

A Quran School. A children's Quran school, adjacent to a mosque, in Indonesia. Children learn to recite and memorize the Quran.
(Courtesy of Fred Denny)

known as *tafsir*. The study of the Quran has thus been at the heart of all Muslim scholarship and has given the intellectual and scientific endeavors of the Islamic world a great sense of unity in the quest for new knowledge.

for all Muslims to the present. Among the beliefs, there are certain basic concepts that are regarded as fundamental for all Muslims.

Tawhid, the Unity of God

QURANIC TEACHINGS: FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS

The greatest impact of the Quran from the earliest period of Islam has been the worldview it teaches and the guidelines for daily life it provides. These have served as the basis for Islamic beliefs and practices that have continued to remain normative

The central concept around which all Quranic teaching revolves is that of *tawhid*, the unity or oneness of Allah, the Quranic name for God. Such a concept emphasizes a rigorous monotheism, stating Allah to be a unique absolute Reality. It is best expressed in a Quranic chapter said to be revealed in response to questions asked of Muhammad concerning the nature of God:

Say: He, Allah, is One, the Ultimate Source, He does not give birth, nor was He born [of anyone], and there is nothing comparable to Him. (112)

The unity of God is emphasized repeatedly in the Quran and echoed in other verses such as the following:

And your God is One God,
There is no God but Him,
the most Gracious, the most Merciful. (2:163)

In denying plurality, the Quran rejects all forms of idolatry, disallows any association of other divinities with God, and specifically denies all other definitions of God that might compromise unity, such as the Christian dogma of the Trinity. Thus, in Islam Allah is the sole reality on whom the existence of everything else depends.

An aspect of this oneness is expressed in God's creative power. The Quran also refers to God as *Rabb al Alameen*, the Lord of all creation (literally "the worlds"). The whole of the cosmos, nature as well as humanity, is created and sustained by God. This notion of God's sovereignty is expressed in the well-known "verse of the Throne":

Allah, there is no god but He,
the Living, the Eternal,

Neither slumber nor sleep seizes Him.
To Him belongs what is in
the heavens and in the earth.

Who can intercede with Him,
except by His permission?

He knows what lies before
them and after them

and they know nothing of his knowledge,
save such as He wills.

His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth
and He never wearsies of preserving them.

He is Sublime, the Exalted. (2:255)

Although One, God is known by many names, which are referred to in the Quran as "the most beautiful names" (7:180). Muslim tradition has established a sequence of ninety-nine of these names of God, and the Muslim rosary contains a chain of ninety-nine beads, in a thrice thirty-three arrangement,

ment, so that the names may be recollected during prayer. These names are also a key to understanding God, because they focus on divine attributes such as the *Compassionate, Merciful, Just, Mighty, First, Last, Eternal, One whom no vision can grasp*, and yet *He who is ever near*. Among the images used to portray God's nature, none is perhaps as striking as that of "light":

Allah is the light of the heavens and of the earth
The symbol of his light is a niche,
within which there is a lamp,
the lamp enclosed in a glass,
the glass as though it were a shining star
which is lit from a blessed tree—
an olive neither of the East nor of the
West, whose oil gives forth light though
no fire touches it—light upon light—
Allah guides to His light whom He pleases
and He strikes parables for humankind and
of all things He is aware. (24:35)

Although transcendent in nature, God is still close to creation. He is viewed as being as close to human beings as their jugular vein, responsive to human appeals, and, above all, universal: "To Allah belong the East and the West: wherever you turn, there is His Face. He is all-present, all-knowing" (2:115).

