

The Religious World

Communities of Faith

THIRD EDITION

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Chapter 9

Islam

*Translation of the
Quranic basmalah:
"In the name of
God, Most
Gracious, Most
Merciful."*



Islam is among the youngest of the world's major religions, belonging to the family of monotheistic faiths that also includes Judaism and Christianity. From its beginnings in what is now Saudi Arabia over fourteen hundred years ago, it has grown and spread to include virtually every corner of the world. The majority of the followers of Islam, called *Muslims*, live in the continents of Africa and Asia (including the Asian regions of the former Soviet Union and northwest China). Among the countries with the largest Muslim populations in Asia are Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, the Arab Muslim countries of the Middle East and the Gulf (in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, among other countries, where there also are Arab Christians), Afghanistan, China, Iran, Malaysia, and Turkey.

In Africa the majority of people living in North Africa are Muslim; Nigeria's Muslim population numbers more than fifty million and Muslims are also found in many of the countries of West, East, and Central Africa. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, Muslims have migrated to North America, Australia, and Europe. Among European countries, several areas of the former Yugoslavia

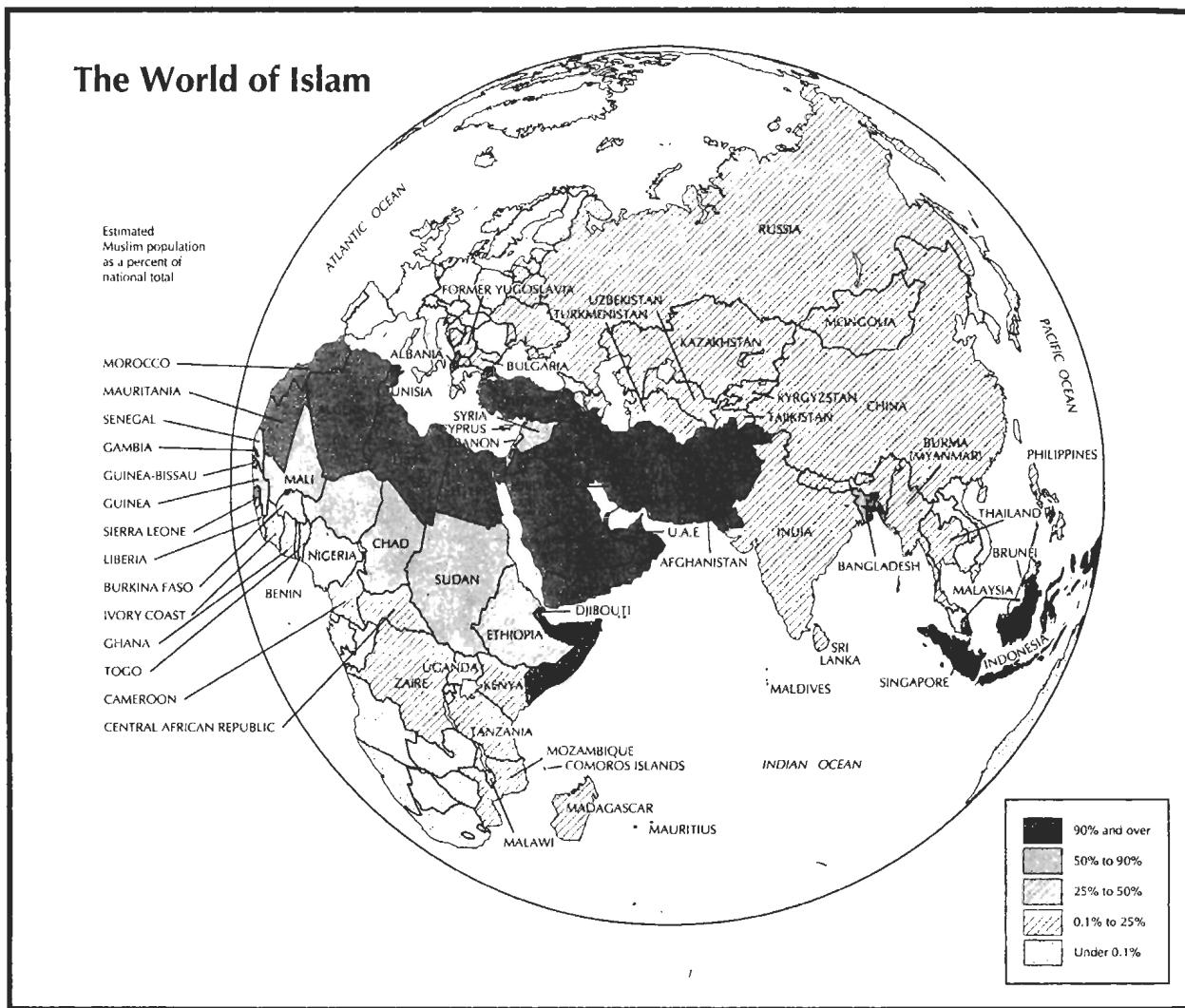
and Albania have been home to Muslim communities for several centuries. The majority of the peoples of the Central Asian Republics—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikstan, Turkmenia, and Uzbekistan—are Muslim. The accompanying map illustrates the current extent of Islam. The "World of Islam," as the area in which Muslims predominate has traditionally been called, thus represents a great deal of diversity in language, culture and ethnicity. Yet historically, religious practices, institutional development, and common patterns reflected in the built environment have provided this world with a sense of unity that is still reflected in the urban and rural life of major Muslim centers all over the world.

