Understanding Islam

Series IV: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part One: The initial expansion of Muslim rule

The expansion of Muslim rule in the first hundred-and-twenty years after the death of Muhammad (632-750) is one of the most remarkable that we know of in human history. From Madina, the Empire spread throughout the Arabia Peninsula, westwards to Morocco and the Pyrenees, north as far as Azerbaijan, and east to the River Indus. How did this happen? What motivated them? How much was this a united empire and was it religious or political?

From the time of the Prophet

It is clear from the words of the Qur'an and the actions of Muhammad that he saw himself as having a wider field of influence than the area around Makka and Madina, where he lived all his life. He saw himself standing in the line of the Hebrew Prophets and presented himself as such to the Jewish clans of Madina. Initially, in both Makka and Madina, he orientated his community at prayer in the direction of Jerusalem, which the Qur'an calls the Holy City (*al-Quds*), and to which he was taken on his Night Journey and Ascent into Heaven. The direction of prayer (*qibla*) was only fixed on Makka some sixteen months after the migration to Madina [Q. 2:142-150]. Muhammad knew of the close relationship between his community and the Christians when he sent nearly half of the Muslims of Makka to the Christian King of Abyssinia to seek refuge in 615. By 629, he dictated letters to be sent to the neighbouring rulers (Byzantium, Persia and Abyssinia) announcing his presence and mission, and inviting them to embrace Islam.

One of the remarkable achievements of Muhammad during his prophetic life was to unite the tribes and clans of Arabia under the banner of Islam. Historically, they valued and guarded their individuality and inter-clan raiding was a habitual way of life. There was a charismatic appeal to the Prophet that exceeded the mere achievements of being the "latest political force" and attracted people to pledge their lives to Islam and thus to his cause. The establishment, survival and expansion of Muslim rule was seen as an action inspired and blessed by God. There was a company of angels that fought on the side of the outnumbered Muslims at the Battle of Badr (624) to ensure their survival and strengthen their faith by victory [Q. 8:9,12,17,42]. The Qur'an declares that God gives the earth to whomsoever God wills and that such blessing is a sign of God's reward to the people who are God-conscious (*taqwa*) [Q. 7:128].

After Makka became a Muslim city, Muhammad consolidated his position by making mutual defence treaties with the clans of the southern and eastern parts of Arabia, which brought them under the banner of Islam and meant that they contributed to the

central treasury. In 631, he sent raiding parties to Tabuk and other desert settlements in the direction of Damascus to bring them under Muslim rule. The territory that today comprises Greater Syria (Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon) was clearly in his mind and some accounts have it that he despatched an army in the direction of Palestine that set out shortly before his death. Just as Islam is not, in a narrow sense, a religion but rather a complete way of life, we cannot distinguish between "bearing the Final Message to lead people to Paradise" and "bringing territory under Muslim rule and law to train the people in the ways of God and establish the way of Islam on the earth." The motivation for Muslim expansion is both "spiritual" and "political," and God will bless those who undertake this work both in this world (economically, militarily, politically) and in the next (Paradise).

The aftermath of Muhammad's death

Not surprisingly, after the death of Muhammad, some of the clans of Arabia felt that their treaties with the Muslim state were thus cancelled and so they decided to ignore their agreements and go back to their former ways of living. This was a political act, treason, we might say, but in order to perform it, they committed a religious act, apostasy. The military actions that followed under the first Caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr (r.632-634), were thus called the *Ridda*, which literally means "breaking out" but is usually translated as the Wars of Apostasy. In order to bring these clans back to their political treaties, a religious act was needed, "reconversion" to Islam. This link between apostasy and treason (or "going over to the enemy") was later reinforced in Islamic law when it was codified.