Communication from God

Next to *tawhid* comes the concept of God's revelation to creation, primarily through messengers who have communicated His will. In Islam such communication is seen as a process that has accompanied human history from its beginnings. It establishes as the purpose of this history the constant interaction between God and human beings. Continuing communication has come either through messengers, some of whom are named and identified in the Quran, or through scriptures that have been revealed to the messengers for their peoples. The Quran states, "To every people have we sent a messenger" (16:36) and "There is no people to whom a warner has not been sent" (35:24). Among the ones identified by the Quran and

referred to repeatedly are biblical figures such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. All of them are seen as coming from the same One God:

We have inspired you [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Issac, Jacob and the tribes; and Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon; as we gave to David the Psalms and Messengers of whom we have spoken to you and others that we have not mentioned. (4:163–164)

God eventually spoke to Muhammad, who is regarded as the “Seal of the Prophets” (33:40), with whom this process of communication through messengers reached its most perfect stage in the revelation that is the Quran. This final revelation completed the process of communication, while at the same time it supersedes all previous revelations.

Muhammad and all the biblical and other prophets, however, are to be considered as human beings through whom God has chosen to communicate. They may be offered great respect, but in the Quranic view they can never be the object of worship, which is due to God alone.

Creations of God

Nature and the Universe. Although the primary means through which God communicates are messengers and revelation, the universe as a whole is also a sign from God. The Quranic universe unfolds in a harmonious pattern, each element in balance with the others, and it is this sense of natural order and equilibrium that is pointed out as a sign of God’s creative power and unity. His power extends also to other created things in nature that are endowed with qualities that enable them to function in an ordered way. A good example cited in the Quran is the bee:

And your Lord inspired the bee saying: “Make your hives in the hills and the trees” . . . there comes from them [bees] a finely colored drink, with the power to heal. Indeed here is a sign for those who ponder. (16:68–69)

The whole of nature is created to conform to God’s will. In this sense all of creation can be un-

derstood to be paying homage to and worshiping God:

The seven heavens and the earth and all that is in them glorify Him; there is nothing that does not praise Him but you do not understand their praise. (17:44)

Angels, Jinn, and the Unseen. Among God’s other creations referred to in the Quran are spiritual beings such as angels, *jinn*, and those elements referred to as the “unseen.” The function of angels is to protect and pray for forgiveness for all on earth and to undertake errands on behalf of God.

The *jinn*, in contrast, may be good or bad, and human beings can often fall prey to such spirits and may even falsely worship them. The “unseen” is that which human beings have no direct knowledge of and constitutes a realm that lies beyond human understanding. Among the angels, mention is also made of Satan, the symbol of disobedience to God whose function is to lead people astray (4:119–120).

Thus, besides the realms of the cosmos and the natural world, the Quran recognizes a variety of other creations that have their function in an ordered, created universe. Nevertheless, the Quran’s central message is for those regarded as the most honored among God’s creation, human beings.

Human Beings. Humankind has a special place within creation (95:4), because in creating human beings, God endowed them with a capacity to know and respond to Him greater than that given to other creatures. They are also special because built into the human condition was the notion of choice, by which they could either fulfill their potential as the most honored among God’s creation or sink to a level farthest away from God by disobeying or denying Him. This freedom of choice is best illustrated in the Quranic account of the creation of Adam. After shaping the form initially from clay, God endows full humanity by breathing his spirit into and endowing knowledge of all things to Adam. The process of all creation is, however, binary; everything comes into existence in pairs, as in Adam and Eve. After the creation, the angels

are commanded by God to bow to Adam; one of them, *Iblis*, or Satan, refuses, and will henceforth seek to lead humans away from God. Satan's first targets were Adam and Eve, who succumb, come to realize their error, are forgiven by God, and returned by Him to their original status. They are thus the symbol of two possibilities of human conduct. Those who accept the message are addressed as follows:

O humankind! We have created you as male and female and have made you nations and peoples that you may come to know and understand one another. The noblest of you in the sight of Allah are the most committed. (49:13)

Those who choose not to accept this path are compared to those

Who are like those who light a fire
Which sheds a light all around
And Allah puts out the light, leaving them
in a state of darkness—deaf, dumb and blind.
(2:17-18)

Ultimately, human conduct is subject to judgment, expressed in the Quran as a "Day of Resurrection." It is on this occasion that all individuals will realize the fruits of their actions:

And the fate of every one we have made the individual's own responsibility [literally, fastened to one's own neck] and We shall bring forth on the Day of Resurrection, a record that will reveal all. (17:13)

Both heaven and hell are depicted with dramatic vividness in the Quran. The reward of heaven is described as

Gardens of eternity which they will enter along with all of their ancestors, spouses and descendants who have acted righteously. From every gate will come angels greeting them "Peace be with you who persevered." Joyous will be the abode! (13:23)

Hell is portrayed as the antithesis of heaven, a place of suffering, punishment, and anguish, an inferno for the wretched.

Finally, when the Quran comes to define ideal human behavior, moral and spiritual perspectives ultimately determine whether one reflects Islamic goals or not:

By (the Token of) Time (through the Ages)
Verily Man is in loss
Except such as have Faith
and do righteous deeds
and join together
in the mutual teaching
of Truth, and of
Patience and Constancy,
(103, from the translation of Yusuf Ali,
The Holy Quran)

A parallel is thus established between human beings, nature, and other creatures who submit to the will of God. In that sense all are *muslim* for they participate in a universal act of submission implied in the word *Islam*. However, it is only persons, because of their God-given capacity to know and respond to his message, who can attain through their own intelligence to the highest state of being *muslim*. Since human action can discover and conform to the Divine Will, this state implied both peace and fulfillment, thus actualizing "Islam" as the harmonious, nondichotomous order that results when all creation works in harmony rather than conflict with divine purpose.

Ummah: The Community of Muslims

The Quran regards individuals as part of a community, the *Ummah*, in which the totality of Islamic values and goals are expressed and realized. The *Ummah* was first accomplished during Muhammad's years in Medina.

You are the best *Ummah* ever brought forth
so that you might lead by right example and
prevent wrong.
(3:110)

The *Ummah* is thus the embodiment of the model behavior expected of society and individuals, and as such represents an example to other human societies. It also embraces the wider goal in the Quran of maintaining a balance between the material and spiritual aspects of life. It is significant that the *Hijrah* of the Prophet constitutes a major turning point for Muslim history, as it marks the transition of the early Muslims from a state where they could not give full expression in society

to Islamic norms to one where such norms could be given concrete expression in personal and social life. The implications of the *Ummah* as a basis of social, political, and moral order is examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

QURANIC TEACHINGS: MAJOR PRACTICES

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the Quranic teaching on the practice of the faith and the organization of the community came to be elaborated and certain basic ritual practices emerged. These are often termed *pillars*, and have come to be regarded as religious practices that anchor human relationships with God and with others within the *Ummah*.

Shahadah, the Profession of Faith

“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger” (*La ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah*) is the statement of Muslim acceptance of the basis of Islam. This profession is whispered at birth, at death, during daily prayers, and at virtually all other events of significance in individual and community life. For a new convert to Islam, it represents the initial act of commitment that henceforth leads to an acceptance of all other aspects of Islam. The profession is also a statement of faith, inasmuch as it comprises essential elements of belief. The first statement (*La ilaha illa Allah*) affirms acceptance of the absolute unity of God and the second statement (*“wa Muhammad rasul Allah”*) relates this unity to the medium through which the Absolute becomes manifested. This manifestation thus makes it possible for human beings to respond to God in this world. The *shahadah* thus links God, the Prophet, and the believers.

