

Islam

A Struggle for Holiness In Personal and Community Life

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Islam

A Struggle¹ for Holiness²
In Personal and Community Life

Part One: The Prophet

Part Two: The Qur'an

Part Three: Islam in History

¹"Jihad" means exertion or effort.

²That is, surrender to God.

Part One: The Prophet

The founder of the Islamic religion, the prophet known as Mohammed, was born in the Arabian desert in approximately 571 C.E.

Muslim tradition describes the world into which Mohammed was born as socially barbaric. Desert living conditions were harsh, and seemed to breed cruelty and contention into those subjected to them. People felt loyalty to their own clan group, and hostility to all others. Material scarcity and the blazing sun inflamed a fighting mood, Pillage was a way of life and proof of manhood. Nor were things any better in the city of Mecca. It was a desert trading center where anarchy, drunken brawls, gambling, and prostitution were the order of the day.

The prevailing religion offered no counter to these conditions. The idols which people worshiped did not inspire anything in the way of genuine religious enthusiasm or elevated moral conduct. Each tribal group tended to have its own preferred gods, and these diverse polytheistic allegiances exacerbated murderous tribal conflicts. Clearly, the time was ripe for a prophet or savior.

Mohammed's early life was afflicted with tragedy. His father died a few days before he was born. His mother died when he was six years old. His grandfather, who cared for him after his mother's death, died when he was nine. Thereafter he was taken into his uncle's home. His uncle treated him kindly but the family's declining fortunes forced the young orphan to work hard tending flocks.

The tradition holds that Mohammed's bereavements made him sensitive to human suffering in every form. He was always ready to help others, especially the poor and the weak. He was of a pure-hearted, sweet, and gentle disposition. His sense of honor, duty, and fidelity made him beloved in his circle.

His deep concern for others caused him to become distressed by the chaotic and decaying society about him. As he grew from childhood to youth and from youth to manhood, the lawlessness, strife, immorality and cynicism which surrounded him caused him to retreat into solitude, into some state of either brooding or contemplation, into a kind of isolation in spite of his empathy for others. He was especially offended by the aggressive pursuit of wealth which characterized Meccan society, a competition in which the poor and the weak were mercilessly trampled.

Upon reaching maturity Mohammed took up the caravan business and at the age of twenty-five entered the service of a wealthy widow named Khadijah. His

prudence and integrity impressed her greatly. Gradually their relationship deepened into affection and love. Although she was fifteen years older than Mohammed they were married.

The match proved to be a happy one in every respect. During long periods of tribulation and isolation when no one was to believe in Mohammed and his message his wife remained steadfastly at his side, confident in the authenticity of his spiritual vision, bolstering his confidence. According to tradition Khadijah bore Mohammed six children, which is a little hard to square with reports of the age difference between them. At any rate, according to the tradition, Mohammed took no other wives while Khadijah lived, but after her death took nine others. His favorite among these, Aishah, was later to figure significantly in the schisms which arose after Mohammed's death over who should succeed him.

At any rate, Mohammed's ministry as a prophet did not begin until fifteen years after his marriage to his first wife Khadijah. These were fifteen years of spiritual preparation. Mohammed used to go to some rocky crags outside Mecca to pray and to meditate in a cave. Peering into the mysteries of good and evil, and unable to accept the crudeness, superstition, and fratricide that were accepted as normal, Mohammed's heart was reaching out to God.

The various spirits and gods of the desert tribes were irrelevant to his religious quest. Through vigils often the lasting the entire night, the reality of the one God, Allah, the Creator, the supreme provider, and the architect of human destiny, became real to Mohammed. One of the earliest messages which was revealed to Mohammed has become one of the best known phrases in the Arabic language: "There is no God but Allah." Remaining in solitude in his cave Mohammed began to enter trance-like states. He began to hear more words from the Creator. He would return home terrified. But his wife, Khadijah, upon hearing the story of his cave experiences, became his first convert. "Be of good cheer," she counseled him, "for you will be a prophet for our people."

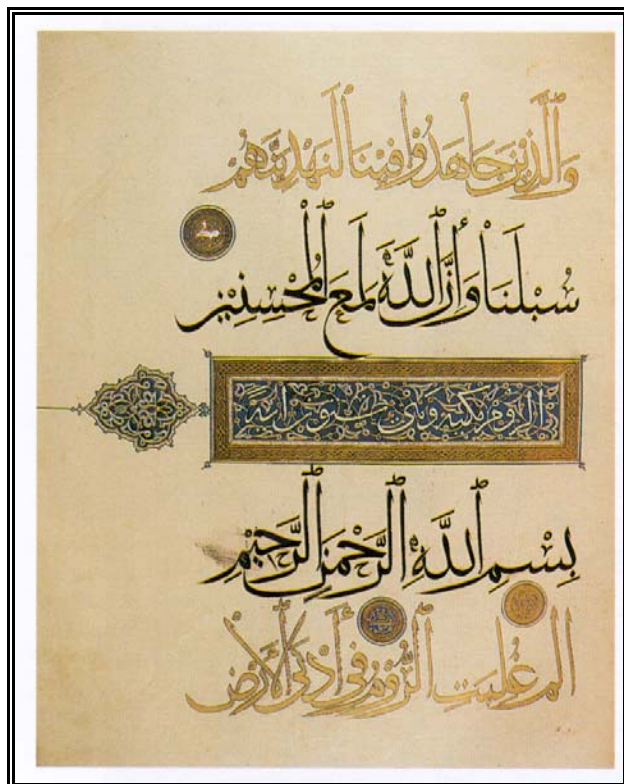
There was anguish, there was doubt. Mohammed was often filled with misgivings. Was the voice he heard really that of God? Would it continue to speak to him? What would it require?

The voice of God kept speaking to Mohammed for the remaining twenty-three years of his life, twenty-three years in which his life was no longer his own.

An examination of the content of Allah's message will be reserved for the consideration of the Qur'an in the next section. The Qur'an is the scripture which was revealed to Mohammed in his visions. In the meantime, the remaining events of Mohammed's life were important in shaping the Islamic movement.

Once he began his public ministry, the reaction to Mohammed's message was violently hostile. His preaching of an uncompromising monotheism threatened the considerable revenue derived from pilgrimages made to the many shrines in Mecca devoted to different deities. (There were well over 300 of them). Mohammed's moral teaching demanded an end to depravities which his fellow citizens were disinclined to abandon. His social teachings were dynamite in the

context of an oppressive and unjust economic order. In a society characterized by both opulence and poverty, a society riven with class distinctions, Mohammed's teaching was intensely egalitarian, insisting that in the sight of the Lord all men are equal, and advocating fairness and justice in social and material things.



A page from an illuminated manuscript of the Qur'an dating from 1313 C.E.

Correctly sensing an assault on their wealth and privilege, the rich and powerful of Mecca ridiculed and derided Mohammed. When their derision proved ineffective they turned to other forms of harassment. Mohammed and his followers were pelted with stones and beaten with clubs. They were driven out of town and left exposed to the desert's burning heat. Mohammed's followers were a small band, but they adhered to the new prophet with a loyalty and devotion seldom paralleled in the world's history. They sacrificed all their worldly interests and suffered repeatedly the

risk of death itself. Mohammed set the pattern for their fidelity. In spite of his earlier doubts, once his public ministry began, he never flinched nor wavered. Slowly but steadily people of energy, talent, and worth became convinced of the truth of Mohammed's message, until eventually several hundred families were claiming him as God's authentic spokesperson.

The Meccan elite became thoroughly alarmed. What at first seemed the pretentious claims of a half crazed camel driver to be God's messenger had turned into a serious revolutionary movement that was threatening their way of life.

But, as his enemies were about to crush him an odd thing happened. There

was a city about 200 miles to the north of Mecca, a city now called Medina. Pilgrims and tradesmen from Medina who had come to Mecca and who had heard Mohammed's teachings had established a small group of followers in the distant city. Medina was having troubles of its own and was in search of a strong leader. About 75 leading citizens came to Mecca and invited Mohammed to come and lead their city. After contemplating the proposal Mohammed agreed to it, provided the people of Medina would observe the precepts revealed in his visions. To this they agreed, and Mohammed and his followers transferred themselves from Mecca to Medina.

One might have thought the Meccan leaders would have been glad to be rid of the Prophet, but they were alarmed at the arrangement and sought to prevent it. Mohammed and his followers narrowly eluded pursuers. This migration or flight is regarded by Muslims as the turning point in world history and is the year from which they date their calendar. (The year was 622 C.E. in Western calendars).

From the moment of his arrival in Medina, Mohammed assumed a different role. From prophecy he is propelled into governmental leadership. The despised preacher became a masterful politician. The religious visionary was transformed into a statesman. He took charge not only of a mere handful of devotees, but of the collective life of the city, serving as its judge, its teacher, and its military leader.

Even his enemies conceded that he played his new role brilliantly. Faced with problems of extraordinary complexity, he turned out to be a gifted leader. At the same time he continued to live simply, as he did when he was obscure. Scorning palaces, he lived in an ordinary clay house. He was seen to milk his own goats and mend his own clothes. He was addressed familiarly by his given name.

