be seen in approaches to Quranic interpretation.

The life of Muhammad has received great attention in the Sunni tradition. Major efforts to collect the Traditions of the Prophet culminated in the ninth century when six great collections of *hadith*s were compiled and came to be accepted as the standard body of the Traditions. However, these collections are not canonical and their authority comes from a flexible consensus in the community rather than an official institutional validation.

The information provided by the records of the early community is the basis for the Sunni definition of the just society. The early community is accepted by Sunni Muslims as being a special example of the way the *ummah* should be, and later Sunni revivalists have modeled their actions on those of the *salaf* ("pious ancestors"). This community provides a relatively concrete basis for the ideal even though great diversity in interpreting the experience is possible.

Sunni Muslims are in full agreement that the message of unity provides the foundation for social integration and that this means that the legal basis for society is Islam. However, as the Islamic legal system evolved, a number of accepted schools emerged rather than one single, authoritative statement of the law. By the time of the rule by sultans, four Sunni schools of law (*madhhab*s) had come to be accepted as equally authoritative, despite the disagreements among them. These schools are not separate "sects" or "denominations," but, rather, emphasize different moods and techniques of law and interpretation.

Each school starts from the bases of the Quran and the Traditions. The Hanafi school traces its development back to Abu Hanifa (d. 767), and gives some emphasis to personal reasoning and free judgment in legal interpretation. Because of its relative flexibility, it became the school of a number of major states and was officially recognized by the Ottoman and Moghul rulers. It is thus widespread in the central and eastern parts of the Islamic world. The Maliki school, which traces back to Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), places greater stress on using the Traditions as a basis for legal interpretation and is more conservative in mood. It became the dominant school in much of Islamic Africa. Muhammad al-Shafi'i (d. 820), the founder of the Shafi'i

school, developed a more formal science of jurisprudence, which character-
izes his school, by combining a strict usage of Traditions with a formal
methodology of analogical analysis. This school became important in the
Arabic-speaking areas of the eastern Mediterranean. The fourth school is the
Hanbali. It is the most strict in its insistence upon an adherence to the specific
terms of the Quran and the Traditions, and it allows very little scope for indi-
vidual reasoning or analogy. This school has often been associated with funda-
mentalism and is currently dominant in Saudi Arabia. The law schools reflect
the fact that Sunni Islam is not monolithic. It is the product of diversity devel-
oping within the framework of the great common themes of Islam.

The Special Case of Shi'ism

The major division within Islam is between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. At
the heart of the split is disagreement over the nature of the *ummah* and the
full meaning of the revelation. The Sunni majority tradition has the authority
of being confirmed by the historical experience of the community, while the
Shi'i Islamic tradition has often been at odds with the actual historical expe-
rience. The Shi'i tradition developed as an alternative vision and, in the days
of the caliphs, presented a basis for opposition to the emerging Sunni politi-
cal and social establishments. When Abbasid unity crumbled in the tenth
century, successful Shi'i movements built the large Fatimid empire in Egypt
and north Africa and a number of smaller states. However, the firm estab-
lishment of the sultanate system was accompanied by a reassertion of Sunni
dominance in most of the Islamic world.

In the framework of the great common themes, the Shi'ites tend to em-
phasize the immanent aspects of the divine, especially in terms of leadership
for the community as being centered in the figure of the Imam. In the Shi'ite
view, Muhammad *did* designate a successor and that person was Ali. The
validity of the succession of the first three caliphs was denied, and the com-
munity is believed to have been in error. The importance of a designated
successor or Imam was explained in terms of the continuing human need for
guidance in understanding and applying the revelation. "The interpretation
of the divine revelation by the Imam . . . was regarded as the right guidance
needed by the people at all times."[19]

For most Shi'ites, there was a line of twelve Imams who provided this
guidance, even though none of the Imams gained significant political power.
In the tenth century, this "Twelve-Imam Shi'ism," or Imami Shi'ism be-
lieves that the twelfth Imam in the line was taken into divinely sheltered
seclusion and will return to visible leadership of humanity at some future
date as a Mahdi or messianic guide.

Diversity within Shi'ism comes over the identification of the authority of
specific Imams. One group associates itself with Zayd ibn Ali, who led a
revolt in 740. Among the Zaydi Shi'ites, the Imam is any member of the
house of the Prophet who rises against the illegitimate rulers of an age. This
tradition became established in Yemen. Another group takes as its starting
point the claim of a person called Isma'il to be the legitimate seventh Imam.
The Isma'ilis maintained a more revolutionary mode as the majority of the
Shi'ites became more politically passive in later Abbasid times.