Salat, Dhikr, and Du'a: Acts of Worship

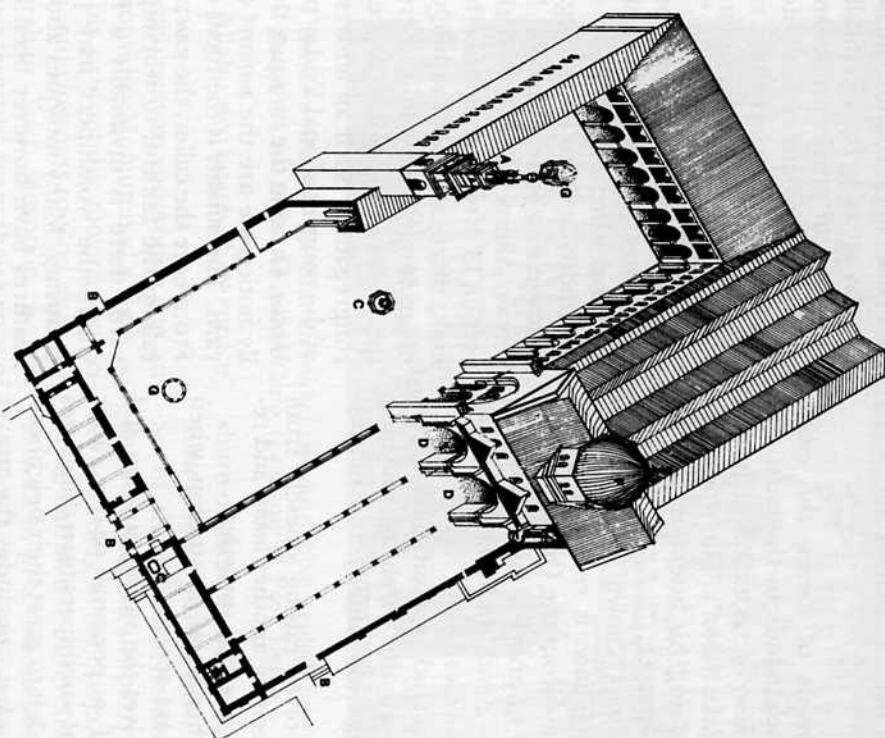
Three practices articulate the Quranic concept of worship. *Salat* is the formal ritual prayer for which both patterns and times are indicated, and further elaborated, based on Prophetic practice and tradition.

Establish prayer [*salat*] at the two ends of the day and in the later part of night. Surely good deeds erase evil ones. This is a reminder [*dhikra*] for those who are mindful. (11:114)

Muslims may pray at any time, although the traditional times for ritual prayer are dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and late evening, some of which may be combined. When possible, Muslims are urged to join with others, particularly for the Friday congregational ritual prayer at noon. *Salat* is preceded by an act of ablution in which Muslims purify themselves. The cleaning involves the hands and the arms, the mouth and the nostrils, and finally the feet and the ankles. All mosques provide facilities for this act of cleansing. Running water is used if available. Where water is unavailable, sand or a stone is used for a symbolic cleansing of the same parts of the body. This act of ablution links water as the symbol of purity to the idea of prayer as the means of purification of the soul. The ritual of cleansing is therefore inseparable from the ritual of prayer itself, reflecting a commitment to the total state of outer and inner purity.

Any clean place may be chosen for prayer, although when possible Muslims are encouraged to pray with others at a mosque or other congregational spaces. Prayers are customarily performed on prayer carpets where these are available. These carpets are intricately decorated, the patterns incorporating a niche with a lamp in it. The niche is the symbol of orientation to Mecca and the lamp signifies illumination, the light of understanding and faith that comes through prayer.

The *salat* begins with a call to prayer often repeated from the *minarets* that adorn a mosque, inviting the believers to hasten to the virtuous act of prayer. An individual competent in performing the prayer acts as a leader called *Imam*, with the congregation gathered behind him in straight rows. All face in the direction of Mecca, which serves as a point of orientation referred to as the *qiblah*. The prayer consists of two to four units,



The Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. Profile of the Great Mosque of Damascus, shown in a cutaway diagram. The letters indicate the locations of (A) the minaret from which the call to prayer is made; (B) gateways through which worshippers enter the large courtyard; (C) the fountain and places for ablution where worshippers purify themselves ritually before proceeding to (D) the prayer halls where they stand facing the qiblah, the direction to Mecca designated by (E) the mihrab. The outside of a mosque is often characterized by (F) a dome; and some mosques have (G) a treasury for charitable contributions and other donations for activities related to the mosque. (Courtesy of George Baumiller)

depending on the time, and involves the recitation of the first Quranic chapter—*al-Fatiha*:

In the name of Allah, most Gracious, most Merciful
All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds
The most Gracious, the most Merciful.
Lord of the Day of Judgment.