The Qur'an speaks about apostasy in various ways. At times, it seems that this is a personal act of faith for which the person will be accountable to God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 3:106; 4:137], at other times, it is spoken of as a more political act that attracts punishment on this earth at the hands of the community [Q. 5:33; 9:11-12; 16:106; 22:11]. When the *shari'a* was codified, this was at a time in Muslim history when the Muslim Empire was a political reality and leaving it through apostasy was "going over to the enemy." The *shari'a* thus details temporal punishments, including the death penalty, for apostasy. Some modern Muslim scholars living in Muslim minority contexts have re-examined the question and drawn a distinction between what they call "simple apostasy," in which someone makes a personal decision no longer to follow the way of Islam, for which they are accountable to God, and "compound apostasy," in which the act of faith is compounded by treason, open attack on the Muslim community, vilification of the Qur'an or the Prophet, or encouraging others to do likewise, which is accountable to human courts and can ultimately carry the death penalty. At the present time, it is important to remember that many cases of attacks on people held to be apostates are conducted by mob violence or lynch mobs, often inspired by lesser motives, rather than through due process of law in a properly constituted and conducted court.

The way in which Caliph Abu Bakr dealt with the *Ridda* was to send in the army to bring them back under the rule and profession of Islam or face the consequences.

After the initial rebellion was put down, the other clans of the Arabian Peninsula were brought under Muslim rule.

The time of Caliph Umar (r.634-644)

Damascus at this time was the seat of administration for the Byzantine Empire in the southern seaboard of the Mediterranean. The Byzantines had been weakened in the area after decades of battling with the Sasanian Empire, based in Persia. Greek was the language of administration and of the elite in society, who treated their subjects with some distain (the Greek word "barbarian" means those who do not speak Greek). After three battles with the Byzantines, taking desert towns, Damascus fell to the Muslim forces in 636 and their rule spread throughout Syria by 637. Muslim forces were to invade the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus, Rhodes and Crete in the 650s. The mainland frontier with the Byzantine Empire through Anatolia was really defined by geography and economics rather than politics or military might.

Palestine, then a district of Syria, fell to the Muslims in 637, with Caliph Umar himself coming forward to accept the surrender of Jerusalem. He respected the Christian religious sites (the Jews had been kept out of Jerusalem during Christian rule) and declined to offer his prayers in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but instead went onto a nearby piece of waste ground that was used as the city's rubbish dump and offered his prayers there. This turned out to be the Temple Mount, on which the Jewish Temple had stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70CE. Later, the al-Aqsa Mosque was built on the place where tradition has it that Umar offered his prayers.

The Muslim forces moved westwards into Egypt under the leadership of Amr al-As and conquered the port city of Alexandria in 642. They established their Egyptian garrison and centre of administration in Fustat, just south of modern Cairo (which was established by the Fatimid Dynasty in the 10th century).

To the east, the Muslim forces were led by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and entered Iraq from the south in 636, capturing the Sasanian capital, al-Mada'in, in 637 and bringing all Iraq until Muslim rule by 641. The great garrison cities of Basra and Kufa were established in the late 630s. Persia fell to the Muslim armies in 650 and this marked the end of the Sasanian Empire.

The Muslim forces were generally small, numbered in hundreds or at most a few thousands, but they were fast, agile, well-motivated and co-ordinated. As a result of their own earlier battles, both Byzantines and Sasanians were in a fairly fragile state. The Muslims used "hit and run" tactics and generally only light casualties were involved. The "Great Battle of al-Qadisiyya," for example, lasted only three days. Deals were normally done between opposing forces to avoid large-scale fighting. Both historical testimony, such as exists, and archaeological evidence suggest that these Muslim conquests did not cause major disruption to the way of life of the local people.

Damascus was the cultural, economic and administrative centre of the area and its capture brought considerable wealth into the hands of the Muslims, although some of the Byzantine elite took their precious possessions with them when they retreated. Caliph Umar set up an office to measure and distribute the booty from captured lands. Many Muslim families became rich and established themselves through a share in the booty. Umar distributed 80% of the lands formerly owned by the Byzantine government between the soldiers and retained 20% in the treasury for the common good. Land that had been abandoned by those fleeing the territory or land that was confiscated from those who fought against the Muslims was claimed by Muslims on a "first come" basis. Peasants were generally left in place to work the land.