The encounter of the World of Islam with the growing military and economic power of European colonialism from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries disrupted the character and patterns of life of most Muslim peoples, whose lives came to be governed or influenced by the policies of the respective colonial powers and internal conflicts over boundaries and political control. Much of their recent history reflects the desire on the part of newly created Muslim nation-states to free themselves

from dependence and to gain greater control over their affairs. The pressures and challenges generated by global politics and nation-building have not always made the task easy. The effort to create modes of life that would reflect past values and provide a sense of continuity with the Muslim heritage is still fraught with tension. But most Muslims continue to perceive Islam as more than a mere source of religious values. In their view, it still provides the basis for inspiring a whole way of life.

BEGINNINGS: ARABIA BEFORE ISLAM

The Arabian peninsula, where Islam had its beginnings in the seventh century C.E., was mostly an arid region populated by nomadic tribesmen called Bedouins. To the north were Arab kingdoms that had contacts with the two major empires of the time, the Byzantine and the Persian Sassanian empires. In the south were other centers of ancient Arab civilization in Yemen. The peninsula was also dotted with growing urban centers and oases.



Among these, the most important was the city of Mecca. It served as a center for the caravan trade routes that crisscrossed the peninsula. Besides its significance as an important trading center, Mecca had a religious sanctuary to which the Arabs were drawn for annual rites of pilgrimage, which also became an occasion for expressing a shared cultural and linguistic heritage.

Bedouin life was governed by tribal custom. Primary allegiance was to the tribe, which formed the focal point of the nomadic existence. Economic life was based on the size of the tribes' camel herds, on occasional raiding of caravans, and on trading with settled city communities. In religious life each tribe possessed certain deities that its members worshiped. The sanctuary of Mecca contained shrines

of some important goddesses, in addition to a host of other divinities. The presence of small Jewish communities and, to a lesser extent, Christians added an element of religious cosmopolitanism to the peninsula.

The importance of trade and caravan routes across Arabia led to the growth of a merchant community in Mecca. The merchants had developed their own organizations to control and consolidate their hold on the economy of Mecca and maintained the religious sanctuary to protect Mecca's importance as a pre-Islamic center of pilgrimage. Also to safeguard its trade they established cordial relations with the Bedouins, so that they might not raid the caravans and thereby destroy the mainstay of Mecca's economy.



Prayer Scene. Muslims at prayer in a desert locale. Prayer carpets have been spread out and the worshipers are kneeling in the direction facing the Ka'ba in Mecca. (Courtesy of Fred Denny)

THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

The Early Years in Mecca

It was in such a milieu that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was born about 570 C.E. Muslim tradition provides a record of the major events of his life, furnishing us with a picture of the man, his mission, and the impact of his personality and life on the Arab society of his time. The first years of his life were marred by the deaths of both parents and the grandfather who had come to take care of him. He grew up in the home of his uncle, Abu Talib, a merchant in the city. Much of his early life was spent helping his uncle, but as a young man Muhammad also came to be admired by other Meccans for his trustworthiness and sincerity. His reputation and personal qualities led to his marriage at the age of twenty-five to Khadija, a widow whom he had assisted in business; henceforth, he became an important and trusted citizen of Mecca.