You alone we worship
and from You alone we seek help
Guide us on the right path,

the path of those on whom you have bestowed

grace,
not of those with whom you have been displeased,
nor those who have gone astray. (1:1-7)

In addition, other verses from the Quran are recited. The recitation is accompanied by bowing and prostration in a rhythmic cycle. Each complete ritual movement, known as *rakah*, follows a set pattern based on the example of Muhammad.

The pattern of *salat* may be divided into seven steps:

1. The first step consists of facing the *qiblah* (Mecca), raising one's hands to the ears, and pronouncing the *takbir*, or recitation of praise: "God is Great" ("*Allahu Akbar*"). The worshiper remains silent, readying his attention for the performance of the prayer.
2. During the second step, known as the "standing," the chapter *al-Fatihah* is recited together with additional verses from the Quran.
3. With the recitation of another *takbir*, the worshiper bows, with his hands on his knees, and in this bent position, praises God.
4. After resuming the standing position, the worshiper prostrates with the forehead touching the ground, as a sign of humility and submission.
5. The fifth step involves raising oneself from prostration while reciting another *takbir* and remaining in a sitting position, praying.
6. There follows another act of prostration, when the praises of God are repeated.
7. The final step involves the sitting position and silent recitation of a personal prayer, after which the individual worshipers turn their faces to the right and the left to greet their neighbors. This greeting, or *salam*, concludes the prayer proper. However, it must be noted that where additional *rak'ahs* are to be said, the first six steps are always repeated.

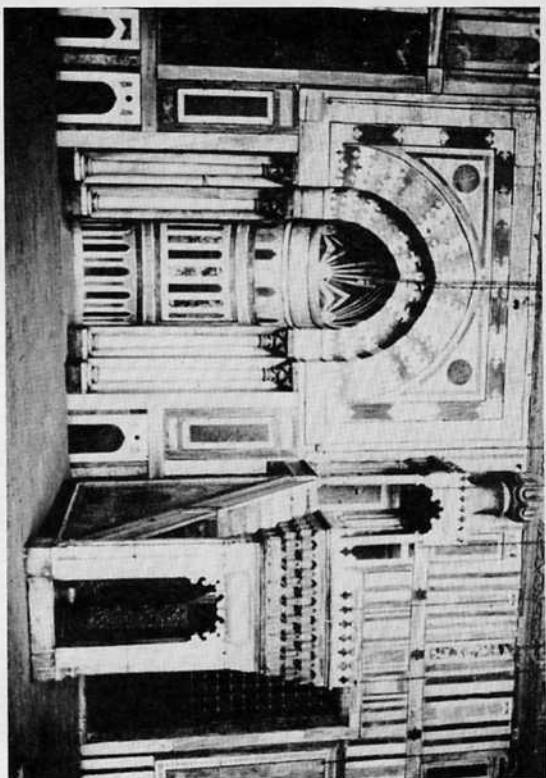
In the prayer the words of supplication and praise, the postures of submission, and the acts of cleansing all come together to symbolize the meaning of true worship, integrating the Muslim into a rhythm of universal adoration. The parts of the prayer also remind them of their created state, the sense of direction in life symbolized by the *qiblah*, the goal of purification necessary for spiritual life, and the fellowship of the *Ummah*, through which they participate in the worship of God.

On Friday, Muslims are enjoined to take part in a congregational prayer at noon. The prayer has a special social significance in most Muslim countries, where Friday is often a public holiday, although

Islam does not recognize the notion of a "sabbath," or a day set aside for specifically spiritual activities. The times of prayer are meant to conform to the rhythm of the daily cycle of life so that the prayers complement other activities, rather than being an escape from the ordinary pattern of life.