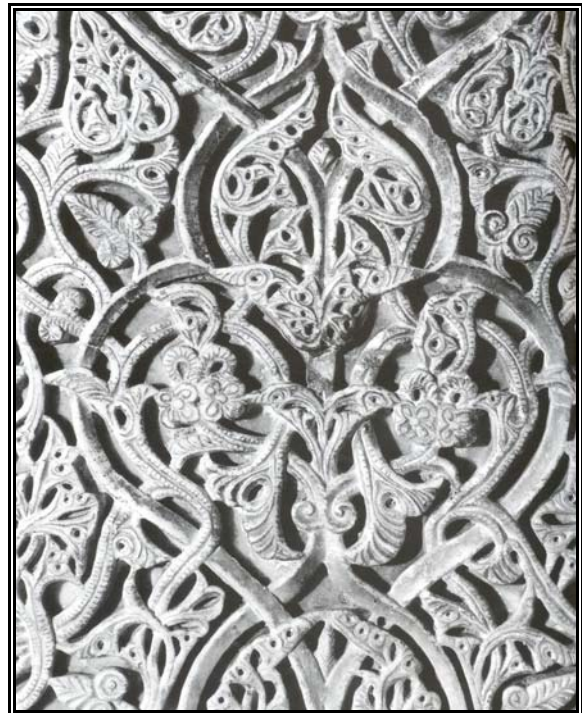
He remained accessible day or night to the humblest of his subjects. Tradition depicts his administration as an ideal blend of justice and mercy. For the remaining ten years of his life Mohammed's personal history merged with that of the city of Medina. His accomplishments attracted visitors from every part of Arabia.

There followed a struggle with the people of Mecca for the mind of Arabia as a whole. Attacked by an army from Mecca that outnumbered the defending force of Medina by many times, Mohammed's forces nevertheless won a spectacular victory. But in the following year there was a reversal in which Mohammed

himself was injured. Nevertheless, the invaders from Mecca were never able to force the Muslims of Medina to capitulate. Their failure turned the tide permanently in Mohammed's favor. Eight years after his flight from Mecca, Mohammed, who had left as a fugitive, returned unopposed as a conqueror. The city that had treated him cruelly now lay at his feet with his old persecutors at his mercy. He refused, however, to press his victory; in the hour of his triumph the past was forgotten. He accepted the mass conversion of the city, dedicated its shrines to Allah, and returned to Medina. He died two years later in 632 A.D.

Thus, after long and often bitter struggle, Mohammed ultimately prevailed. But all this came together relatively near the end of his life. He did not reign victorious for very long. During his career he bore many assaults and hardships. He prevailed sometimes by lowering his profile and strategically fading away. But in the face of murderous assaults, he also led his followers in great battles, which they won in spite of facing overwhelming odds. Yet he was also always ready to reconcile, and was known as a man of humility.

Within the brief span of a mortal life Mohammed had called forth from unpromising material a nation which had never before been united; he established a religion which today claims the allegiance of a vast segment -- about one sixth -- of the human community; and he launched a civilization which within 100 years spread from Spain to the edge of India, and which later spread even further. Some details about the teachings in the Qur'an, and the drama of the Islamic attempt to develop a social order expressive of the will of God, will be the subjects of the next sections. For now it is important to emphasize that in Islamic spiritual experience the life of the prophet is seen as a model of piety. He was compassionate, resolute, brave, selfless, a gifted poet, and a person of deep and profound spiritual insight. These are the



Although it is not clear that the Qur'an forbids the making of statues or paintings, the Islamic movement's origin as an alternative to polytheism and its associated idols resulted in a preference for art in which representations of human and animal figures is avoided. As an alternative, there developed in Islamic culture a high art of calligraphy, and also characteristic carved decorative motifs for architecture consisting of "arabesques" based on geometric or floral designs, as shown here.

virtues devout Muslims seek to emulate. They are extremely careful, however, never to confuse the humanity of the Prophet with the divinity of God.

One can wonder if, in the history of the world, there has ever been an example of a comparable moral advance among so many people in so short a time. Before Mohammed there was virtually no restraint on inter-tribal violence. Glaring inequities in wealth were accepted as the natural order of things. Women were regarded more as possessions than as human beings, and the infanticide of girls was commonplace. Drunkenness and gambling was the order of the day. Within half a century a remarkable change in the moral climate was effected on all these fronts. Mohammed carried out this miracle, or rather, as a Muslim would contend, Allah carried out this miracle, by revealing a vision of truth in which faith and politics, religion and society, are inseparably joined. It is this marriage of religion and the state, and the corresponding expectation that public affairs should be characterized by a practical compassion, that sets Islam on a collision course with modernity and with the impersonal forces of economic globalization.

Part Two: The Qur'an

The Qur'an is unique among the world's classical sacred texts. It is unique in that it was revealed in a relatively recent, and therefore accessible, historical time. It is also unique in that it was revealed through the offices of a Prophet many of whose actions in history are more susceptible to independent scholarly verification than are those, say, of Moses, Lao Tzu, the Buddha, or Jesus.

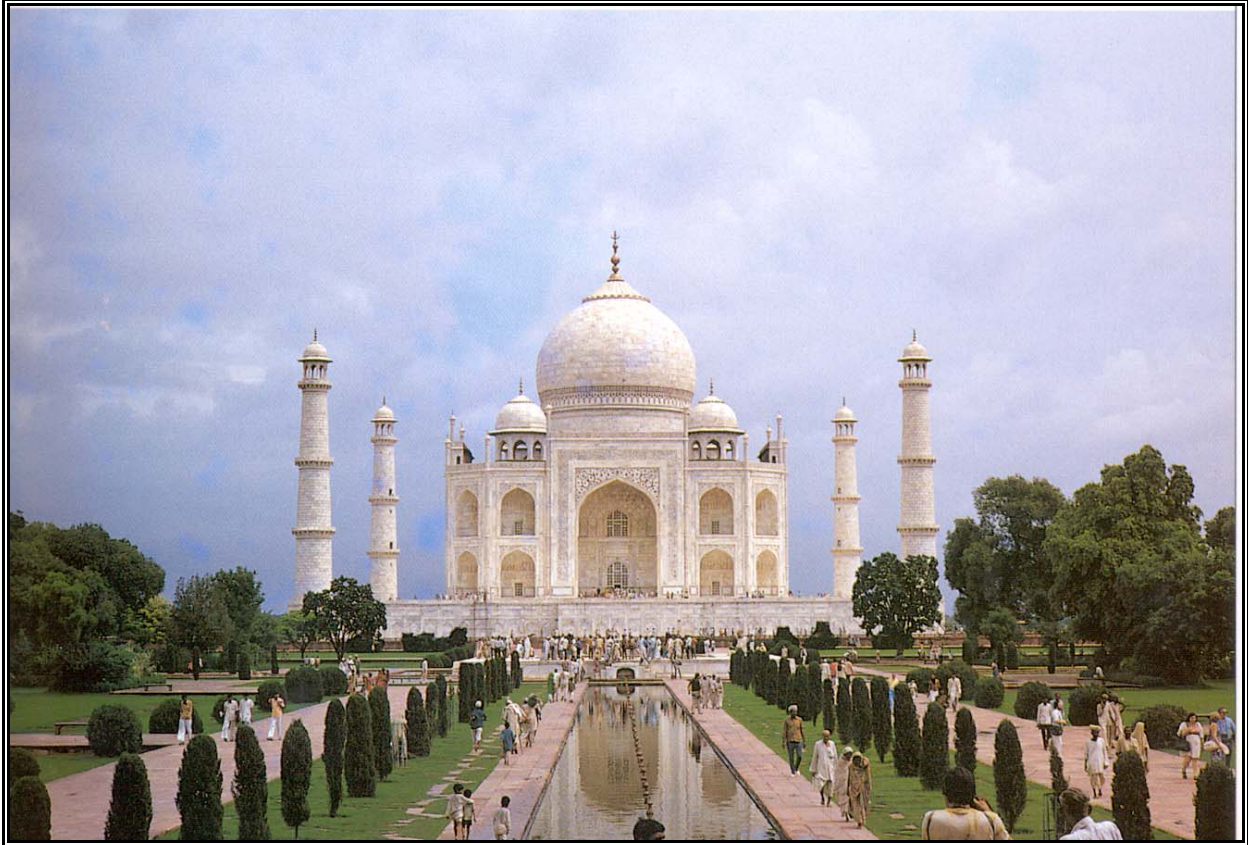
The Christian revelation builds upon the spiritual tradition of the Jews. Buddhism adopted and adapted large measures of the Vedic spirituality which comprised its founding milieu. It is rare that a religion is invented out of wholly new cloth. According to its own word, the Qur'an is aware of and builds upon two other important spiritual traditions -- those embodied in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The Qur'an connects itself to these distinguished predecessors and represents its teaching as confirming and clarifying the truth of what was in those earlier revelations.

