Islam

Islam is the second largest religion in the world, with more than 1.5 billion adherents. Muslims consider it to be the last member of the “Abrahamic” family of religions after Judaism and Christianity. That is, they consider it to be the last and the most complete in a series of revealed religions based on the bedrock of devotion to one God to the exclusion of others (otherwise known as monotheism). This is the distinctive feature of Abraham’s heritage as a prophet as understood from an Islamic perspective. The word *islam* literally means “surrender” or “submission,” and a *muslim* is someone who submits exclusively to Allah, the Arabic name for the supreme deity known as God in the western traditions.

Although Islam originally emerged within Arabic culture, today less than twenty percent of its adherents are of Arab ethnicity. From southeast Asia to the heart of Europe, from Central Asia to West Africa, and more recently in the Americas, people from vastly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds call Islam their religion. Although they practice their Islams in significantly different ways, there are unmistakable unifying factors. Overwhelming majority of Muslim, for example, would relate the same foundational myth or narrative, albeit in different versions, which culminates in seventh century CE Arabia with a man called Muhammad and the message he brought from God to humanity. There is also an unmistakable similarity in the ways in which Muslims across the world re-enact various aspects of this myth in their rituals.

Origins and Early Formation

According to traditional narratives, Muhammad son of Abdullah was born in Mecca at 570 CE in an overwhelmingly pagan setting. As a young adult, he married a wealthy merchant woman, Khadijah, from his own tribe, Quraysh. As her business agent, he made several trips to Syria. When he was forty years old, he had a series of dramatic experiences during his annual retreat in a cave outside Mecca. More specifically, he was addressed by the archangel Gabriel and ordered to deliver God’s message to his people. The message was a simple one: the end of times was near, and unless people turned away from the idols and submitted to one high God, namely Allah, and listen to his messenger, they would be doomed. From the very beginning of his mission, he was faced with severe opposition from his own tribe. When they failed to convince
Muhammad of the validity of their gods, this opposition turned to persecution. After ten difficult years, Muhammad had to flee his hometown and migrate to another with his nascent community of followers in order to survive. He was able to secure the allegiance of some Arab tribes in a small oasis, later called Medina, approximately three hundred miles to the north of Mecca.

The situation for the early community of believers changed dramatically, as Muhammad was soon able to establish himself as the religious and political leader of Medina. This event, known as the hijra or “migration,” was such a turning point in Muhammad’s career and the future of Islam that it was later chosen as the beginning reference point for the Islamic calendar. Later Muslims rightly viewed it as the event that ushered a new era in history, the Islamic era. After Muhammad’s death at 632, his followers astonished the ancient world with their rapid success in destroying one empire (the Persians) and bringing another one to its knees (the Byzantine) in just a few decades. Unlike early Christianity and Judaism, then, Islam was not the religion of a persecuted minority in its formative years. The rapid ascension of Muslims to political dominance permanently marked the Islamic vision, making it one that did not shy away from the social and the political.

A relevant, and much discussed, example would be the idea of jihad, which can be translated in this context to “holy war.” During his tenure in Medina, Muhammad planned and/or led several raids and battles against his enemies, most importantly his own tribe in Mecca. From very early on, Muslims were fascinated with this aspect of his life in Medina. In fact, details that later generations of Muslims remembered from Muhammad’s military expeditions became the substance for a genre of literature known as maghazi or “military excursions,” which is perhaps the earliest genre in Islamic literature. This literature later merged with the more general genre of sira or “[Muhammad’s] biography.” From a comparative perspective, it is these early genres of Islamic literature in which Muslims remembered their prophet that can best be compared to the Christian Gospels, through which the early Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus did the same with respect to theirs.

The material on Muhammad’s expeditions, and also the early Muslim conquests, gave Muslims scholars much to think about in terms of the permissibility of waging a war in the name of Islam and the conditions in which such an act was warranted from a legal perspective. A separate chapter, therefore, was dedicated in many books of jurisprudence to deal with such questions. How the question of jihad was dealt with in medieval books of law, however, had
little in common with the way contemporary Jihadist groups deploy the concept to further their own agenda. We will get to this difference momentarily.

The Quran

Muslims believe that Muhammad received revelations throughout the twenty-three years of his career as a prophet. These revelations, they add, were not collected in the form of a fixed book until two decades after his death. The Quran, therefore, was primarily understood to be an oral message, the Spoken Word, with recitation and memorization as its primary modes of transmission. The importance of the oral aspect has continued in the age of print. Even today, the silent reading of the Quran is not a customary practice of Muslims. Rather, they are encouraged to “recite” the Quran, and the art of recitation is the most revered among the pious. Having said that, the written text of the Quran has remained surprisingly stable throughout time. Even the earliest Quran manuscripts from the late seventh century do not show traces of a significantly different literary tradition.