The term *masjid*, "mosque," which has come to refer to the place of formal prayer in Islam, literally means "a place of prostration." It can thus be any place where the believer responds to God either individually or in congregation by paying Him homage in a state of purity. Most mosques share certain common features. Within, the *qiblah*, or direction to Mecca, is signified by a niche, called *mihrab*, often adorned with Quranic writings and other designs. Next to it, there is a rostrum called the *minbar*, from which a preacher addresses the congregation. Such an address is an integral part of the congregational Friday prayer and is called a *khutba*. Outside the mosque, the features most easily noticeable are the *minaret* and the open courtyard. The *minaret* is the focus of the call to prayer. From here the caller, the *muezzin*, chants the words calling the faithful to worship. Within the courtyard, there is invariably a fountain and places where the worshipers may perform the acts of cleansing. Many mosques also have domes. These features have however been adapted or incorporated in many parts of the Muslim world to vernacular architecture and by using local materials. The wide range of mosque designs, structures, and scale, indicate the key role of the mosque, in symbolizing the aspect of unity in Islam perhaps more than any other physical structure in the Muslim world.

Dhikr, remembrance of God, and *du'a*, a voluntary or private prayer, are the other forms of worship that complement the ritual prayer in Islam. They provide an opportunity for meditation and contemplation within the heart and a way of drawing closer to God. The ritual act of prayer, with its formal aspects and physical orientation to Mecca, is complemented by remembrance, which draws the individual inward, creating an inner sense of harmony and peace. The Quran emphasizes this aspect in the verse that states, "Surely in the



Inside a Mosque. The mihrab (niche) and the mihrab (pulpit) inside the famous Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo. (Courtesy of Fred Denny)

remembrance of Allah, do hearts find peace" (13:28).

The essence of such prayers is devotion and adoration. Muslims consider Muhammad's vigils on Mount Hira and his profoundly moving experiences of revelation and closeness to God as examples of such worship. Such devotion is also reflected in prayers preserved from the sayings of well-known devotees, such as a Muslim woman called Rabia, who lived in the eighth century:

My Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.¹

The goal of these forms of worship, representing the devotional spirit in Islam, is to bring believers into daily communication with the Creator through public as well as personal and private actions.

share of their wealth to the community. The word

zakat means "purification," thus indicating that the act of sharing is a necessary prelude to making one's wealth and property pure. The amount varies according to the category of wealth or property, being calculated differently on agricultural products, cash, precious metals, and livestock.

The Quran also specifies the purposes for which dues from the *zakat* are to be used, including aid for the poor, the needy, and those heavily in debt who require assistance, as well as for education, health services, and facilities for travelers. The duty of *zakat* is coupled with that of charity, which may range from almsgiving to a kind act:

Those who share their wealth in Allah's way may be compared to a grain which grows seven ears, each with a hundred grains. Allah grants an increase to whom He will. (2:261)

A kind word of forgiveness is better than an act of charity followed by harm. (2:263)

Zakat, Purification Through Sharing

Many of the verses of the Quran that enjoin worship also make it obligatory for Muslims to pay a

Quranic injunctions, though they condemn the hoarding of wealth and economic injustice, also urged individuals and the community at large to act as trustees, through whose acts of sharing the

moral and spiritual vision of a just society could be fulfilled. An equitable sharing of justly earned wealth, through *zakat*, was thus a key element in redressing imbalance and poverty.

Ramadan, the Month of Fasting

The Quran prescribes fasting for all able, adult Muslims for the period of the month of *Ramadan* (the ninth month of the Muslim calendar). Fasting begins at daybreak and ends after the setting of the sun. The spiritual, moral, and physical discipline observed during these hours included a more intensive commitment to the values and practices of Islam as well as refraining from food, drink, and sexual activity. The month of Ramadan is singled out because the Quran was first revealed during that month, the night of the first revelation being described as the "night of power." On this night Muslims stay up, praying, remembering God, and reading the Quran until daybreak.