From the Muslim perspective, the sentiment was that God had conquered through the hands of the Muslims and the booty was a sign of God's blessing and favour on them. The conquered Christians tended to see their defeat as a sign of God's wrath for their sinful ways. The Muslim rulers were unused to administering an empire, so they retained the services of the Byzantine administrators, Christians and Jews, with the executive decisions being taken by Muslims and various Muslim colouration to the economic system, e.g., the introduction of the military tax that was to be paid by Christians and Jews in lieu of military service (*jizya*). Greek remained the language of administration for some decades, with Persian serving the same function in the former Sasanian lands.

Umayyad Rule

The Umayyads were part of the old Makkan aristocracy and ironically, the first three Umayyad Caliphs (Mu'awiya I r.661-680, Yazid I r.680-683 and Mu'awiya II r.683-684) were all direct descendants from Abu Safyan, an arch-opponent of Muhammad and a late convert to Islam. An Umayyad saying is reported to the effect that now that we have power, we should be like boys with a ball and pass it from one to another. The family tree of Umayyad caliphs from 661-750 is full of brothers and cousins passing around the honour and a good deal of the history is taken up with disputes about succession. Mu'awiya I was Governor of Syria in the time of the fourth Rightly-Guided Caliph, Ali (d.661), the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet. Mu'awiya proclaimed himself Caliph, with the help of his Syrian stronghold, and thus began the Umayyad dynasty that ruled the Muslim community until 750.

The Umayyad caliphs, with the exception of Caliph Umar II (Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz r.717-720), who was regarded as pious and observant, were corrupt (to say the least). Amongst them, Yazid I, who was responsible for the events leading up to the massacre at Karbala in 680, may be regarded as the low point. His successor, Mu'awiya II, was weak and ineffective and ruled only for a few months. He was followed by Marwan I, who only ruled for one year (684). The real consolidator was Abd al-Malik (r.685-705), he saw off other candidates for the post, put down a revolt in Makka and united the Caliphate on a strong basis from 692.

Three elements are important in the coherence of the Empire at this time. First, Abd al-Malik established a professional Syrian army to replace the old tribesmen under a command structure that was more reliable than their old chieftains. There is a real sense in which the Syrian army was the engine of expansion of the Umayyad Caliphate and its means of maintaining stability. Not only did they effectively conquer new territory but they were on hand to be sent to outposts where disruption or rebellion occurred. Abd al-Malik sent the army northwards to open a new front with Armenia and southwards to bring Iraq back under control and deal with the factions there. Second, significant changes in administration occurred at this time. Arabic replaced Greek and Persian as the administrative language and Arab families began a speedy ascent amongst the ranks of Jewish and Christian administrators. Third, central authority was reinforced by the introduction of standard weights and measures for commerce and coins were minted under the Caliph's authority from 696. The Empire at this time developed the ideology of a state and all the instruments needed to control and exploit the territory and population.

It was Caliph Abd al-Malik who had the Dome of the Rock built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which was completed in 691 and internally decorated by Byzantine Christian craftsmen, who were the masters of such arts, using verses of the Qur'an written in calligraphy on the walls, many of which were chosen to correct the excesses of Christian doctrine. The Umayyad caliphs continued within the family with al-Walid I (r.705-715), Sulayman (r.715-717), Umar II (r.717-720), Yazid II (r.720-724) and Hisham (r.724-743).