In terms of its structure, the Quran is divided into 114 suras or “chapters,” with each sura consisting of a number of ays or “verses,” ranging in length from five to 286 verses. The chapters are traditionally divided into Medinan and Meccan ones, that is, chapters revealed to Muhammad early on in Mecca and later on in Medina, respectively. There are clear differences between the two. Whereas the primary theme of the former group is the signs of the End of Time and warnings to disbelievers, the latter chapters focus on addressing social and political issues, from war and booty to marriage, inheritance, and polemics against Christians and Jews. The contrast is clearly a reflection of the situation on the ground for Muhammad and how these social, religious, and political contexts dramatically changed with the community’s migration to Medina.

One distinctive feature of Quranic discourse is that throughout most of the chapters God is the speaker. That is, unlike the Gospels, which are understood by most Christians to have been written by human authors inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Quran is seen as the literal Word of God spoken though his angel Gabriel to Muhammad. And that is exactly how the text reads: God here addresses Muhammad, his followers, his enemies, humanity, and other beings directly. Since, moreover, His message was recorded in Arabic, the logical conclusion for the Muslims was that Arabic is the language of God, that is, that it is a sacred language. From a comparative perspective, then, it makes the most sense to compare the Quran to the early Christian
understanding of Christ as the Logos or “Word” of God. Although the idea of comparing a book to a person might initially seem jarring, it is worth noting that neither Jesus from the perspective of early Church fathers was speaking “just” as a person nor is the Quran, from a Muslim theological perspective, “just” a book. They both were and are understood as the logos, the Word of God. In both traditions, moreover, the earliest theological debates centered around the question of the precise nature of the Christ or the Quran. That is, the debates revolved around the question of how to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory aspects of their natures as simultaneously belonging to both the world of divinity and the world of humanity.

Even a cursory look at the Quran and other early sources about Islam reveals that Muhammad’s message was shaped in a significant conversation with Judaism and, to a lesser degree, with Christianity. Traditional sources tell us, for example, that Muslims initially prayed towards Jerusalem, and that this only changed when the relationship between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes in Medina deteriorated. Structurally and content-wise, the body of religious law in Islam known as the Sharia bear striking resemblances to its Jewish counterpart, the Halakha. Rituals like circumcision are widely practiced today among the adherents of both religions, although the original meaning of the ritual as a covenant of God has been forgotten among Muslims.

The Sunnis and Shiites

Muhammad died without explicitly appointing someone as his successor. Although for a short period of time the rapid conquests and other external threats thwarted the question of succession, it soon came to haunt early Muslims, causing much dispute, bloody civil wars, and eventually a permanent divide that split the umma, or community of believers, into two major divisions: the Shiites and the Sunnis.

For Sunnis, who nowadays constitute close to eighty percent of the worldwide Muslim population, things were rather simple: Muhammad did not receive any revelations from God regarding the matter of succession and, thus, the decision was left to his community. Accordingly, a group of his followers gathered immediately after his death and agreed to pay allegiance to Abu Bakr (d. 634 CE), Muhammad’s father-in-law and one of the earliest converts to Islam, as the amir al-mu'minin or “the commander of the believers.” The office that was first occupied by Abu Bakr was later called the office of the caliph or “deputy [of God].” Together
with the next three successors, Umar (d. 644 CE), Uthman (656 CE), and Ali (d. 661 CE), the first four leaders of the early Muslim community are called “the four rightly guided caliphs” in later tradition. The establishment of the title of “rightly guided” was a reflection of a sustained attempt in later Muslim historiography to construct a memory of the few decades after the death of Muhammad as a time where, in contrast to later Muslim caliphs who are not regarded as particularly pious, the early leaders held true to the prophetic message by following the Quran and the precedent set by Muhammad, otherwise known as his sunna.

The term sunna technically refers to the normative legacy of Muhammad, which consists of what Muhammad said, what he did, and what he did not oppose that happened in his presence. The unit through which this legacy is transmitted is known as hadith. The term Sunni was chosen as a shorten version of ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama’a or “the people of Muhammad’s tradition and community” in order to emphasize the importance of the sunna or legacy and the priority of a unified umma or community.

And yet the situation on the ground was anything but unified. All three caliphs after Abu Bakr were assassinated, the latter two by disgruntled Muslims themselves over the question of the legitimacy of their respective rule. There is some indication in the Quran that God has bestowed upon Muhammad’s family an unparalleled status, and from very early on a faction of Muslims felt there was something special about them. These beliefs and individuals coalesced around Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, to whom Fatimah, the only surviving heir of Muhammad, was wed. This group of Muslims were later called the Shia, a shortened version of the expression shi’atu ‘Ali or “partisans of Ali.”