The rhythm of abstinence and quietude during the daylight hours of Ramadan alternates with times of feasting and socializing throughout the evenings. When the time of sunset arrives, the fast is broken in the traditional manner of eating a few dates and having a refreshing drink. Prayers follow, and then part of the night is spent sharing a meal with family and friends. The evenings reflect an air of gaiety, with most of the cities and towns alive with people, mingled with a stronger sense of piety reflected in prayers and intense reading of the Quran. The spirit of joy and festivity reaches its climax after the last day of fasting. The following day is called *'Id al Fitr*, a time of celebration, feasting, and sharing; this day is one of the major festivals in the Muslim year.

Fasting has significance in Islam at several levels: It commemorates the experience of revelation that was granted to Muhammad; it singles out a month in the changing lunar calendar during which all adult Muslims practice a common act of discipline, self-denial, and self-examination; it enlarges their sympathy and compassion for persons deprived of the daily means of survival; and finally it establishes a continuity of practice with religions

such as Judaism and Christianity, in which fasting is recognized as an important practice.

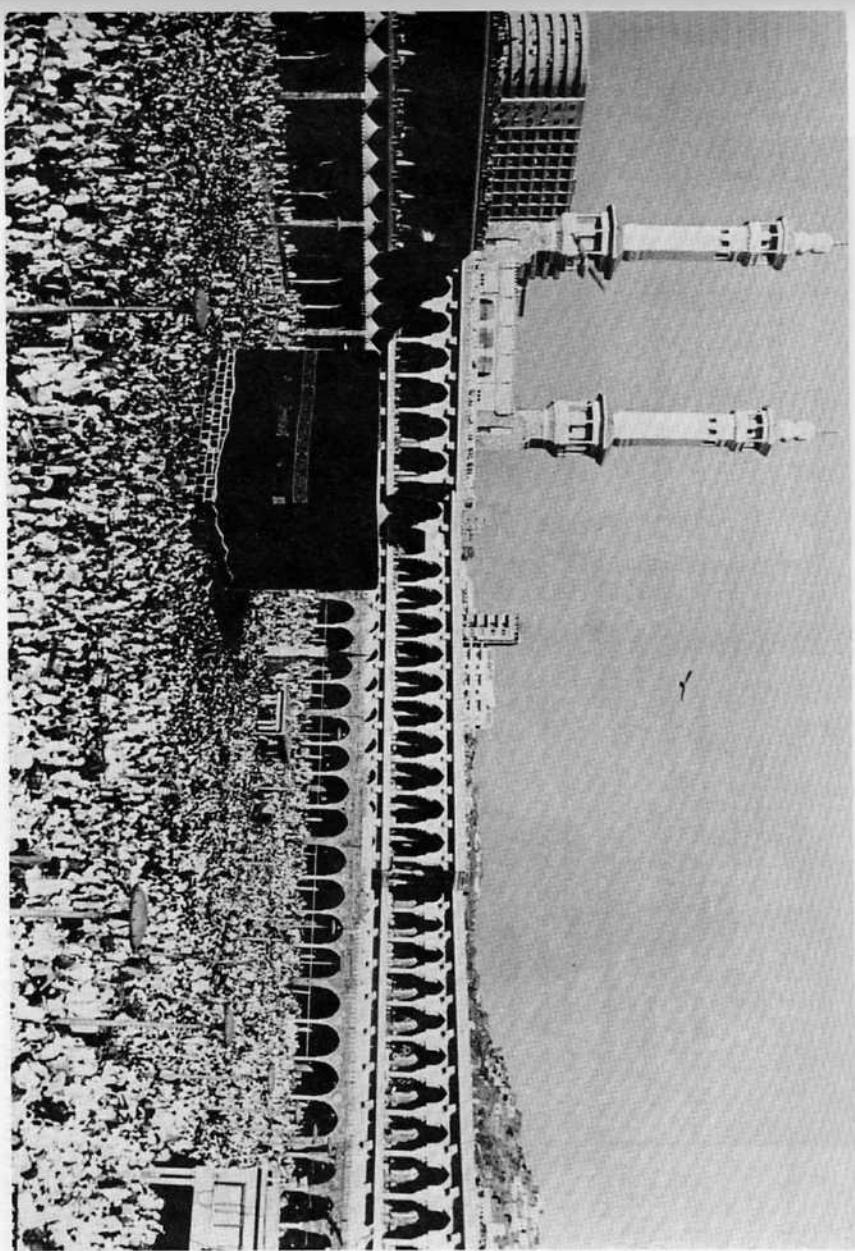
Hajj, the Pilgrimage

The ritual event that represents one of the peak experiences in the life of a Muslim is the *Hajj* or pilgrimage to the sacred places of Islam in and around Mecca. This duty is prescribed for Muslims unless it becomes financially too burdensome or renders the individual and the family destitute. The *Hajj* takes place in "The Month of Hajj" (*Dhu-l-Hijjah*), the last month of the Muslim year.

The event can best be understood by tracing the steps through which pilgrims pass and noting the significance of the places and objects they encounter during the *Hajj*. The occasion begins even before departure from home for Arabia, for the period before departure is spent readying oneself emotionally and spiritually.

When the pilgrims arrive in the vicinity of Mecca, they enter into a state called *ihram* or sacredness. Men do this by putting on two seamless garments; women don a simple, modest gown and a headcovering. In this state, the pilgrims refrain from shaving hair, cutting nails, and wearing jewelry or other adornments; they also abstain from any acts of violence, hunting, and sexual relations. It is in this purified state that the pilgrims make a commitment to fulfill the duties that are to follow.