Thus, from an Islamic perspective, the Qur'an is the most recent link in a chain of revelation going back to the very origin of humankind. In this view, the Qur'an has the special function of recollecting the essential message of all previously revealed books. Moreover, it presumes to distinguish this essential message from the opinions and errors which were interpolated into the ancient texts of Judaism and Christianity after they were given in remote places and unknown times.

The name Qur'an means "the Recital" or "the Reading." But given its claim to be a summary of all revealed truth, it is also referred to in Arabic as "the Reminder," or "the Criterion," or "the Clarification." The contemporary Islamic theologian Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah writes of the Qur'an as follows:

"The Qur'an is nothing but the old books refined of human alloy, and contains transcendent truths embodied in all sacred scriptures with complete additions, necessary for the development of all human faculties. It repeats truths given in the Holy Vedas, in the Bible, in the words of the Bhagavad Gita, in the sayings of the Buddha and of all other prophets, and adds what was not in them, and gives new laws to meet the contingencies of the present time when the different members of God's family who lived apart from each other in the days of the old revelations have come close to one another."

This combination of a broad-minded inclusiveness with an assertion of the Islamic tradition's own finality and superiority can obviously be a little exasperating to a non-Muslim. But it is a sort of perspective not unknown among other



The Taj Mahal, a world-famous example of Islamic architecture. It was built in the early 1600s by the Emperor of India, Shah Jehan, to serve as a mausoleum for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

religious traditions, particularly the monotheistic religious traditions, which tend to be combative and self-assertive. After all, Christians have spent twenty centuries asserting the superiority of their own religion above all others. While there have been a few exceptional, broad-minded Christians, it has been the commonly held belief in the Church that other religions are of Satanic origin and that their adherents ought to be converted to Christianity at all costs. In our own time, at last, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church took a different line, acknowledging that there are true and beautiful things in the non-Christian religions. But the Vatican II proclamations still regard Christianity itself as the normative measure of what it is in the other faiths that should be either esteemed or rejected. So even this more enlightened and modern Christian perspective fails to recognize other faiths as co-equals which might, perhaps, contain elements which Christianity lacks and from which it could learn.

Although the Prophet Mohammed appears not to have known about Buddhism or Hinduism, and although his knowledge of Judaism and Christianity was imperfect, being derived from his contact with the marginalized outpost Christian and Jewish communities in the Arabian desert, the respect he afforded to

Judaism and Christianity anticipated by 1400 years a similar attitude of tolerance on the part of Christianity.

The Qur'an was revealed to Mohammed in distinct segments while he was in a series of trance-like states which took place over a period of more than 20 years. The segments were committed to memory by practiced memorizers to whom Mohammed dictated his visions. But even during his lifetime the text began to be committed to writing on palm leaves, on stones, and on any other material that came to hand. This written collection was completed and an authorized version of the Qur'an was established around 650 C.E., barely twenty years after the Prophet's death.

Muslims do not regard Mohammed himself to be in any sense the author of the Qur'an. He is the vehicle or the messenger through whom the word of God was transmitted to the human community. Most Christians regard the Bible as a mixture of divine inspiration and human creativity. There are some conservative Christians who do regard every word of the Bible as the direct expression of a divine source, inerrant in every respect. Mainstream Muslims' view of the Qur'an is closely analogous to the views which conservative Christians hold of the Bible.

It must be acknowledged that it is difficult for a non-Muslim who does not speak the Arabic language fully to grasp the mesmerizing power the text seems able to exert over those who can read it directly. Like Italian, Arabic seems to be specifically designed in order to make beautiful poetry possible. Like Sanskrit, it seems designed to hold in majestic form immutable and eternal truths. To hear devotees of the Qur'an speak of their reaction to the text, its impact upon them is something akin to the influence on us which might be had by a writer who combined the qualities of William Shakespeare with those of the Prophet Isaiah. Muslims regard the Qur'an not only as a work of incomparable prophetic grandeur, but also as a masterpiece of surpassing literary excellence.

At the same time, Muslim scholars who are bilingual in Arabic and in English, or in Arabic and any other language, insist that the Qur'an cannot be translated. Western scholars, whether they can read Arabic or not, seem often to be bewildered by the text and to be disparaging of it. But even the same Islamic scholars who insist on the text's purity and beauty also acknowledge that large sections of it are altogether obscure, even in Arabic. Moreover, some of the less opaque verses, because of the nature of the Arabic language, lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. Exegetical efforts have been a major industry throughout Islamic history, and huge volumes of commentaries and interpretations are available. A collection of writings known as the Hadith, containing traditions about the life and sayings of Mohammed, are also used in the exegetical project, since it is claimed that by associating obscure verses of the Qur'an with what was going on in Mohammed's life when the verses were

delivered enables their meaning to become clear.

One is driven to conclude that although the entire text of the Qur'an comes through one source, and although it was delivered relatively recently and in a relatively short period of time, it is, like the scriptures of other faiths, sprawling, contradictory, obscure and uneven, while also containing much that is genuinely inspiring and spiritually elevating.

Nevertheless, it does seem possible to conclude some things about Qur'anic teachings to which a broad spectrum of scholars and devotees might be expected to agree:

1. The Qur'an claims itself to be the direct word of God.
2. The Qur'an advances an insistent monotheism. There is no God but Allah. While there are many honorifics or epithets applied to God, e.g., the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Ruler of Judgment Day, speculation about the nature of God is discouraged. God is beyond human comprehending. The Qur'an calls theological speculation about ineffable matters which no one can ascertain one way or the other to be a form of self-indulgent whimsy. It is pointless to argue about abstruse dogmas; far more crucial is the effort to live in the way God intended for human beings. What we are given is God's laws. We should live in constant awareness of God's presence, and should find God through obedience to the deity's laws. Paradoxically, although the Qur'an is oblique about the nature of God, its claims to knowledge about the Day of Judgement and about the afterlife are more bold.
3. The Qur'an claims, as has been mentioned, that its message is simply a "reminder" of truths that everyone already knows. It claims to present a primordial faith that has been preached to the whole of humanity by the prophets of the past. God has never left human beings in ignorance about the way they should live, and has sent messengers to every people on the face of the earth. Constantly, the Qur'an points out that it has not been delivered in order to cancel out older religions, to contradict their prophets, or to start a new faith. Its message is the same as that Abraham, Moses, Solomon, David or Jesus. The Qur'an mentions only those prophets known to the Arab's of Mohammed's time. But as we have seen, modern scholars claim that a correct reading would universalize the Qur'anic approach to Christianity and Judaism to all religions. According to the Qur'an, all rightly guided religion encourages complete submission to God, refuses to worship man-made deities, and preaches justice and equality. Such religions all come from the same divine source. Some scholars claim that the Qur'an does not assert that Mohammed is the last prophet, or the final prophet, or

the seal of the prophets, that this is a claim made by Muslims in a later time. Yet the idea seems so intrinsic to Muslim faith and practice that many other scholars seem to acquiesce in the idea that it originates with the Qur'an. I cannot comment, since I have not read the Qur'an from cover to cover.

4. There is nothing innately hostile to Judaism or Christianity in the Qur'an. Mohammed saw himself as building upon and extending the good things in the Christian and Jewish faiths, gleaning what was best from them and projecting the vision they offered to a newer, deeper, more profound and more up-to-date level. The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as "the receivers of an earlier revelation" (sometimes translated as "the people of the book."). The Qur'an insists strongly that there should be no coercion in matters of faith. It commands Muslims to respect the faiths of Jews and Christians. According to the Qur'an, Abraham is the founder of the Jewish and Muslim communities. The Jews descended from the son of Abraham's first wife, Sarah, the son known as Isaac. The Arabs descended from the son of Abraham's second wife, Hagar, known as Ishmael. Although the Qur'an's stories of Adam and Eve, Moses, Noah and others are not exactly congruent with those of the Bible, the Qur'anic understanding is that Jews and Arabs have a common story up until the time of Isaac and Ishmael. The Qur'an then proceeds to elaborate the story of Ishmael, a story not given in the Hebrew scriptures. Mohammed never asked Jews and Christians to practice Islam unless they particularly wished to do so, because he regarded them as having a perfectly valid faith of their own. It seems to have been the practice throughout the various Islamic empires for the Christians and Jews within these empires to remain unmolested in the practice of their faiths. Hostility to Christianity and Judaism on the part of Muslims is a relatively recent invention, perhaps stemming from their experiences in modern times.
5. Social justice is the crucial virtue preached by the Qur'an. Muslims are commanded that it is their first duty to build a community characterized by a practical compassion, a community in which there is a fair distribution of wealth. This is far more important than any doctrinal speculation about the nature of God. For a Muslim, salvation does not consist in the redemption of some original sin committed by Adam, but lies in the achievement of a society which puts into practice God's desire for the human race. The Qur'an is much more concerned with right behavior in these matters than it is with right theological beliefs. The Qur'an exhorts all to protect the weak. It is egalitarian in spirit. It establishes no institution which has the power to interfere with the personal beliefs or the decisions of individuals. While each Muslim has a personal and unique responsibility to obey God's law, the Qur'an establishes no institution, and no specialized group of clergy, which is presumed to stand between the individual Muslim and God. What the

Qur'an seeks is that people should live in a certain way, rather than that they should accept certain creedal propositions. The only creed required of a Muslim is confined to the two phrases: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet." Westerners who define religion in terms of *personal* faith or *personal* spiritual experience have difficulty understanding Islam, which calls upon people to establish a very explicit kind of *social* order. Faith and politics, religion and society, are inseparable in Islam.