Although initially the Shiites were a loosely defined group of people, in the first few centuries of Islam they developed a highly complex sectarian identity with an alternative version of the sacred history of Islam. They insist that Muhammad had in fact mentioned, following the divine command, Ali in several occasions as his successor. Muhammad’s religious and political authority, they said, was to be transmitted to Ali, had his followers not betrayed him. That is to say, the Shiites believe that it was out of jealousy and a hunger for power that prominent companions of Muhammad, in spite of the fact that they knew Ali was designated by Muhammad as the most qualified person to succeed him, plotted against him to keep political power within their own circles, excluding the family of Muhammad.

For these Shiites, the line of succession had to continue within the family of Muhammad
from the descendants of Ali. Ali and his offspring, therefore, were elevated to the rank of infallible imams or “leaders.” The matter of religion and its right interpretation, the Shiites argued, was too important to be left to fallible human beings. It was only the family of Muhammad, raised with an intimate knowledge of the Quranic revelation and the prophetic tradition, that could guide the Muslim community to salvation. It was only their political leadership, they added, that could guarantee the establishment and continuation of a truly Islamic society. In the early struggle for authority within the Islamic community, the Shiites lost and the Sunni view, with the help of political authorities, became the Muslim orthodox position. This is reflected in today’s demographics. Less than twenty percent of Muslims identify as Shiites in the modern world, with Iran and Iraq being the two most important Shiite majority Muslim countries.

The difference between Sunnis and Shiites is much more than simply a disagreement on a political issue. It reflects, through centuries of development, a deeper divide on how the relationship between the human world and the divine realm should be conceived and institutionalized after the death of the “Last Messenger.” If Muhammad is the last prophet, as both Shiite and Sunnis agreed, does that mean that the gates of heaven are shut forever towards the aspiring believers who are looking for a more intimate knowledge of their creator? Does that mean that God would never speak again to a human being? The Shiites refuse to believe this. For them, the imams were exactly the link that kept the community of believers always in contact with the heavenly realm. They were infallible superhuman beings whose bloodline guaranteed magical access to the charismatic source of all reliable religious knowledge. God spoke to them and bestowed on them powers to do miracles and foresee the future. This access to the divine realm of knowledge and power, however, did not mean, at least for the majority of Shiites, that the imams ranked equal to Muhammad or above him. The eternal message has already been brought down by Gabriel for Muhammad. What the imams have done is offer an authentic interpretation of the Quran and the sunna or legacy of the Prophet.

Ascetics, Saints, and Mystics

The desire to live in an enchanted world with charismatic leaders, a world in which the gap between humanity and God can be occasionally breached, was not exclusive to the Shiites.
Well before the boundaries between Shiism and Sunnism solidified in the ninth century, some zuhihad or “ascetics” in central Islamic lands – particularly, Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, and Persia—took the Quranic and prophetic traditions to the extreme, severing worldly attachments in order to prepare for the afterlife. Accordingly, we are offered fantastic stories in later Muslim hagiographical literature about how some of these ascetics spent their days in the wilderness wandering from town to town. Or how they joined Muslim forces as warriors in the holy war against the disbelievers, all the while fasting for consecutive days and praying uninterrupted all night long. They were especially harsh on their bodies, renouncing any attachment to the material world, as they obsessed over the destiny of their souls after death. Their extraordinary, and sometimes stunning, modes of life did not surprise the inhabitants of the Middle East, though. For the last few centuries of the late antique period, roughly from the fourth to the sixth centuries, the region witnessed a rise in popularity of the charismatic figure of the “holy man.”iii Christian monasticism was also at its heyday just before the rise of Islam. The Muslim ascetics were no doubt seen as the most contemporary blossoming of this same cultural tree, which bore so much fruit in Christian, Jewish, Manichaean and gnostic soils.

As we have noted in the textbook, the practice of asceticism, that is, the depriving of the body of the most pleasurable sensory input (food and sex) for a long time often results in a catharsis that manifests in various forms of religious experience. It is no surprise, then, that in a few generations, the early ascetics movement transformed into a mystical quest centered around the idea of proximity to or union with God. The unbridgeable gap between the world of humanity and the divine world was to be breached, this time by saints who were called awliya-‘Allah or “friends of Allah.”