Although a prosperous and well-established merchant in his own right, Muhammad never felt fully content to be part of a society whose values he considered to be materialistic and devoid of true religious significance. He sought such a significance in his own life by spending long solitary hours in a cave on nearby Mount Hira. There were others in Arab society, referred to as *hanifs*, or the "pure" ones, who also devoted their lives to contemplation and asceticism. Muhammad, however, did not choose to cut himself off from his family and society. Khadija gave birth to several children; two sons died in infancy, but four daughters survived, among whom the best known was the youngest, Fatima. Muhammad thus had ongoing responsibilities both as a father and as a citizen in Mecca's public life. His most profound moments, however, came through the acts of solitary meditation and self-contemplation on Mount Hira. Out of these experiences emerged the prophetic call that was to alter dramatically Arab and world history in times to come.

During one such evening in the cave, Muhammad heard a voice. The words he heard heralded a series of revelations that were to come to him for

the rest of his life. They are recorded in the *Quran*, which is for Muslims a faithful recording of the entire revelation of God through Muhammad, his chosen Prophet to humankind. These first words called upon Muhammad to

Recite: In the name of your Lord who created—created Man from a clot [of blood].

Recite: Your Lord is Most Noble.

Who taught by the Pen,
taught Man what he did not know. (*Surah 96:1-5*)*

The initial effect of this experience was to plunge Muhammad into a state of anguish and fear. He hurried home to his wife, from whom he sought solace and help in understanding the significance of what had happened to him. These moments of anguish, plus the ambivalence he felt about the nature of the experience and his own uncertainty regarding the call, indicate that the role asked of him as not one he had consciously sought, nor one to which he was led by any self-seeking ambition. Into his human consciousness had erupted the full force of a revelatory experience. It was this reality that he gradually and steadily came to learn and believe, until he was at last driven to proclaim it as the truth. In addition, this comprehension of his role as a messenger of divine revelation helped him to understand his mission in the light of prophets and messengers who had come and gone in earlier times and places. Henceforth his work would represent a continuing link in the transmission of the message, which according to the *Quran* had begun ages ago and was being channeled through him to the society in which he lived, and beyond. At this time Muhammad was forty years old.

His first convert was Khadija, whose support and companionship provided necessary reassurance and strength. He also won the support of some close relatives and friends. Gradually he began to proclaim the message to others in Mecca. The Meccans responded initially with puzzlement

* Wherever the *Quran* is quoted in this chapter, the first Arabic numeral indicates the number of the *Surah* or chapter and the second set of numerals the number of the verses (*ayat*).

and even amusement. It astonished them to see a trusted and respected citizen claiming to be the recipient of a divinely revealed message that told them to forsake their gods, laws, and customs. Some even pronounced him mad. Muhammad persisted, however, preaching openly with increasing fervor.

The style and poetic quality of the early message, as preserved in the Quran, conveys a powerful sense of this message.

In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful.
By the night as it enshrouds.
By the day as it illuminates,
by the creation of male and female,
indeed your affairs lead to various ends.
For those who are giving and committed,
and who affirm moral excellence,
We shall smooth their way.
But for the niggardly and the vain,
who reject moral excellence,
We shall make things miserable.
Their wealth will not save them
as they perish,
for guidance is from us
and to us belong the Last
and the First. (92:1-14)

The basic themes of the early message were the majesty of the One, unique God; the futility of idol worship; the threat of judgment; and the necessity of faith, compassion, and morality in human affairs. All of these themes represented an attack on the materialism and idolatry prevalent in Mecca and among the Bedouins.