Significant numbers of Imami Shi'ites are in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq,
and they are the dominant majority in Iran. This dominance began when the
Safavid state established Imami Shi'ism as the official religion of the Iranian
state in the sixteenth century. By Safavid times, Imami basic positions had
become carefully articulated. The Ja'fari school of law, whose origins are
identified with the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, provides the basic structure
for jurisprudence and differs little from the Sunni schools except in the issue
of the Imamate and the choice of authentic traditions. In the area of political
theory and community guidance, it was clear that "pending the return of the
Hidden Imam, the possibility of absolute claim to political power (*qudra*)
and authority (*wilaya*) resembling that of the Imam himself was ruled out."[20]
In this situation, Imami Shi'ites accepted the idea that there are religious
teachers whose piety and knowledge render them capable of independent
interpretive judgment in matters of faith. These people are called *mujtahids*,
that is, people who can exercise *ijtihad* ("independent judgment"). It came
to be accepted that in the absence of the Imam, people needed to follow the
guidance of a living *mujtahid*.

Developments in the Safavid state reflect the broader trends of the time in
the Islamic world. Early Safavid rulers created a relatively flexible state
system, culminating with the rule of Shah Abbas (r. 1587–1629). However,
by the mid-seventeenth century, the Shi'i ulama were asserting their own
position as guides for the community and at the end of the century one of the
major *mujtahids*, Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, compiled a comprehensive
exposition of Imami Shi'ism in strict and uncompromising terms. In the
following years, as the Safavid state itself collapsed, the religious scene was
dominated by a tension between two schools of thought: the Usuli, which
utilized a more flexible methodology that relied on reasoned opinion and
analogy, and the Akhbari, which was more fundamentalist in tone.

Diversity Through Popular Practice

The vibrant diversity of Islamic experience is not confined to the realms
of the ulama and the political elites. Underlying the visible movements of

thought and social structure is the general faith of the masses. The application of the great common themes in daily life is influenced strongly by local customs and traditions. There is a lively interaction in Islamic history between the cosmopolitan literate tradition and the "popular religion" of the masses. "Popular Islam" is often defined in negative terms as Islamic experience that has been "diluted" by non-Islamic practices. Traditionally strict ulama as well as modern intellectuals tend to condemn what they see as magical practices and superstitions.

One dimension of popular faith is the role of specially respected local holy men. In all of the areas which became part of the Islamic world, there were customs built around the local religious leader, and the functions performed by those leaders were taken over by Muslim guides as the communities converted to Islam. Just as there are distinctive differences between the shamans of central Asia and the village spiritual leaders in Africa, local Muslim leadership also presents a picture of diversity. In general terms these figures came to be explained in Islamic terms as *walis*, or individuals who are especially close to God.

In popular faith the immanent aspects of God tend to be stressed, and explanations tended to take Sufi forms. As a result, there was frequently a blending of Sufi teachings, tariqah structures, and local devotional practices and organizations. Popular tariqahs often became the vehicles for flexible adaptation to local conditions and helped to bring new peoples into the Islamic community. However, because of this openness, fundamentalist movements often opposed the popular practices of the Sufi groups in their efforts to "purify" religious life.

A second major theme in popular religion is continuing messianic expectations. Although the achievements of the Islamic community have been great, life for the average peasant, worker, or nomad continues to be difficult. The revelation is seen by them as a promise for a better future, a world of justice without oppression. Islam was and is a vehicle for the expression of these hopes. It is widely accepted that at the end of the current age, God will send a rightly guided leader, the Mahdi, "who will fill the world with justice, as it had been filled with injustice."[21]

The doctrine of the coming of the Mahdi is most fully developed in Shi'i teachings. However, despite reservations on the part of the Sunni ulama, the expectation of the Mahdi is also part of popular Sunni Islam. "It was, then, in the hearts of the Muslim multitude that the faith in the Mahdi found its resting place and support . . . The more, too, the Muslim masses have felt themselves oppressed . . . the more fervent has been their longing for this ultimate restorer of the true Islam and the conqueror of the whole world for Islam. And as the need for a Mahdi has been felt, the Mahdis have always

appeared."[22] Militant Islamic activism, whether Sunni or Shi'i, has often taken the form of a Mahdist movement. Within Sunni Islam there has also developed a less apocalyptic vision or revival involving a renewer or *mujaddid* who is thought to be sent by God at the beginning of each century to bring new life to Muslims.

Popular Islam presents further elements of diversity within the Islamic community. The faith of the masses has been shaped by the broad, common themes of Islam and they have looked to the great leaders of the faith as well as their local leaders for guidance. At the same time, the vigor of popular faith has helped to maintain an awareness of the problems of daily life and the special visions of hope shaped by the expectations of the masses have influenced the thinking and practices of the intellectual and political elites.

Conclusion: Basic Styles of Action

In this complex array of great themes, elements of diversity, and different moods and approaches, it is helpful to look for common patterns or styles of approach and action among Muslims. Such patterns are, of course, constructs created by the viewer to aid in understanding the complexity of the Islamic experience, and yet they can help to bring some comprehensible order to the vast subject. One framework for organization which arises from this discussion of continuity and change, of common themes and diversity, is to note the different styles of social action in the broad Islamic experiences.

In the experiences of coping with change and maintaining continuity, it is possible to define four styles of action. Other approaches might see more or fewer styles, while still others might prefer to view the experiences in very different ways. In this discussion of continuity and change in the modern world, however, the organizing framework for the presentation will be to view the three dimensions of the Islamic experience as the context for four styles of Islamic action, as have already been seen in the premodern history of the Islamic community.