Later, these friends of God became associated with what we now call the Sufi movements. Sufis, like all other Muslims, had the utmost respect for Muhammad and viewed him as the exemplar of the faith and the most perfect wali or “friend [of God].” They argued, however, that by following the Prophet’s footsteps they themselves could also attain, to a certain degree, such proximity to God. The Sufis developed a complex notion of walaya or “sainthood” and an elaborate understanding of the mystical journey known as the tariqa or “the [mystical] Path.” Specific and detailed meditational techniques were developed to help the seeker along the Path. The most fundamental element in making the journey was a pir or “[spiritual] master.” Only if the murid or “disciple” absolutely surrendered to the will of his master would there be any hope
for a successful spiritual journey.

The final goal was known as the *haqiqa* or “Truth.” This is no ordinary knowledge. Rather, it was the result of a metaphysical transformation through which one *becomes* the Truth—knowledge by identity, if you will. As a result of this spiritual and metaphysical transformation, the Sufi’s sensory and cognitive perceptions are transformed as well. She or he now sees through the eyes of God and hears through his ears.

Sufis also developed their own distinctive interpretive methods in order to read and understand the sacred texts of Islam, the Quran and the *hadith* literature. These interpretive methods were based on the assumptions that there are multiple levels of meaning encoded in the sacred text. The literal meaning or *zahir* or “apparent” was considered to be only the first and most basic layer of meaning. Several further layers of the “hidden” or *batin* meaning were buried beneath and within the apparent surface meaning. But such hidden or secret meanings, the Sufis argued, only revealed themselves to the chosen people of God, that is, to the saints and mystics.

The Sufis gradually gained enormous popularity throughout the Muslim lands. The shrines of the past saints became pilgrimage destinations. People would ask the local Sufis, dead or alive, to intercede for them in worldly and otherworldly matters. These saintly figures of medieval Islam thus provided the masses with a crucial mediating link through which they could connect to God. An elaborate metaphysical framework was soon developed in which the friends of God played significant cosmic roles as *qutbs*, or “poles of [the universe].”

As Sufism was institutionalized in the Islamic middle ages, roughly from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries CE, it became the dominant mode of religiosity across the Muslim world. A vast network of Sufi institutions, in the form of brotherhoods, youth clubs, and Sufi lodges or *khanaqahs*, rapidly expanded. Sufi masters became the linchpins of society and their institutions the backbone of the social order. In central Islamic lands, a new term, *dervish*, was used to refer to some of the more popular figures of Sufism in contrast to the elite Sufi masters. It is important to remember in this context that Sufi Islam represents a distinct approach to Islamic sources rather than a single or particular sect within Muslim community. It should thus not surprise us to find Sufi brotherhoods in both Shiite and Sunni circles. In fact, there seems to be an agreement between most Sufi orders and Shiite Muslims that Muhammad’s esoteric teachings were transmitted and preserved, for the most part, among his descendants from Fatimah and Ali’s
marriage. That is why most Sufi orders trace back their spiritual genealogy to Ali and his descendents.

Given the multilayered understanding the human nature, Sufi literature became one of the most fertile grounds in which Muslims pondered the nature of the human soul, its origins, and its final destination. The answers to such questions seem, on the surface, straightforward enough: the soul is created by Allah, and it survives bodily death and is then in a kind of limbo state called *barzakh* until the Day of Judgment, when it joins the resurrected body to face the anguish of Hell or the pleasures of Heaven. Yet the more Muslims delved deeper into the variety of ways such a basic scheme can be understood, the more controversial the issues became. As such, they initiated some of the most fascinating and contested intellectual debates in the history of Muslim theology.

Comparisons were always being drawn within these debates. Indeed, Hindus, Manichaeans, Christians (including gnostic Christians), and, of course, Greek philosophers were among the most influential conversation partners here. The result was a broad spectrum of views. One standard Sunni position, for example, holds that soul is a direct and everlasting creation of God, and that it is essentially of a corporeal or bodily nature, although this bodily nature is of a different sort of essence than simple matter, more similar to the nature of “light.” Many of the philosophers and Sufis of the Islamic world, along with mainstream Shi’a theologians, hold a quite different view. They are more aligned with a dualist position to the extent that they emphasize the non-physical nature of the soul. Here the soul’s nature is compared to that of an angel and is understood to be completely different than that of the body.

There are two terms in Arabic that roughly convey what an English speaker would understand by the term “soul” or “spirit”: *nafs* or “self,” and *ruh* or “breath” or wind.” The latter term appears frequently in the Quran. In a few verses, God is said to have “blown his ruh into Adam,” a clear Arabic reference to the original Jewish story (32:9; 15: 29; 38: 72). This relatively short verse, with a seemingly simple message, proved to be extremely difficult to understand, however. For centuries, commentators have tried to make sense of the fact that, according to the verse, *ruh* was not only something that God himself was in possession of, but also something that can be transferred (or breathed) into human beings. Is this *ruh* somehow divine? Can divinity be transferred into a human being? The fact that in another verse the Quran
refers to Jesus as a *ruh* from Allah further complicated the matter in the context of Muslim-Christian relations (6: 171).