These attacks resulted in mounting opposition from the tribe of Quraysh, which controlled Mecca. Because Muhammad was a member of the same tribe, the Quraysh tried at first to exert pressure on Abu Talib to stop his nephew from preaching; they then tried to bribe Muhammad by offering him an important role in Meccan affairs, but to no avail. When these efforts failed, the merchants began persecuting Muhammad and his small band of followers. In 615 some of the new converts had to leave their homes and seek refuge in Ethiopia. Meanwhile Muhammad continued to face opposition and hostility, which eventually extended to a

commercial and social boycott of his family. Khadija, who had been a devoted companion, and Abu Talib, his uncle, both died during this period of trial. Muhammad's attempts to seek converts outside the city of Mecca failed. Persecution often turned to violence, endangering the lives and families of the converts. This period was emotionally for Muhammad the lowest point in his mission. A chapter of the Quran captures the mood exquisitely as it seeks to give solace to the Prophet:

By the radiance of morning and the hush of night
Your Lord has neither forsaken you nor left you
forlorn;
and the Last shall be better for you than the First.
Your Lord shall give and you shall be satisfied.
Did he not find you an orphan and shelter you?
Did he not find you erring, and guide you?
Did he not find you needy, and enrich you?
As for the orphan, do not oppress him
and as for the beggar, do not spurn him,
and as for your Lord's blessing, declare it openly.

(98)

Muhammad also drew comfort from the knowledge revealed to him about other prophets such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, each of whom had been persecuted, tested, and challenged by seemingly invincible forces. Their eventual success testified to divine support and ultimate victory. Sustained by these beliefs, Muhammad's community continued to adhere to the message, worshiping together and drawing courage from his example and leadership.

Some distance north of Mecca lay the city of Medina, then called Yathrib. It was an agricultural community with differences among its major groups. There was also a Jewish community there, so that the Arabs of the city were conversant with monotheistic beliefs. Following a meeting of some of its inhabitants with Muhammad, they invited him to come to Yathrib to arbitrate some of the differences among the various factions. They also responded favorably to his teaching and pledged him their support. Meanwhile, the Quraysh were plotting to kill Muhammad. Before such a plan could be put into action, he asked his followers in

Mecca to join those who had already left for Yathrib. Under the cover of darkness, he and his followers succeeded in eluding the pursuit of his enemies, arriving in the city that would henceforth carry his title—*Madinat al Nabi* (The City of the Prophet) or Medina, as it is generally known. This event in the year 622 is known as the *Hijrah*, or migration, the date from which the Islamic calendar would henceforth begin. The year of migration thus marks the first year of the new lunar calendar.

The Years in Medina

The city of Medina provided the first real opportunity for Muhammad and his followers to organize themselves into a community. The community included the Arab residents of Medina, some of whom had converted to the new teaching, and the Jews who lived there. The community was called the *Ummah*. Muhammad was recognized as its leader by virtue of his status as Allah's Prophet, and all the groups agreed to support each other in the event of Meccan opposition. The Jews were permitted to continue their way of life and recognized as the "people of the Book," to whom God had revealed a message in the past through other prophets. But Muhammad also sought to attract them to the new faith.

The growth of the *Ummah* in Medina, and Muhammad's continuing efforts to spread the new faith, antagonized the Meccans. For the new Muslim *Ummah*, the effort to win converts and exercise control over their own destiny signified a *jihad*, a struggle in the way of God. The word *jihad* literally means "struggle" or "striving." In early Muslim history it signified the military struggles to establish and consolidate the *Ummah*, the task of spreading Islam through preaching and conversion, and the effort to establish a social and economic order based on the teachings of the Quran. This struggle for power resulted in a series of military battles. The first of these, the Battle of Badr, took place in 624. The battle pitted the smaller, somewhat apprehensive army of Muhammad against the Quraysh contingent, which far exceeded them in

numbers and weapons. Muhammad led the Muslims, organizing them in battle. The Muslims, standing their ground, eventually forced the enemy to withdraw and finally to flee from the field of battle. The victory was a tremendous boost to the growing *Ummah*. It reinforced their faith and morale, and consolidated their belief in Muhammad's divine mission and leadership.

In subsequent battles the Muslims became the dominant religious and political force in the region. It was then decided that those Muslims who had once been forced out of Mecca should now have an opportunity to visit it, and a truce was arranged. In a subsequent visit to Mecca in 629, Muhammad and his followers returned in triumph to take control of the city. The final victory was a peaceful one. To underline his ties with the city, Muhammad invited his enemies to embrace Islam, shun their past way of life, and become members of the *Ummah*.

In the next two years the new religion found many converts. Religious practices became established and a revealed "law" governed relationships within the *Ummah*, which now had its own distinctive Islamic identity. Muhammad sent emissaries to invite other Arab tribes to Islam, and also sent representatives to the rulers of surrounding states and to the emperors of Byzantium and Persia. It is clear that he envisaged his message as not being limited to the Arabs, but sought to spread the message of Islam beyond the borders of Arabia.