6. While avoiding dense creedal requirements of the faithful, the Qur'an is very explicit about what constitutes right behavior. Unlike some other religions, which tend to advance a very broad, lofty and general ethic, the Qur'an pins things down with explicit injunctions. A Muslim knows exactly what his obligations are. Again, this relates to the Islamic sense of the relationship among itself and Judaism and Christianity. God's revelations to humanity proceeded through four great stages. First, through Abraham God revealed the truth of monotheism, the truth of God's oneness; second, through Moses, God revealed the Ten Commandments; third, through Jesus God revealed the golden rule that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. But a final prophet was needed to explain what loving our neighbor as ourselves requires. The glory of the Qur'an is that it translates the beautiful but abstract sentiments of Jesus into definite laws.
7. The Qur'an does not justify warfare in general. It does develop the notion of a just struggle for self-defense and to protect decent values, but it condemns killing and aggression, especially the killing of non-combatants and civilians, and most especially the killing of innocent children. Commentators liken the Qur'an's attitudes in these matters to Roman Catholic doctrines about just war. The primary meaning of the Arabic word "jihad" is exertion, or effort. This effort can be made with the heart, the tongue, the pen, the hands, or the sword. Some commentators claim that by the standards of the era during which the Qur'an was revealed, when Papal Bulls were recommending the extirpation of heretics, the concept of jihad is relatively humane. "Defend yourself against your enemies; but attack them not first; God hateth the aggressor." (Qur'an, Chapter 2, verse 190).
8. The Qur'an does not contain the sort of miracle stories common in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and some other religions. In an age charged with supernaturalism, when miracles were accepted as the stock-in-trade of the most commonplace holy person, the Qur'an refuses to traffic in human weakness and credulity. To miracle-hungry idolaters seeking signs and portents, the Qur'an only counsels that they open their eyes. The stars holding their silent course in the vault of the heavens, the incredible order of the universe, the rain that falls to relieve the parched earth, palms bending with golden fruit, ships that glide across the seas laden with good

things for people -- can these be the handiwork of gods of stone? "What fools cry for signs when the creation harbors nothing else for those who would but pay attention?" asks the Qur'an. Mohammed lays claim to only one single miracle -- that of the Qur'an itself. That he by his own devices could have produced such a work was the one naturalistic hypothesis he could not accept.

9. The Qur'an, thus, tends to emphasize the need for intelligence and alertness in deciphering the messages of God in the world about us. According to the Qur'an a study of the workings of the natural world shows that it has a transcendent dimension and source. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason, but rather they should look at the world with attentiveness and curiosity. There is no basis in the Qur'an for the sort of fear and hostility toward science and toward independent philosophical study which has characterized Christianity for many centuries of its existence. As a result there was an incredible flowering of natural science and philosophy in Islamic civilization while Europe was in what we now term its Dark Age.
10. Finally, we should give attention to the teachings of the Qur'an regarding women. This is, obviously, a vexed and complicated issue. On the one hand, it can very easily and justifiably be argued that the Qur'an demands a great improvement in the lives of women over what was commonplace at the time its revelation occurred. On the other hand, these prescriptions, advanced as they may have been at the time, are very regressive, to put it mildly, by today's standards in the West. Moreover, in Islam, the situation is complicated, and indeed worsened, by the fact that many Muslims and many Muslim societies do not even live up to the prescriptions of the Qur'an regarding women, but tend to lapse into pre-Qur'anic habits derived from early tribal social life, an ancient way of life which still persists in many places.

The Qur'an gave women the rights of inheritance and the right to initiate divorce centuries before such rights were afforded to Western women. The Qur'an makes men and women partners before God, with analogous duties and responsibilities. The Qur'an permits polygamy, or, more precisely, polygyny. Men are permitted to have up to four wives provided that they treat them all with absolute equality and show no signs of favoring one rather than the others. (Yet the Hadith speaks of Mohammed having a favorite wife himself). Some Islamic apologists explain that this polygyny is not a concession to male sexual greediness, but was a way to ensure that in a society where, due to war and violence, women outnumbered men and widowhood was commonplace, no woman would be left without a protector. The Qur'an, at least according to commentators, does not prescribe the veiling of women. The Qur'an explicitly addresses itself to

women as well as men, and asserts that at the Day of Judgment they will be as answerable for their actions as men will be. Infanticide, usually practiced against female children, is explicitly forbidden in the Qur'an.

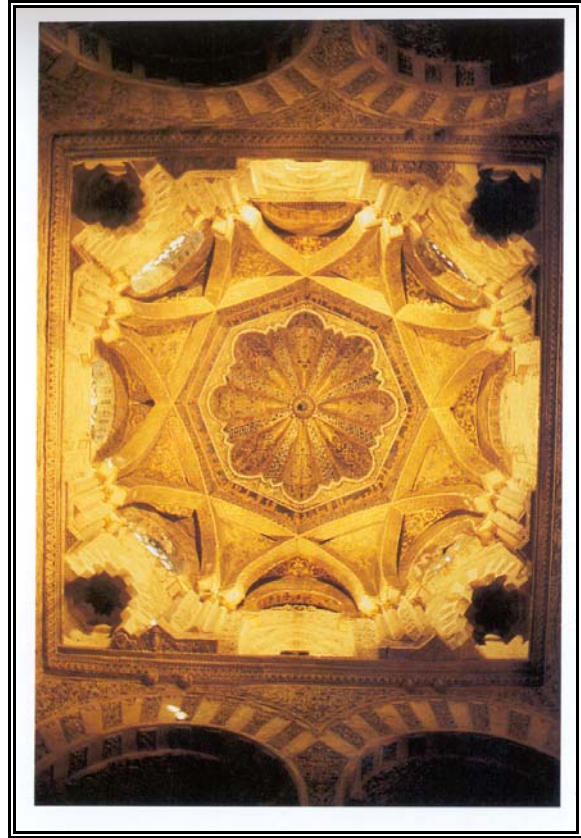
However, in demanding that daughters be included in inheritance, the Qur'an allows them only half the proportion that sons are afforded, under the theory that sons must support their families, while daughters will be supported by their husbands. The Qur'an sanctifies marriage, and makes it the sole locus of the sexual act. This was, according to Islamic apologists, a tremendous advance for women, since before the Qur'an women were treated as little more than chattel and marriage arrangements were so loose as to be scarcely recognizable, with conditional and temporary contracts quite commonplace. On the downside, however, Qur'anic law allows a man physically to chastise a recalcitrant or disobedient wife as a final resort when other measures have failed. In certain legal proceedings a woman's testimony is only worth half that of a man's; it is assumed that a woman will need a friend to jog her memory when testifying in a legal proceeding; the Qur'an also assumes that a woman will be unfamiliar with business matters. These Qur'anic rubrics are not necessarily incompatible with the claim that the emancipation of women was a project dear to the Prophet's heart, given the social context in which they were proclaimed. But modern Islamic feminists wishing to move beyond these traditional positions face many theological obstacles, not the least of which is the idea that, as the unalterable speech of God, the Qur'an is deemed to be non-negotiable.

Our consideration of the extraordinary qualities of the Qur'an provides us the opportunity to reflect on the role of Scripture and revelation in religious life and in civilization itself.

Religions universally seek to answer three great questions. 1) What meaning can we find in the reality we see around us, and how can we understand our place in the Creation? 2) What is it that we can hope for? 3) What should we do, how should we behave, in order to live in an authentically human way?

The answer to these questions is what Jesus terms the bread of life. Unless we have within our hearts a grasp of the answers to these great questions we are like dead people, even though we may be alive in a technical sense. The root meaning of the word "religion" is "to bind together." Religion connects us to our Creator. It enables each human being to find his or her place in the unfolding drama of the Creation. Religions bind us to each other by outlining a perspective of caring and mutual responsibility. Indeed, the great religions of humankind have provided a basis for entire civilizations, enabling millions upon millions of people to relate to each other in ways that most can regard as natural and right.

It has been the peculiarity of our own segment of human civilization for the last four or five hundred years to attempt to answer these three great questions of human spirit, and to construct the animating basis for the social order, out of pure reason, or out of a combination of reason and empirical observation, rather than deriving them from revealed religion. This enterprise has been an expression of the process of secularization which is a hallmark of the modern age in Western civilization. People of great genius have embarked on this project: Emanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Soren Kierkegard, David Hume, John Locke, Karl Marx, John Rawles, Bertrand Russell, Edmund Burke, and many, many others. Rene Descartes tried to construct such a worldview starting with the simple proposition "I think, therefore I am," followed by an exacting series of logical deductions.



Looking upward into the dome of the Mosque in Cordoba, Spain.