The same verse also served as a spring board for many authors to address two important questions that were being posed to the newly emerging Islamic worldview, namely: the question of whether the divine spirit can enter a human being, that is, the question of incarnation (*hulul*), as we have it in different forms within Christianity; and the question of whether the soul reincarnates (*tanasukh*), as we have it in most Asian religions. Both of these doctrines were seriously entertained by various Muslim mystics and communities, including some Shi’a groups and the followers of Mansur al-Hallaj, the well-known Sufi martyr of early Islam.

Another example is the idea of *buruz* that was put forward by a fifteenth century CE Persian Sufi named Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh, who, later in his life, claimed to be the promised Mahdi. Nurbakhsh claimed that the heavenly archetype of the Perfect Man, called the Muhammadan Reality, can manifest itself in the bodies of living human beings through the process of *buruz* or “projection.” This occurs, according to him, at varying levels, so that the perfect humans in a given historical period—including himself—are receptacles of the projection available in the age. Needless to say, Nurbakhsh’s radical claims caused him much trouble, eventually leading him to a self-imposed exile to a remote mountainous region in the vicinity of the modern city of Tehran, where his tomb is still a pilgrimage destination.

The fierce competition among rival parties to win the dominant voice led to the emergence in the ninth century of a literary genre known as *rudud* or “refutations.” These were polemical treatises aimed at various non-Muslim religions and competing Islamic tendencies. Almost without exception, the beliefs in incarnation and reincarnation were among the major accusations leveled at “heretical” groups. In short, these two doctrines of the soul were precisely what came to separate the Muslim from the non-Muslim. God cannot incarnate as a human being, and the soul does not reincarnate.

**Legal Traditions**

As Sufis put a high premium on an esoteric or secret understanding of religion and scripture, another group of learned Muslims, usually referred to as *faqih* or “jurists” put the emphasis on the legal aspects. Although less than ten percent of the verses in the Quran deal explicitly with matters of religious law, the rapid expansion of Muslim polity and the subsequent
gradual conversion of a large portion of the indigenous population to Islam necessitated a far more detailed and systematic approach to matters of law. The early experts of Islamic law used local customs (‘urf), prophetic reports (hadith), and their own opinion (ra’y) as sources of legal thought. As time passed on, however, the predominant view that was most influential in shaping legal orthodoxy viewed the use of local customs and personal opinions with increasing suspicion. Hadith traditions were sought out for new situations that required a new legal opinion or fatwa.

In response to this demand, there emerged a group of learned Muslims who specialized in religious law called faqihs. They traveled extensively to hear prophetic reports from local religious authorities across the Muslim world. They also began to think more systematically about principles that governed the logic of Divine law. This systematic legal thinking led to the creation of a distinct Islamic discipline of knowledge known as fiqh. Technically, it refers to a systematic human attempt (scholarly activity, to be more specific) to understand God’s law or “Sharia.” The latter term was usually understood to refer to God’s law in its quality as divine or as revealed to Muhammad.

In the meantime, a large number of hadith reports were fabricated in order to meet the demand. As a result, Muslim scholars who were worried about the potential divisive effects of the circulation of an increasingly growing number of hadiths devised a process of authentication and then compiled canonical collections. Six books of hadith, known as Sihah sitta, were accepted as the canon in Sunni religiosity in a process that took more than two centuries to complete.

A similar effort was made to canonize a limited number of schools in legal thought. As a result, around the eleventh century CE, most scholars in the Sunni world came to a consensus that there were only four major schools of law (madhhab) that Muslims could follow. These were the Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, and Shafi’i schools, each named after a prominent early Muslim jurist. As long as one’s religious opinion was in accordance with one of the above-mentioned schools of judicial thinking, she or he was within the confines of orthodoxy. Beyond that, there was limited room for independent investigation and opinion-making. The Shiites developed their own system of legal thinking. Theirs was called the “Jafari” school named after Ja’far al-Sadiq, the sixth imam in the lineage of the descendants of Ali and Fatimah.

Finally, it is important to notice that most of the prominent Sufis of the Islamic middle ages also had a strong background in legal training. Sometimes they were appointed as judges in
their districts of residence, and their followers asked them about not only esoteric matters of the spirit but also about more public social and political obligations set out in the Sharia or religious law. All religious experts, Sufi or jurist, were initially referred to as *ulama* or “knowledgeable [men]” but the term gradually came to be used only for specialists in exoteric or social fields of knowledge.