By 632 the *Ummah* embraced almost the whole of Arabia, its members bound together by the acceptance of the message and messenger of Allah. In the same year, Muhammad undertook his last visit to Mecca, a farewell pilgrimage to the sanctuary that had now become a symbol of Allah's revelation.

The Death and Significance of Muhammad

Muhammad died in Medina on the twelfth day of *Rabi al Awwal*, the year 10 of the new Muslim era. It is said that many of his followers refused to accept his death. Then one of his trusted compan-

ions, Abu Bakr, reminded them of the Quranic verse that states:

Muhammad is but a messenger. Many messengers before him have come and gone. Were he to die or be killed, would you take to your heels? Those who turn back cause no loss to Allah and He will surely reward those who are grateful to Him. (3:144)

Within the Arabian setting, Muhammad gave an impetus to the lives of his followers that was to lead them to spread Islam far beyond the borders of Arabia. His mission encompassed several goals, but primary among these were the goals of creating a society cemented by loyalty to Islam rather than to tribe; linking his people to the worship of One God who had chosen to speak to them through one of their own in their own language; and providing a framework of values, actions, and institutions that would continue to bind them together so that, in the words of the Quran, they might become "an Ummah of the middle way and a witness to humanity as the Prophet was a witness to them" (2:143).

After the death of the Prophet, Muslim scholars set about collecting material on his life, consisting of the *hadith*, a standardized report of things he did and said, transmitted by his companions or members of his family. These traditions were then passed on to succeeding generations. These *hadith* and the chain of transmitters were in turn submitted to a test of authentication to enable scholars to judge the relative validity of the accounts. The corpus of the Prophet's sayings and actions thus constitutes an important source of values in Islam. For Muslims, they are a model and represent an ideal pattern, referred to as the *Sunnah*, meaning custom or practice of the Prophet. The *Sunnah* provides Muslims with a pattern they can emulate. In so doing they look to Muhammad as an exemplary human being, who had realized in his own life the ideals of Islam revealed by God.

Muhammad's practice of prayer and devotion to God; his role as husband and parent; his example of humility, compassion, and justice, and his acts of kindness to children, orphans, the disadvantaged, and animals all serve as a model of proper conduct.

It is this role of Muhammad envisioned as teacher, exemplar, and ideal that has the greatest impact on the ordinary lives of Muslims and is illustrated vividly in the *hadith*, given below as they have come to be recorded and preserved. Generally, each *hadith* is preceded by the name of a transmitter or chain of narrators and then a report of what "the messenger of God said."

To pursue knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim, man and woman.

The ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of martyrs.

Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.

None of you (truly) believes until you wish for your fellow human being what you wish for yourself.

Acting justly between two people is an act of charity, a good word is charity; and removing a harmful thing from the road is charity.

Let those who believe in God and the Day of Judgment refrain from harming their neighbors, let them honor their guests and either speak good or hold their tongues.

The one who shows concern for the widows and the disadvantaged is like one who struggles in the way of God or fasts by day and rises at night for prayer.

Adore God as though you see Him; if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you.

God said "Heaven and earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of my devotee does contain Me."

Imitation of the Prophet's behavior thus represents a goal of all Muslims. Although Muhammad is emulated and deeply loved as God's final messenger, he is not the object of worship. His tomb in Medina is visited by Muslims and prayers are offered there; but no attempts have been made to convert the tomb into an object of undue veneration, and no images or likenesses of Muhammad are preserved. Muslim tradition has resisted any such attempt to guard against possible deification of the person of the Prophet.

In their daily prayers, and whenever his name is mentioned, Muslims invoke blessings on Muhammad and his descendants as a continuing mark of remembrance and gratitude. In addition to being a model of piety and of continuing struggle at all

levels of life against adversity, his life is also a paradigm and ideal of spiritual life and love, of one who attained closeness and intimacy with God. Besides being the object of historical writing, his life has also been a rich source of poetry and folk literature written in praise and love of his work and example. Above all, for all Muslims he is the recipient of God's final message, enshrined for all time in the revelation contained in the Quran.