After five hundred years this great project of seeking a rational and empirical alternative to revealed religion must be deemed a failure. Can anyone detect a body of enthusiasts who are happily leading their lives according to any of these philosophies, and who are expending their energies joyously sharing the "good news" they have discovered with others? Marxism came closest to this, serving as an alternative kind of religion to many millions. But it has collapsed in ruins in what must be considered the briefest of historical times, especially when compared with the enduring qualities of the great spiritual traditions.

The problem with this modernist secularist project has two facets. The first has to do with the nature of the reasoning function itself. Reasoning is a way to get from premises to conclusions by carefully constructed processes of deduction. But human reason of itself has no way to establish the starting point for the reasoning process; it has no way to establish the initial premise. One of the roles of religious revelation is to establish initial premises, and to do this through poetry, fables, and parables which, through their beauty and majesty, through their transparency in "revealing" a compelling truth, inspire spiritual enthusiasm. There seems to be no way that a purely rational process can accomplish something comparable.

Connecting the rational process with empirical observation also does not solve the problem. There is one sense in which empirical observation is part of the religious quest. We have seen how passages of the Qur'an called the devotee's attention to the natural world as a window to the majesty of God. Jesus of Nazareth often began his invitations to reflection with a reference to observable things: the lilies of the fields, the sower and his seeds, the mustard tree and its seed. Contemplation of the natural world can often lead to a sense of God's presence and to a feeling of spiritual awe, itself a kind of spiritual illumination. For many people this is the first step on the spiritual path. But in and of itself it cannot answer the three great questions, nor can a series of logical deductions derived from the experience of a sunset or the miracle of a baby's smile do so. What we can loosely term "nature mysticism" is no substitute for a developed religious perspective.

For those that can understand them, the unraveling of the human genome or the second law of thermodynamics can inspire the same kind of awe that others find in a sunset or a baby's smile. But there is no way we are going to find the answers to religion's three great questions through science and empiricism, no matter how much we learn about the first few milliseconds of the big bang, no matter how well we eventually manage to integrate quantum mechanics with the special theory of relativity, and no matter how precisely we may come to understand the exact steps through which human beings evolved from chimpanzees. Science is a great and noble project, and probably no religion can survive if it presumes to contradict the findings of science in science's own sphere. At the same time, while the scientific method is excellent for describing how things work, is utterly unable out of its own devices to answer the great questions of meaning. The attempt of the Social Darwinist's to do something of the sort only resulted in a spiritual vision which is utterly repellent.

Let us now consider in a little more detail how Scripture works in this realm.

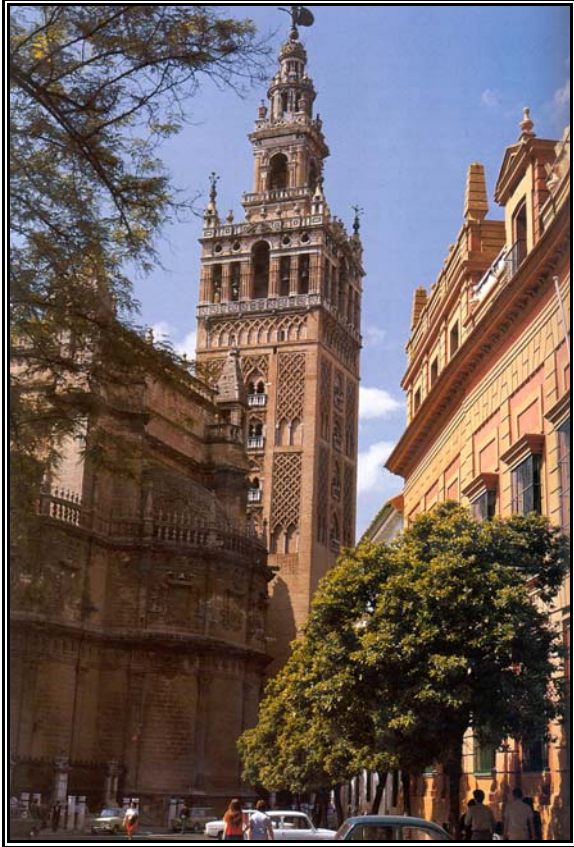
About fifteen years ago when I was a member of New York Yearly Meeting some Friends kindly became concerned about my immense ignorance of the Bible. (I was raised a Roman Catholic and so had scant familiarity with Scripture). One Friend gave me a copy of the Bible divided into 365 sections so that one could read the whole thing by devoting a modest amount of time to the matter for each day of a year. It seemed like a good idea to me and I was grateful for the gift. I proceeded to undertake this project. It turned out to be an excruciating spiritual exercise! I remember the year well. It was 1989. I did manage to complete the task but I was enormously relieved when the year was over. I am glad I did this; yet I am not sure I would ever recommend it to anyone else. The Bible is simply not a compendium each quantum of which is worth an equal amount of attention.



The great church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) built by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, one of the wonders of the world in its day, was converted to a mosque when the Ottomans conquered Istanbul in 1453 C.E.

Most of us have a loose association of thoughts and images about the Bible floating about in our heads: the great accounts of the creation, the Exodus, and the life of Jesus; some beautiful passages from Isaiah and the Book of Psalms; some phrases from the Sermon on the Mount and the great epistles of Paul. All in all, we may have 1/500th of the Bible in our grasp. We might be tempted to assume that the rest of the Bible is full of like material. Alas, it is not! One of the things I learned in my excruciating spiritual exercise of reading scripture from cover to cover is that there is an awful lot of material in the Bible which is simply trivial, and also a considerable amount which is appalling, as when it is alleged that Yahweh orders the genocide of perfectly innocent people. The material we are familiar with grabs attention precisely because it is unlike a lot of other material, not because it has been selected at random from a huge compendium of analogous text.

This brings us to the matter referred to in theological circles as "the canon within the canon." Individuals and groups gravitate towards sections of the scripture that are most meaningful to them. These may change with times and circumstances. I have met and have had searching discussions with many varieties of Christians, including evangelical Friends. No matter how much



A cathedral bell tower in Seville Spain which was once the minaret of a mosque.

people may insist that each word of the Bible comes equally from the mouth of God, and that the whole Bible is literally true and inerrant, no one gives equal attention and affords equal significance to the entire canon. However much people want to believe that Scripture offers us a rule book for life, offers a simple declarative word from the Creator which unambiguously guides us onto the right path, the reality is something different. Scripture asks us questions, rather than telling us things. Partly, it asks us questions we simply must answer for ourselves; partly it offers "multiple choice" answers by presenting to us a smorgasbord of possible first premises from which to construct a Weltanschauung. From the sprawling, ambiguous, contradictory and uneven library that makes up most scriptural traditions we turn to passages which "speak" to us. This is not necessarily an easy process. We may need to hear an unwelcome message. We may have to search. We may have to reread again and again some section which draws us,

yet perplexes us, until there is a breakthrough. And then, when all is said and done, we may still have an enormous job of discernment and struggle, a struggle which may indeed involve reasoning, deduction and empirical observation, to get from the scriptural insight, or first premise, to its import for our present situation in daily life. The fundamentalist longing for a simple and clear directive of unassailable authority from scripture simply ignores the content and quality of the texts and the experience in human life of how scripture works.

Obviously, the exegetical process I have described is uncertain in its outcome, and allows for many evasions. The most cursory look at Christian history discloses many examples of the most appalling practices for which divine sanction was claimed based on readings of scripture. The idea that Christian scripture justifies and defends the institution of slavery, for example, is not a slander against Christianity perpetrated by Hindus or Buddhists, but was an insistent claim made by authoritative Christian leaders themselves. Religion can rather easily be domesticated by the reigning status quo for its own advantage. Wild radicals and iconoclasts can also make easy use of the texts. So what I will call the "fundamentalist" longing, the longing for a direct, unambiguous, and

explicit word from God, for a text which provides a rule for life which frees us from all controversy and doubt, is in some senses perfectly understandable, but it is also absolutely impossible.

People with a grievance against Christianity, often a justifiable grievance, can easily assemble long lists of Biblical passages which insult modern concepts of decency and justice. Indeed, from a contemporary perspective, Jahweh himself should be hauled to the Hague and tried for crimes against humanity. Practicing Christians find some way to overlook these passages, and are often genuinely surprised if they are called to their attention. It is here that the modernist concept adopted by many Christians that the Bible consists of a mixture of divine insight and human fallibility becomes relevant and useful, whereas claims of Biblical inerrancy lack all credibility.

The same game can be played with the Qur'an. In his best selling book *The End of Faith* Sam Harris gives several pages of quotations from the Qur'an which insult contemporary values. The English texts he uses coincide closely with the Penguin Classics edition of the Qur'an, presumably a good-faith scholarly effort at interpretation.

All of us know Muslims who are genuinely grieved that a faith they practice, and which they associate with the virtues of humility, piety, compassion, kindness and social justice, has been "hijacked" by suicide bombers and by people who behead helpless hostages on video in the name of Allah. apparently quite confident that they are giving expression to genuine Muslim values while doing so.

Perhaps there exists within the Qur'an passages which can be interpreted to support radical extremist positions. Such hypothetical passages, if they exist, fall outside the "canon within the canon" to which ordinary Muslims attend. They might fail to take account of them, just as ordinary Christians today are oblivious of ways in which scriptural passages written during the early life of the church can be interpreted to support slavery. A lay person who has not read the Qur'an from cover to cover in Arabic must simply confess that he does not know the answer to this. One hopes that future interfaith dialogues will shed light on the matter.