Ritual

Islam puts a high premium on ritual observations and performances. As it is often the case with rituals, they are highly symbolic and operate simultaneously on multiple levels: the individual, the social, and the political. The principal rituals of the faith are as follows: (1) the five daily prayers (*salat*); (2) the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca; and (3) fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadhan. These are considered three of the “five pillars” on which the Muslim faith is based. The other two are the belief in one God and his Prophet (*Shahada*), and paying the religious duty of *zakat*, which is a form of religious tax on accumulated wealth (2.5 percent or one-fortieth of net worth) that every Muslim is required to pay annually. It is helpful to understand the three abovementioned fundamental ritual practices as re-enactments of the foundational myths that situate Islam in time and place, broadly understood.

The number of obligatory daily prayers (five), and the specific moves that one makes during each prayer (bows and prostrations), as well as the words one recites in each move, are all generally understood to be re-enactments of what Muhammad did and said in his heavenly encounter and conversation with God on his throne. As we explained in chapter 4, this heavenly encounter was the culmination of an extraordinary experience, traditionally referred to as *isra* or “night journey” and *miraj* or “ascension.” According to this story, Muhammad was initially taken from Mecca to Jerusalem on a mystical beast, and then from there to the throne of God as he passed through seven heavens.

Every Muslim, provided that one is financially and physically able, is required to make the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. This pilgrimage, as the most complicated and extensive Muslim ritual, is also, in many ways, a re-enactment of the founding narratives of the religion. Pilgrims entering the ritual space move in the footsteps of Abraham, who is considered to be the archetypical Muslim, and re-enact what Abraham and his family supposedly did thousands of years ago in the deserts of Arabia. Abraham, we are told, with the
help of his son from Hagar, Ishmael, reconstructed the Kaba, the first house dedicated to pure devotion to God that was originally built by Adam. Abraham was also ordered by God to sacrifice Ishmael as a test of his devotion. As he proved his willingness to submit to the will of God, an animal appeared miraculously to be sacrificed in the place of his son. To be reminded of Abraham’s devotion and this founding event, every pilgrim is supposed to sacrifice an animal at the end of his hajj.

The month of Ramadhan is also a special time in the Islamic calendar. According to traditional sources, Muhammad received the Quran during this month, when he used to go out of the town and make a retreat in a cave for long periods of time. One of the most important and beneficial religious observances during this month is to recite the Quran as much as one can. Pious Muslims hold night vigils on a couple of nights, reciting the Quran and performing extensive prayers during the last ten days of Ramadhan, when they believe Muhammad received his first communications from God via the archangel Gabriel.

Essential to all three abovementioned rituals as a precondition is the concept of tahara or “ritual purity.” Islamic law concerns itself in astounding details with matters of purity and impurity as a prerequisite to the performance of religious rituals. Yet the dichotomy of pure/impure is not only about the ritual space and the act of prayer. It also encompasses a wide spectrum of human actions and interactions, from giving birth, eating food, and having sex, to daily conversation, making money, and private personal fantasies. Food prepared by an unbeliever, for example, would be considered “impure” and, as such, would not edible if one wanted to stay in the state of ritual purity. Having “impure thoughts,” for example, entertaining fantasies of having sex with someone other than one’s wife or husband, is also considered to be a serious detriment to one’s spiritual health. Money earned by illicit means—by usury (charging interest), for example—is also considered impure and, as such, can be detrimental to one’s spiritual health. Purity, then, is a very broad category that functions well beyond matters of ritual, extending into the realm of daily life, ethics, and spirituality.

Generally speaking, what Mary Douglas argues in Purity and Danger (see chapter 5), holds true for a wide array of purity codes in Islam. That is, the dichotomy works well to provide a sense of order and meaning, to mark personal and community boundaries, to shape and preserve social order, and to protect the resulting fragile constructions from collapse by keeping the “dangerous” or the “impure” at bay. So, for example, standard Muslim purity codes make it
essentially impossible for an observant Muslim to have social interactions with people who do not believe in God. Such people are considered impure. Even a handshake with them might cause the believer to become ritually impure, a situation that necessitates ritual abolition to be rectified. Alcohol and gambling are also impure activities and substances in this worldview. Avoiding such things significantly alters the ways in which observant Muslims can socialize and the kinds of people with whom they can interact.

Muslim jurists developed a five-fold system to classify the actions of the “servants of Allah,” as they would usually call human subjects of divine law in terms of their compliance with Sharia. These are wajib or “required,” mustahabb or “preferred,” mubah/halal or “permissible,” makruh or “detestable,” and haram or “forbidden.” The two categories of halal and haram are also used in legal discourse to rules pertaining to the consumption of food and drink. There is a wide spectrum of things that can be described as haram, from listening to certain types of music to shaking hands with unknown females to eating Gummy Bears that contain pork-based ingredients. The five daily prayers and the fast in the month of Ramadhan are considered wajib or “required,” whereas there are many additional prayers and occasions for fasting that fall into the category of mustahabb or “preferred.”