The first of these styles is the adaptationist, which represents a willingness to make adjustments to changing conditions in a pragmatic manner. This style is visible in the political realism of the early caliphs and sultans and is manifested in the intellectual traditions of those thinkers who adapted Greek philosophical traditions in explaining Islamic positions. The religious openness of Akbar in Moghul India and the flexibility of popular Sufi teachers are other examples of this style.

This adaptationist style opened the way for the great syntheses that have

given dynamism and social power to the Islamic community. It made it possible for Muslims to cope with many great challenges, such as the tensions arising from the first conquests, the problems associated with the collapse of the political unity of the early caliphate, and the intellectual challenges of integrating new ideas into the basic framework of the Islamic revelation.

The success of Islam brought achievements that are worth preserving, which is the motivation behind the second style, the conservative. As a great synthesis emerged, much of the learned community hoped to preserve the gains that had been made. From the very beginning, the perfection of the revelation has been seen by Muslims as requiring a reserved attitude about change that is too rapid. In this style, a mistrust of innovation tends to be the keynote.

The efforts of the conservatives have served the Islamic community well in times of turmoil, and they have helped to keep the compromises of the adaptationists within the bounds of what has become accepted as Islamic. In the long run, the conservative style of action has avoided supporting stagnation of the community by gradually accepting new circumstances as they have become part of the established order to be preserved.

The third style is the fundamentalist. The scriptures of religions that accept the concept of recording divine revelations provide a basis for a permanent standard to use in judging existing conditions. In Islam, the Quran is this unchangeable standard, and the fundamentals of the faith as presented in the Quran have a universally accepted validity within the Islamic community. The fundamentalist style insists upon a rigorous adherence to the specific and general rules of the faith and presents a critique of existing conditions by calling for a return to the fundamentals of the faith. When additional elements are accepted as authoritative, they may also be included among the fundamentals. Thus, within Sunni Islam, the Sunnah of the Prophet, as defined by the *hadith* literature, is also used as a basis for evaluating Muslim practices, as are the collections of the traditions of Ali and the Imams within Shi'i Islam.

The distinction between the fundamentalist and conservative styles is important. Fundamentalists are unwilling to accept adaptations and are more often critics than defenders of existing conditions. They frequently are political activists, and they often are disturbing elements who upset social stability and oppose the conservative establishments of Muslim society.

The fundamentalist style serves as a corrective adjustment mechanism. In the context of change and adaptation, fundamentalists work to keep the basic Islamic message in full view of the community. When adjustments to local conditions or the adoption of new ideas and techniques threaten to obliterate

the unique and authentically Islamic elements, fundamentalist pressure begins to build. In one sense, the mission of Islamic fundamentalism is to keep adjustments to change within the range of those options that are clearly Islamic.

The fourth style places emphasis on the more personal and individual aspects of Islam. Although all Muslims recognize the communal implications of the revelation, there is a style which tends to subordinate legal structures and communal institutions to the personal aspects of piety and leadership by charismatic, divinely guided individuals. The Shi'i concept of the Imamate and the popular belief in the Mahdi are broad political manifestations of this style, and it is also visible in the Sufi tradition of personal piety and the importance of the local spiritual guide. This style of action permeates the whole Islamic experience, and in a general sense, the resistance of the Islamic tradition to the creation of a formal church structure and an ordained clergy is a product of this individualized spirit.

These styles are not formal, separate movements within the Islamic community but represent orientations for action within the broader Islamic experience as a whole. In any specific group or individual, the styles are combined with varying degrees of emphasis. The identification of these styles is for the purpose of providing an analytical framework for understanding the complex dynamics of the Islamic experience.

The Islamic dimension of this study includes the historical experience of the community. In that history there is a dynamic interaction between the elements of continuity and change, including the interplay between the challenge of adapting to changing conditions and the steady adherence to to fundamentals of the faith. The way these elements interact is described by observing the various styles of Islamic action and response. The heritage of the Islamic community is the foundation of the modern history of Islam.

Muhammad

'Ali,b. Abi Talib (d. 661) + Fatima

al-Hasan (d. 670)

al-Husayn (d. 680)

'Ali,b. al-Husayn (d. 712–13)

Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 731–32)

Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765)

Zaydi Imams

Ithna Ashari Imams

Musa al-Kazim (d. 799–800)

'Ali al-Rida (d. 817–18)

Muhammad al-Jawad (d. 835)

'Ali al-Hadi (d. 868)

Hasan al-'Askari (d. 872)

Muhammad al-Mahdi (*ghaybah* 873–74)

Ismaili Imams

Isma'il

Muhammad

Ahmad

Muhammad

Abdallah

Muhammad al-Mahdi

Muhammad al-Qa'im

Fatimid Caliphs to Mustansirbillah (d. 1094)

Imams of the Mustali Ismailis

Until 1130 when their Imam went into *ghaybah*

Imams of the Nizari Ismailis

Line of Imams continuous until the present with Shah Karim, Aga Khan as 49th living Imam.

The Shia Imams.