In the last half of the twentieth century, as globalization progressed and interactions among people of different religious backgrounds intensified, there grew a willingness on the part of many generous-minded people, as has been mentioned, to acknowledge the true and beautiful things in the diversity of spiritual traditions which have taken root in different sections of the human community. But to be more than naive, this has to be balanced with an insight that religion can also be very dangerous, that many crimes have been

committed in its name, and that almost all scriptural traditions incorporate material which is repellent. Furthermore, there are few religious communities where people are immune from the sin of acting in modern times on the basis shockingly antiquated values lifted from their tradition's dark past. Fanaticism, absolutism, and fundamentalism are everywhere a danger. All people have a duty to be more than passive and "tolerant" when these aberrations appear in their own spiritual communities.

The Qur'an's great strength and great weakness, in my personal view, is that it is rather successful in meeting the longing for a scripture which will at once offer poetic and inspiring first premises out of which a world view can be formed, a world view which inspires spiritual enthusiasm, while at the same time explicitly and unambiguously defining what this means for life as it is lived every day. When it was first proclaimed, this combination of inspiration with explicit instruction promoted a great advance in civilization. But as time has passed, and what was once advanced has, inevitably, become outmoded, there seems to be little way to escape from the text. While there are, apparently, large parts of the Qur'an which are cloudy or ambiguous, they do not offer a clear alternative to the parts which are all too clear, and often very time-bound. The literalist "this is the word direct from God" view of the Qur'an, together with the explicitness of the exhortations to behavior, which did not allow wiggle room for evasion when they were a challenging advance, also do not allow wiggle room for escape now that the human family is seeking to transcend them and reach a genuinely new level. But I want to be clear in saying this that I do not regard the package of values advanced by a secularized and materialistic Western civilization whose high priests sit in the board rooms of multi-national corporations, to be the "new level" towards which humanity's spiritual aspirations are reaching.

Islam is on the move. Islam is also at a crossroads, as happens with every great religious movement from time to time. We know that the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. Will Islam succumb to the temptation continuously to anchor the spirit strictly to the letter? Or will it find a way out that will carry the movement forward while preserving its incomparably valuable characteristics and insights? There is an Islamic saying: "In the disputations of the canonists there lieth a mercy." The saying recognizes the dangers of the hidebound and the rigid. All of us, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and people of many other faiths, should pray that this mercy will prevail within Islam, and that our brothers and sisters of the Islamic faith, who comprise one sixth of the human community, will find the way forward, once again making a glorious contribution to the world's temporal and spiritual progress.

Part Three: Islam in History

For a thousand years, that is, for the period from the eighth century to the eighteenth century, the leading civilization on the planet, in terms of its extent, its power, and its creativity, was Islam. How this came about as a result of the career of Mohammed and the inspirational qualities of the Qur'an, the holy book which was revealed through his prophetic office, is a fascinating drama of epic proportions.

But this epic drama has ended with a vast change in power relationships between the North Atlantic civilization we call "the West" and Islam. It is a change which has taken place in the last two hundred years, in a mere flash of historical time. This eclipse of Islam by the West is at the root of a current political crisis which is global in scale. Yet the history of Islam is almost unknown among average Europeans and Americans, whose education has tended to focus, perhaps not unreasonably, on the history of "Western" civilization.

The shallowness of our knowledge of the titanic historical forces at work in the transitions of the last two hundred years can tempt us to assume that once the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is resolved, and once the present conflict between America and Saddam Hussein is ended one way or the other, things will settle back to normal. Naively, we might expect that the Islamic world will docilely assume its assigned role as one player among many in the game of constructing a globalized economic and social system based on the Western concepts of secularism, materialism, technology, and unfettered capitalism carried out by transnational corporations. This expectation of Islamic cooperation in a global order based upon a Western world view is a dangerous delusion.

Imagine the problem someone would face if trying to summarize Christian history in a few pages, even to a knowledgeable audience. How would one encompass meaningfully the Renaissance papacy with the Quaker movement, the crusades with the spirituality represented by one such as Francis of Assisi, the monastic movement with the capitalistic ethos of Protestantism, the Christian revivalist movement in America which took place simultaneously with a genocidal war against Native Americans? There has been as much diversity in faith and practice among Islamic peoples as among people in the Christian West, and just as here in the Christian West there are historical developments of vast scope which fly in the face of Gospel values, so, too, in Islamic history there are

many lapses from the founding vision of the movement

However sketchy our treatment of this subject must be, I think it important to start at the very beginning with Mohammed's death. Incredibly, some of the events which occurred that long ago still reverberate in the present day in the context of strife between Islam and the West.

We have seen that the Qur'an provided explicit direction for the conduct of life, including the conduct of life in the political sphere. The Islamic movement aspires to a society organized and governed according to God's will for the human estate. Yet the text of the Qur'an as it was revealed does suffer from some omissions, and one particularly glaring one concerns us here. Mohammed apparently had no vision which provided guidance regarding how his own successor was to be chosen. The Qur'an simply does not address the succession issue.

Upon the Prophet's death there was disagreement about the succession. This involved some residual tension between the people of Medina, the city that had harbored the Prophet during his rise from obscurity to power, and the people of Mecca, the city of his origin which had cast him out but with which he was ultimately reconciled. The people of Medina assumed that the succession should be determined by a consensus of elders; the people of Mecca assumed that leadership should be handed down to Mohammed's male heirs. No male children survived the Prophet, but his daughter, Fatimah, had a husband, Ali, and together they had a son, Mohammed's grandson, Husayn.

This tension between the two camps was temporarily plastered over. After all, Arab unity had been the Prophet's life work, and no one was inclined to desecrate his memory too baldly by launching a civil war over his fresh grave. Given Husayn's youth, and even his father Ali's relative youth, the party favoring hereditary succession decided to bide their time. The leader selected by the elders was allowed to become the first caliph, the spiritual and temporal successor to Mohammed. He was succeeded in turn by two other caliphs. During this period the unity achieved by Mohammed seemed a little fragile. Some of the tribes who had given their loyalty to Mohammed perhaps had never intended automatically to transfer this loyalty to a successor. Perhaps they had not thought of themselves as doing more than swearing allegiance to a particularly gifted leader, not as having irrevocably joined a new centralized state.

At any rate, intrigue continued, even while the Islamic empire was growing. The capital was moved from Medina to Baghdad, more near the center of things as Islamic hegemony was developing. The third caliph was murdered. Mohammed's son-in-law was not involved in the murder plot, but the murderers and some other dissidents invited Ali to be fourth caliph. Ali accepted, and moved

The Five Pillars of Islam

While concerned with the justice of the social order, Islamic tradition does not neglect the path of personal piety. There are five “pillars” which constitute the recommended devotional practices of individual Muslims.

1. Although creedal demands are minimal in Islam, each Muslim is expected to say, at least once in his life, with full awareness and completely deep attention, the phrases “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet.”
2. Prayer should be constant, but five times each day are designated for special prayer: upon rising, at noon, in mid-afternoon, just after sunset, and upon retiring. There is no Sabbath in the same sense as Jews and Christians hold to one. But noon on Friday is a common time for people to gather at the mosques to pray. At other times one spreads one’s prayer rug wherever one happens to be at the designated hour. It is not uncommon to see groups of people praying in the street in Islamic countries.
3. One is required to give one fortieth of what one owns to religious authorities to distribute to the poor every year. Note that this is a wealth tax, not an income tax.
4. Observation of the Holy Month of Ramadan with appropriate prayers and fasting is the fourth pillar.
5. Every Muslim who can afford to do so is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime.

his capital to Kufah, some distance from Baghdad in the direction of what is now Kuwait. Many Muslim’s never accepted Ali, and after having to wage wars to maintain himself in power he too was murdered in 661. Mohammed died, you will recall, in 632, so the murder of his son-in-law while he was serving as the fourth caliph occurred less than 30 years later. Some time after Ali’s death the people of Kufah, the murdered Ali’s capital, invited Ali’s son, that is, Mohammed’s grandson, Husayn, to govern there as caliph. Husayn, like his father Ali, failed to win the allegiance of many Muslims, and in 680 he, too, was cut down, somewhat less than fifty years after Mohammed’s death.

Thus a deep schism occurred in Islam in the decades immediately following the Prophet’s death, a schism which has not been healed to this day. The hopes of those favoring a blood-line succession were irretrievably dashed with Husayn’s death. The movement of Husayn’s partisans, the advocates of bloodline succession, nevertheless still exists. This group is known as the Shi’ites. They comprise about ten percent of Islamic people. The Shi’ites remained marginalized and somewhat bitter throughout most of Islamic history. They conduct anguished remembrances every year on the anni-

versary of Husayn's murder, with parades of people flagellating themselves in the street. The main branch of Islam, the other 90% of Muslims, the branch generally flowing from the caliphate established by the elders of Medina upon the Prophet's death, are known as Sunnis. In general, throughout Muslim history, the broad majority of Sunnis have been more relaxed and pragmatic. But, of course, this can appear to be apostasy to people of a different perspective, like the Shi'ites, who tend to advance a more austere and, by their lights, more orthodox version of the faith.