Expansion to the west

The western capital of the Empire was established in al-Qayrawan in modern Tunisia in 705 and from this base it moved out to conquer the whole of the North African coastal region as far as Morocco by 710. Critical to this expansion were the Berber tribes, many of whom converted to Islam and joined the Muslim army, which brought with it a share in the spoils of war. This territory had been occupied by the Visigoths, who had come down from northern Europe through Spain and whose dominant religious tradition was the Arian form of Christianity. The Arians did not accept the divinity of Jesus and thus their conversion to Islam was a shorter step than for Byzantine Christians, which probably accounted for the more rapid conversion rates in North Africa. Some Berbers resisted conquest and conversion and headed towards the mountains or moved further inland. The great Berber general, Tariq ibn Ziyad (dates uncertain) ruled the western Maghreb from his base in Tangier, from which he surveyed Spain, which was divided between feuding Visigoth princes.

In 711, Tariq led an invasion force to Spain and they swept up through the Iberian Peninsula reaching Toledo in the same year and the Pyrenees by 714. The Umayyad rulers in Syria were alarmed at this rapid expansion and feared too great an autonomy in the west, so Tariq was recalled to Syria, bringing with him much plunder from the rich pickings of Spain. The Berber armies continues raiding to the north and ruled an area of southern France, the Languedoc, with their capital in Narbonne, for fifty years

before retreating back across the mountains to Spain. During this time, there were Muslim raiding parties that sallied into France, attacking Toulouse in 721, until they were turned back at the Battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel in 732.

The Berbers revolted in 740-741 in opposition to what they saw to be their treatment as inferiors by the Arabs. The Syrian army was sent to Spain to crush this revolt, which was defeated at Toledo in 742. The inevitability of the western division of the Empire being too far distant to be controlled from Syria was realised thereafter and the way was paved for the separate Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) from 750 onwards. This Caliphate flourished for nearly three hundred years with its capital at Cordoba, which became a great centre of learning with Jewish and Christian elites working alongside Muslims. Eventually, the Christian kingdoms of north-west Spain, Castile and Aragon, began to defeat the Muslims and Cordoba fell in 1031. There followed some centuries of fluctuating Muslim-Christian frontiers until the Muslims were confined to the Kingdom of Granada from 1238, until its final fall in 1492.

The northern expansion

The Umayyads expanded northwards into Byzantine territory in the early eighth century until the failure of the siege of Constantinople in 718. Thereafter there were only periodic raids into Byzantine territory in the subsequent decades. They expanded into the Caucasus capturing Armenia in 711 and, after some sets-back, captured Azerbaijan in 732. The borders were stabilised from 737 onwards.

Expansion to the east

To the north-east, the Umayyad army crossed the River Oxus and expanded into Transoxania from their forward capital in Khurasan, bringing Bukhara under Muslim rule in 709 and Samarqand from 712. To the south-east, the Muslim army, under their general Muhammad ibn Qasim, moved into Sind in 711 and began to take control of the lands to the west of the River Indus, moving up into West Punjab to establish a base in the city of Multan in 773. In 724, they crossed the Indus into Rajasthan and Gujarat for some time but were driven back eventually to form a fixed frontier at the Indus from 740 onwards.

A decentralised Empire

The Umayyad Empire reached its greatest extent by around 740. Muslim rule now extended from Spain and Morocco in the west, along the coast of North Africa, through Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, through Greater Syria and up to Azerbaijan in the north, then down to Samarqand and Sind in the east. Such a massive empire could not possibly be controlled as a single unit from Damascus and so, in effect, it consisted of decentralised administrations with a good deal of local autonomy under the banner of the Umayyads and the Syrian army. Local chiefs were key to keeping the territory under control and they in turn exercised patronage to smaller chiefs. The

Umayyads adopted the pattern of appointing members of their own clan to act as governors, especially in the Arab lands, but there was rumbling discontent between the perceived Arab superiority over the non-Arab Muslim converts (*mawali*): Indians, Persians, Central Asians and Berbers. Unfair tax revenues were generated from these non-Arab Muslims as well as from non-Muslims in the Empire, which contributed to a general decline in cohesion.