The sequence of rituals that follow lead most pilgrims first to the sanctuary of the *Ka'ba*. Before the rise of Islam, this sanctuary was used by the Arabs for their own religious festivals and to house the images of their divinities. When the Prophet conquered Mecca, he cleansed it of all its idols. In the Quran the *Ka'ba* is referred to as the "Sacred House" (5:97) and the "sanctuary established for humanity" (2:125). In Islam, therefore, the significance of the *Ka'ba* lies in its being the symbol of the initial human attempt to express a relationship with God. The Quran also refers to it as the "place of Abraham" (2:125), which he and Ishmael, his son, sanctified for the worship of the One true God. It is thus also the link between Islam and the tradition of Abraham.



The Ka'ba. The Ka'ba during the Pilgrimage. (Courtesy of the Ministry of Information: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

The *Ka'ba* is not merely a structure signifying the physical axis of the Muslim world, the direction to which all Muslims turn in prayer. It also has a cosmic significance in Islam, for it is the symbol of the human encounter with the Divine for all times. As the symbolic center, it is the point toward which all Muslims converge daily for prayer and once during their lives, if possible, for pilgrimage.

The stone structure is located in the middle of the courtyard of Mecca's great mosque. It is about fifty feet high, cubical in shape, with its four corners aligned with the cardinal points of the compass. It is covered with a cloth, generally black in recent times, and embroidered in gold thread with verses from the Quran. In one corner of the *Ka'ba*, set within the wall, is the Black Stone, which Muslims, following the tradition of the Prophet while

he was on Pilgrimage, kiss or touch. The stone is believed to be a relic that has survived from the time of Abraham.

Upon first entering Mecca, all pilgrims pay their respect to this central symbol of Islam. They perform the "circling" of the *Ka'ba*, going around it seven times in a counterclockwise direction. Having done this, the pilgrims embark on the *Hajj* proper. Moving away from the center, the pilgrims run between two spots called *Safa* and *Marwa*. This ritual (called *sa'y*) signifies the running of Hagar, Abraham's second wife, as she sought water for their son Ishmael. Islamic tradition states that when Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael there on his mission for God, he promised that God would not abandon them. When the small supply of dates and water ran out, Hagar ran between the two