Shi'ites finally gained some political power in the 16th Century when the rulers of one part of the Islamic world, the part we now know as Iran, made the Shi'ite branch of Islam the official religion of that area. Shi'ites are also a majority of the population in neighboring Iraq, but they do not hold political power there, Saddam Hussein and his coterie being Sunnis. This schism figures in contemporary geopolitics because, on the one hand, some American strategists expect the disenfranchised Shi'ite majority in Iraq to rise up against Saddam Hussein if an American assault on Baghdad provides an opportunity. On the other hand, other American strategists fear that the Shi'ites of Iraq, once Saddam Hussein is out of the way, will simply want to annex themselves to their fellow Shi'ites now running Iran, thereby serving to consolidate the so-called axis of evil.

But this is jumping ahead.

It is amazing, and not a little bewildering, to contemplate the century following Mohammed's death. In spite of the scandalous succession intrigues, Islam was on the move. The unity so dear to Mohammed held fast, in spite of some uncertainties. But the unity was fostered by the caliphs through a strategy of redirecting the tribes' aggressiveness away from each other and toward the surrounding territories. Eventually, within 100 years, the area governed by the caliphs reached from Spain all across North Africa and over to the edge of India. This was not by any means the ultimate extent of the Muslim domain – it is just its extent at the end of the first hundred years.

At the same time, since the precepts of the Qur'an, specific as they attempted to be, did not anticipate all the governance issues which running a vast empire according to God's wishes would involve, there began the development of a sophisticated jurisprudence, known as Shariah law, defining ways in which what was in the Qur'an and the Hadith could be used to infer additional principles to cover new situations. This allowed for a dynamic process, a process which lasted up until about the tenth century, and provided the necessary framework through which the growing empire could be administered. For reasons too complicated to discuss here, the body of Shariah law became frozen in the tenth century, and so, like the Qur'an itself, it became canonical and immutable. You will frequently see references in the newspapers to attempts in various Muslim

countries to replace a modern secular legal system with Shariah law. It is this vast but frozen body of jurisprudence derived from the Qur'an by inferences and deductions made in an ancient time which is referred to as Shariah law.

Obviously, it is a difficult thing to reconstruct in all particulars what actually occurred during the great expansionist era of the Islamic empire. Christian culture retains a lore about bloodthirsty Saracens wielding terrible curved sabers from astride galloping horses mercilessly slaying in the name of Allah all who dared oppose them. Those more friendly to the Islamic enterprise see it differently. The expansion was a secular affair, not something done in the name of Allah, and was far superior in moral character than, say, the much later British subjection of India. The Muslims simply threw out exploitative oligarchies in the conquered territories, replacing these ousted regimes with an administration guided by Qur'anic ideals of equality and fairness. Life always improved markedly in the areas conquered. Learning and culture flourished in a new way. People were allowed to live their lives according to their own lights. Islam was practiced in the garrisons of the Muslim armies, but was not imposed upon the general population. Christian and

Jewish communities flourished within the Islamic empire. The first Islamic outreach was directed into Byzantine Christian territory, that is, into the eastern remnant of the fallen Roman Empire, and into Persia. Islamic scholars can cite

The Sufis

Sufism is a mystical tradition within Islam which is in some ways analogous to the mystical tradition within Christian civilization. Mystics emphasize the possibility of connectedness between the human consciousness and God. Mystical movements, or schools, usually define a "path" or series of disciplines which a devotee can undertake to prepare for the encounter with God, but most mystics acknowledge that it is up to God, not to the mystic, actually to effect the encounter.

In Arabic "suf" means wool. Sufi mystics began wearing coarse woolen garments to protest the silks and satins of the caliphs. "Shaikhs" are Sufi masters of special mystical disciplines. "Fakirs" are people known to be poor in material things, but rich in God. "Dervishes" are practitioners of a spinning dance said to prepare the spirit to receive a divine word.

In Sufism there are generally acknowledged to be three paths, or disciplines, through which to prepare for a divine encounter: the path of love, the path of ecstasy, and the path of the mind.

Mystics generally cause disquiet in the religious mainstream because their claim that they can achieve a union with or connectedness to a divine source is usually seen as a challenge to conventionally constituted religious authority.

concrete historic evidence that the common people in both these areas regarded the arrival of the Muslims as a welcome relief.

Eventually the empire became too vast to be governed from a single center. Different domains arose within the empire, although their heads, while acting independently for all intents and purposes, often still professed vassalage to the central caliphate. Ultimately, a great swath from Spain all the way to the Pacific Ocean, incorporating most of China, India, North Africa and the Middle East, became part of Muslim civilization. Islam extended even into the Pacific Ocean itself, incorporating what is now Indonesia and the islands in the southern half of what is now the Philippines.

Even though it was not tightly governed from a central location, this great new cultural and economic nexus was able to draw upon the knowledge and the commodities of lands between China and India in the east and Spain in the west. It incorporated most of the world's great cities and most of the world's areas of settled agriculture. In this region there was a shared language of religion and law; and merchants could travel and do business within a shared framework of assumptions. Its high culture was expressed in symbols to which all could respond. Arguably, it was the world's first "globalization."

During its early phase Islamic civilization's great capitals were found in the Arab-dominated world that included Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba. In its later phase the capitals of the Turco-Iranian world prevailed: Istanbul, Isfahan, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Delhi. There were great achievements in scholarship and in science, in poetry and in prose, in philosophy, in architecture, and in spiritual insight, all of which are precious legacies of humankind. For about half of what we term the Christian era, Muslims could regard themselves as marching at the forefront of human progress.

I do not mean to imply that all this occurred very smoothly. There were long centuries of struggle. The expansion is generally considered to have reached its zenith at around 1500, that is, 800 years after Mohammed's death. There were reversals along the way, and some internal wars. The empire was also beset by external foes. The expulsion of Muslims from Spain by Christians in 1492, and the earlier establishment of the Crusader states in the Holy Land along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, have always, until very recent times, loomed much larger in the Western imagination than in Muslim eyes, to whom they seemed somewhat peripheral.

Of much more significance to Muslims was the assault of Genghis Khan, who overwhelmed the core areas of the Empire around 1200. Setting out from his stronghold in Mongolia, and leading a terrifying assault on the settled agricultural and urban areas of the Islamic territories, Genghis Khan proceeded all the way

to the Adriatic in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east. But the Mongol conquerors eventually became domesticated by those they conquered, becoming Muslims themselves.

Saladin, Suliman the Magnificent, Tamerlane and Genghis Khan are the names of great conquerors associated with Muslim history. Compared to them such figures as Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Adolf Hitler seem like shrinking violets and fly-by-nights. The exploits of these Western strongmen collapsed during their lifetimes, or, in the case of Alexander, shortly thereafter, while the eastern conquerors married their military prowess to a capacity for statecraft that allowed their accomplishments to endure, sometimes for many generations.

Of course, as I have mentioned, there were many profound lapses from Islamic ideals which developed in the course of this long and varied history. The opulence of the caliph court is legendary. Whereas Mohammed was addressed by everyone by his given name, and lived in a simple clay house, the caliphs, presumed to be his successors, built lavish palaces, were addressed with titles like “shadow of God on earth,” and were approached only by people on their hands and knees with their foreheads scraping the floor—people who once might have prostrated themselves only to Allah.

But in the face of such lapses the mosques have repeatedly served as centers of reform, even of revolt when things got very bad. The principles revealed to Mohammed in the holy book have always been available, serving, in their very explicitness regarding what we would call the Kingdom of God on earth, as a rebuke to political oppression and to the mal-distribution of wealth. Typically, throughout Islamic history, mosque-centered reform movements have been “fundamentalist,” in that they are rooted in a cry to return to the fundamentals of Islamic teaching in the political and social sphere. The contrast we see today between the absurd agglomeration of wealth by the Sultan of Brunei or the Saudi royal family, and the widespread dissent emanating from radical clerics preaching from New York to Cairo to the back country of Pakistan and Afghanistan is nothing at all new in the general pattern of Islamic history. Nor is there anything particularly novel in the charge that in their apostasy Islamic rulers of power and wealth have become unduly captivated or corrupted by non-Muslim influences, such as, in our own day, by the United States. Islamic reformers have always tended to be suspicious of foreign influence and of alien accretions which corrupt what they see as the purity of the faith. The idea of returning ever more rigorously to the true Islam is a perennial feature of Islamic societies in trouble. Indeed, we see many of the same fundamentalist impulses in our own Christian culture in times of crisis.