The Structure of Religious Authority

It is often pointed out that Islam, unlike some forms of Christianity (particularly Roman Catholicism), does not have an official hierarchy of religious experts who claim the sole authority to interpret dogma and lead the ritual performances. This is true to a certain extent. Again, thinking comparatively, Muslims have never had a Pope-like figure as the head of a highly stratified religious hierarchy. Rather, their institutions have more often been a diffused structure of religious authority that resembles the Eastern Orthodox Church and its local and regional bishops. Having said that, it is definitely the case that some centers of religious learning and teaching (called madrasas) were more prestigious than others and, as such, exerted more influence in the Islamic worlds. The ancient madrasa of al-Azhar in Egypt is an example of such an elite institution. This diffused model of authority did not mean at all that religious orthodoxy did not have any power to make people comply with its specific interpretation of the religion. The ulama or religious “men of knowledge” have always been seen by the layman of their locality as sources of authority and the guardians of orthodoxy. As a result, from the formative
years to the modern world, the ulama, especially jurists amongst them, have issued fatwas based on the sources of the Quran and hadith. They have targeted specific individuals and groups of Muslims who adhere to beliefs or practices that they find objectionable. This in turn has resulted in acts of ex-communication, persecution and openly discriminatory behavior.

In the Sunni world, as this diffused model of authority with its competing forces of diverse judicial and theological opinions threatened the essential unity of the umma or the Muslim community at large, later generations of the ulama or religious men of knowledge made a concerted effort to counter the destabilizing diversity with some more unifying forces of conformity, creating canonical schools of law, canons of hadith, and a theological orthodoxy. The notion of religious orthodoxy in Sunni history, therefore, was constructed on the basis of not only specific understandings of the Quran and prophetic reports of hadith but also, and more importantly, on the idea of a necessary consensus among the ulama, which is called their ijma.

Generally speaking, Shiites have been more prone to developing hierarchical systems of religious authority. This is due to the fact that for them religious knowledge and authority exclusively belong to the office of the imam or spiritual leader. Take, for example, the “Sevener” sect of Shiism, otherwise known as the Ismailis, so named because of their belief in the authority of seven consecutive infallible imams from the descendants of Muhammad (via Fatimah and Ali), ending with the figure of Ismail. For them, authority is solely invested in the office of their present imam, known as the Agha Khan. In contrast, for Twelvers, who believed in twelve infallible imams from the descendants of Muhammad in contrast to the Seveners, the question of authority was understood in a similar way until the “occultation” or hiding of the twelfth imam, the Mahdi, which left the community in a state of disarray and confusion over a pivotal aspect of their religious life. While Twelvers waited for the Mahdi, the Muslim messiah, to return from occultation and restore justice on earth, his authority was understood to be diffused to some extent amongst the ulama, a situation similar to the Sunni model.

This was the case until the recent centuries where a new model of religious authority emerged in Twelver Shiism. The roots of this recent development might be traced back to the sixteenth century CE, when Twelver ulama gained unprecedented power in Persia as the newly established Safavid dynasty declared Twelverism the official religion of the empire. A more centralized system of religious authority emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a result. Although it was only made possible because of political elites sponsorship, this new model
developed an internal dynamics that worked quite independently of the system of political authority. The highest ranking religious scholars, generally known as “source of emulation” or *marja‘ taqlid*, were seen as the ultimate authority in matters religious and beyond in the absence of *imam*. An army of mid and low ranking clerics and preachers made sure that the populace had ample opportunity to know their religious obligations according to the interpretation of their source of emulation and pay their religious dues to him. Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, was just such a figure, a *marja*. Yet Khomeini was just one face in a global movement in the Muslim world, generally known as Islamism, that pushed for a more pronounced and central role of Islam in politics.

Islam in the Contemporary World

The effects of the immense transformations in recent human history generally referred to as “modernity” were enormous for Muslim societies across the globe. Like many other non-European nations, though, they were introduced to modernity through its ugly and often violent face—colonialism. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 is taken as a convenient starting point by historians for the era of European colonial domination of the Muslim central lands in the Middle East. The initial response to European invasions and exploitation of indigenous resources was one of sporadic and largely unsuccessful armed resistance. After such movements largely failed to achieve any tangible results, at least in the short run, Muslim intellectuals were faced with a daunting question: “What happened?” What happened that the Islamic civilization, once one of the most powerful and advanced civilizations in the world, was now in such a “backward” and weak position? Why were the “infidels,” who were time and again defeated by the formidable Muslim forces in the past, able to dominate them so easily and efficiently this time?

In response to this difficult and painful question, some intellectuals argued that the main problem was with the way Islam was practiced in Muslim societies. The only reason, they argued, Muslims were no longer in a position to match and challenge the “disbelievers” (*kuffar*) was the corruption of their religion. This became the impetus for many Islamic reform movements beginning in the late nineteenth century. The astounding success of the European colonizers and their advantage was rightly seen as a result of scientific progress. The early modernist reform movements, therefore, were mostly preoccupied with the question of Islam and its compatibility with the scientific worldview and the secular social order that emerged with it in Europe.
By the second half of the twentieth century, some disillusioned Muslim activists started to criticize what they considered to be the “defeatist” mentality amongst the earlier Muslim intellectuals vis-a-vis the West. They shifted their focus to restoring the ideal Islamic society by going back to the model of pristine Islamic community, that of the early believers at the time of Muhammad and his Companions. The Quran was at the center of this vision. The new focus on the recovery of “original” Islam, a feature that such movements share with their counterparts in Judaism and Christianity, prompted some scholars to categorize these individuals as fundamentalists. Others preferred to call them Islamists in the light of their uncompromising focus on Islam as having the answer to all the maladies of modern Muslims, be these economic, political, or cultural.

Modernist reform movements, then, differ from the Islamist ones in important ways, especially in terms of their stance vis-a-vis secularism. Whereas modernist Muslims largely accept a secular model of government, the Islamist believe secularism to be in contradiction to their political interpretations of Islam. For them, there is no separation of Church and State, as it were, in Islam, nor can there be. What all these trends share, however, is that they all developed as re-actions to the new world order that was introduced and managed by European powers. They also shared a common disdain for the traditional institutions of religious authority and learning, the ulama and their madrasas. The liberating and progressive spirit of Islam, they said, was suffocated by the complicity of the ulama with the current corrupt systems that ruled Muslim nations and their obsessions with minor legal problems that seemed to be so irrelevant to the major problems that a modern Muslim society faced. Such a criticism was well received among the learned Muslims and often resulted in a breakdown of religious authority in Muslim lands. Some observers have argued that the rise of fundamentalist Islam across the Muslim world and the concomitant decline of the traditional system of religious authority can be compared to the Protestant revolution in Europe in the sixteenth century.

Although this is very much an ongoing development and any final judgment would be premature, there is no question that various groups of Muslim fundamentalists do share a common denominator with conservative Christian Protestants in their attempt to bypass the established tradition that supports the claims of the ulama regarding their exclusive authority to offer an authentic interpretation of the canon. Fundamentalist leaders, who happen to be overwhelmingly trained as physicians and engineers (and not as scriptural or legal experts),
allow themselves to read the Quran very selectively and in ways that often lack the nuances and qualifications of the tradition itself. They thus rely on their own understandings of the canon to come up with ways to answer the very modern dilemmas facing their own societies.

Glossary

aya: a verse of the Quran

batin: the hidden

dervish: poor or mendicant (many aspirants in the path of Sufism were called dervishes for their asceticism and mendicant lifestyle)

faqih: an expert in Islamic law

fatwa: a religious opinion issued by a Muslim jurist

hadith: the unit through which sunna is transmitted.

hajj: the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca

halal: lawful or permissible

Haqiqa: in Sufism: the ultimate Truth

haram: unlawful or forbidden

hijra: Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE

hulul: incarnation

ijma: consensus of religious scholars

imam: a religious leader. In Shiism: a divinely inspired leader

khanaqah: Sufi lodge

kufr: disbelief
madhhab: a school of thought; in jurisprudence, one of the four canonical schools of law

madrasa: a traditional institution of religious education

maghāzi Muhammad’s military expeditions (literary genre)

Mahdi the Islamic messiah.

Marja Taqlid source of emulation, the highest ranking Shiite jurist

miraj Muhammad’s mystical ascent to heavens

murid a Sufi disciple

nafs soul

pir a Sufi master

Ramadhan the month of fasting

ruh spirit

salat Muslim prayers

sawm fast

shahada the profession of faith, that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is his messenger

Sharia God’s law

shirk associating other deities with God

sihah sīta the six canonical hadith books for Sunnis

sīra a literary genre consisting of biographies of Muhammad

sunnā the normative legacy of Muhammad

sūra a chapter of the Quran
tahara ritual purity

tanasukh reincarnation

tariqa the Sufi mystical path

ulama (sing. alim) religious scholars

umma: The Muslim community at large

wajib an obligatory ritual act

wali (pl. awliya) a friend of God, a saint

zahir the apparent

zakat religious tax

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