Over the past 200 years, the Islamic world system has been overwhelmed by the West, as has every other part of the globe. Scholars of European colonialism

indicate that by 1920 fully 85% of the planet's land area was under the influence of Europeans. Capitalism and the industrial and scientific revolutions enabled Europeans to prevail over everyone else. In the Islamic world, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 was the first humiliating blow. Then the British took India, the British and the Dutch divided southeast Asia, the British, French, Germans, and Italians took Africa, the Russians swamped Central Asia, and the British and the French carved up the Middle East between them. By the 1920's only Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Central Arabia and Yemen were free of Western control in a formal sense, but they were, nevertheless, subjected to heavy Western influence. The caliphate, which reached back to the Prophet, had begun to fade in the 1500s and existed no longer well before 1920. For a while it was feared that even Mecca and Medina might fall into Western hands.

While a formal decolonization began to take place after the Second World War, it was after the Second World War also that European powers rather crudely inserted a Western-style European state into land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, unceremoniously tossing out many indigenous people while doing so. This land had been Islamic since Saladin's expulsion of the Crusader states in 1187. The analogy between the establishment of the State of Israel and the establishment of the Crusader States in the Holy Land in the Middle Ages has given modern Muslims a sensitivity to the idea of crusades, and to the use of the word "crusade," as George W. Bush recently found out, a sensitivity which they might not have thought much about before 1948.

The plight of the Palestinian refugee people obviously resonates throughout the Islamic world, not only out of empathy for the real human tragedy from which the Palestinian people have suffered, which is reason enough, but also because the establishment and existence of the State of Israel so neatly symbolizes the humiliation to which Islamic peoples are subjected by the West on an ongoing basis. Modern Israelis, unfortunately, are likewise victims of this tragic situation, for they had little to do with the fatal lack of foresightedness by European statesmen who, reeling at the end of the Second World War and stunned at the holocaust which had taken place amidst the War's chaos, expedited the long-sought formation of a Jewish state as a partial gesture recompense. But instead of establishing this state by giving it Alsace-Lorraine, or Massachusetts or Florida, land was seized from the Palestinians. The Bible, with its ancient tale of genocidal assaults by the Israelites on the Canaanites, Hittites, and other peoples who inconveniently occupied the Promised Land when Joshua, the successor to Moses, and his people arrived to take possession of it, was used as the justification for this confiscation of land from the Palestinians.

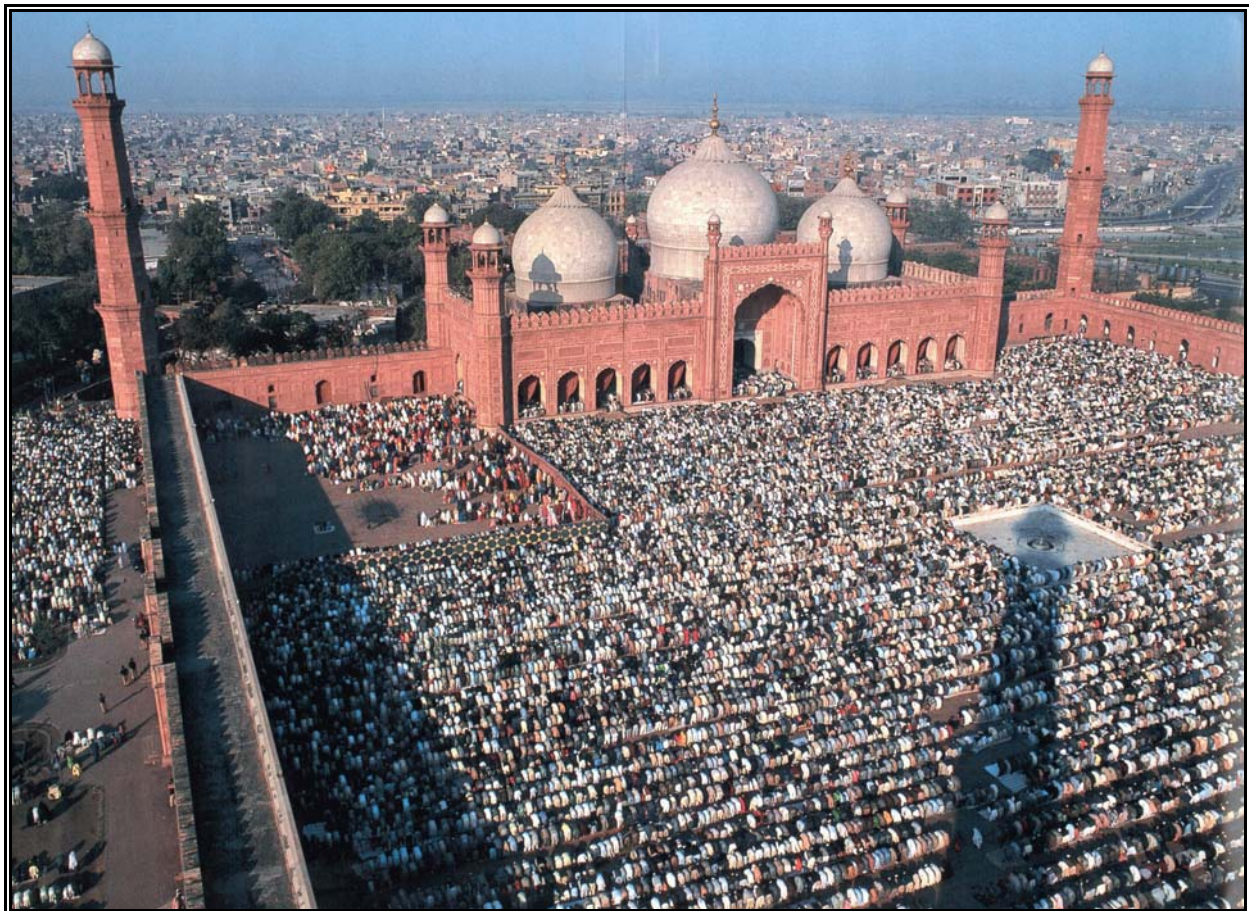
Through their Islamic faith, Muslims have looked for God in history. The Qur'an gave them a historic mission. Their chief duty was to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable, were treated with

absolute respect. The experience of building such a society and living in it would give them intimations of the divine, because they were living in accordance with God's will. A Muslim had to redeem history, and that meant that affairs of state were not a distraction from spirituality but were the stuff of religion itself.

It is easy for such a perspective to mutate into the idea that faithfulness to the truth will lead to political and material flourishing. This proved to be true, for all appearances, for many centuries after the Prophet's death. The poverty and degradation suffered at the hands of the West in recent times is a sort of rebuke to the religious sensibility which Islam commends, and is the cause of bitter soul searching. Alas, messianism is as apt to sap morale in times of adversity as it is to stimulate morale when the problems encountered are susceptible to an effective response.

What does the future hold for Islam and for the West?

My personal view is that, ironically, this depends more upon the West than upon



Worshippers at the Mosque of Lahore, Pakistan.

Islam. For there is not a shred of evidence that the post-World War II economic regime which has replaced colonialism is any better for the world's exploited people than colonialism was. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have probably done more harm to more people than any other non-military organizations in history. Similarly, NAFTA is proving itself devastating for Mexicans and for Americans alike. Although these are presumably international bodies and international treaties, they do, alas, have the American flag painted all over them in the eyes of most of the world's people.

Vast populations today are being placed at the mercy of an anarchic global economic system in which transnational corporations are the primary actors, transnational corporations accountable to no one but the tiny circle of their most elite stockholders and executives. So we in the West, alas, are caught up in a fundamentalism all our own. It is a secularized fundamentalism, but it is fundamentalism nevertheless. The idea that the anarchy of the unfettered free market magically transforms the greed of individuals into the common good, and that through it wealth somehow trickles down from the super-rich to everyone else, is surely one of the most enduring exercises in wishful thinking humankind has ever known. Yet this is the idea now being audaciously implemented on a global scale, in an arena in which the painfully built up constraints through which national governments have managed to channel and domesticate the market process are no longer effective.

If this globalization process continues without substantial revision in favor of human values, we can expect that the polarization between Islam and the West will deepen, and that terrorist resistance will continue to exploit the very technology and the lack of effective national boundaries which are the essence of the new global order itself. In short, Islam will replace Marxism as a locus of resistance for exploited peoples.

Some sort of globalization process is inevitable. If the globalization process is humanized, Islam might soften, as Christianity has, in the face of the attractive qualities of modernity. The core spiritual values of Islam will be universally esteemed, not the least among Islamic people themselves, while ways will be found to release what is outmoded and regressive.

But all such suppositions can only be speculative and tentative. History has a way of surprising us all; this will be true of the future no less than it has been in the past.

I have mentioned the fondness for poetry of people in Islamic cultures. I would like to conclude this brief reflection on Islam in history by reading a poem. This poem is often used to open political meetings, strange as the idea of opening a political meeting with a poem may seem to us. It is the work of the 19th Century

poet Altaf Hussein Hali and is entitled *The Ebb and Flow of Islam*:

When autumn has set over the garden,
Why speak of the springtime of flowers?
When shadows of adversity hang over the present,
Why harp on the pomp and glory of the past?
Yes, these are things to forget: but how can you with
The dawn forget the scene of the night before?
The assembly has just dispersed;
The smoke is still rising from the burnt candle;
The footprints on the sands of India still say:
A graceful caravan has passed this way.

Daniel A. Seeger
Moorestown, New Jersey

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