By the time of the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwan II (r.744-750), the tribalism of local rulers, plus a general distaste for the unislamic lifestyles of many of the Umayyad rulers and families and the desire for a more authentic Islamic way of life led by the Kharijites and the Shi'a, combined to form a general revolt, usually called the "third *fitna*." A strong challenge emerged from Iraq through a combination of Hashemites, those who traced their ancestry back to the clan of Muhammad and now, in this context, to be referred to as the Abbasids, and the Alids, those who traced their ancestry through Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, more often called the Shi'a, who upheld the privileged position of the Ahl ul-Bayt as the divinely-appointed locus of leadership amongst Muslims. The Abbasids took the upper hand and Abu al-Abbas (r.749-754) was proclaimed as the first Abbasid Caliph in the mosque of Kufa in 749. He led an army north and defeated Caliph Marwan II in 750. Abu al-Abbas was given the nickname *al-Saffah* (the Blood-letter) on account of his bloody despatch of many of the leading Umayyads, which sealed their defeat. One branch of the Umayyads escaped to Spain and there established the only remaining element of Umayyad rule from 750 onwards. Abu al-Abbas was succeeded by his brother, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (r.754-775), who moved the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate to Baghdad.

Part Two: Islam spreads outside the Middle East

The "spread" of Islam brings two thoughts to mind: one is the spread of Muslim people and Islamic influence and rule, and the other is the spread of the faith of Islam by men and women converting to become Muslims. I want to look at both aspects here.

Only a minority of Muslims in the world today live in what Europeans call the "Middle East." There are more Indonesian Muslims in the world than all the Arabs combined. How did this come about? How did a way of life that grew out of the Semitic heartlands come to influence the lives of some 20% of the world's population today?

We have seen the way in which Muslim rule spread at a phenomenal pace, until one-hundred-and-twenty years after the death of Muhammad Muslims ruled from Spain and Morocco in the west, to Samarqand and the River Indus in the east, from Armenia and Azerbaijan in the north, to Yemen in the south. Like all other political empires in the world, this had been spread by force of arms and negotiated takes-over. What about the people who lived in these territories and now found themselves under Muslim rule?

The "protected people"

The majority of those people who came under Muslim rule during the first century were Christians, with Zoroastrians in Persia and Jewish communities in Spain and elsewhere. The Qur'an has a special name for these communities; they are the *Ahl al-Kitab*, the People of the Book. This term is applied to four communities in the Qur'an [Q. 2:62; 5:69; 22:17]: the Jews and Christians are named explicitly, then the group called the "Magians" is held to be the monotheistic Zoroastrians of Persia, and finally the "Sabeans," which is generally held to be a reference to the Mandaeans, the ancient followers of John the Baptist (the Prophet Yahya), who were to be found mainly in Iraq. This is a recognition that these communities were founded by true Prophets of God, who, in the case of Jews and Christians explicitly, had been given earlier revelations and had established ways of living them out (*shari'a*). Thus they may be thought of as "the People of the Earlier Revelations." By extension, at periods of Muslim rule in India under the Mughals, those Hindus who followed the Vedas were accorded the same status.

The *Ahl al-Kitab* living under Muslim rule in the historic Islamic empires had certain rights and privileges. They had the right to continue in the practice of their faith "in private," namely in their homes and places of worship, but not "in public." They had the right to hand on their religion to their children but not to seek converts. They could keep and maintain their existing religious buildings but not build new ones. They could be employed in the administration of the Empire but they could not be part of the decision-making executive. They could be servants to Muslims but not have a Muslim servant. They were to be protected by the Muslim army, indeed they were

called “the protected people” (*dhimmi*) and were to pay a military tax (*jizya*) to help support it. The army was the extension of the Muslim executive and therefore the *Ahl al-Kitab* were not allowed to serve in it; this had serious consequences at times of expansion because only the soldiers and the rulers were allowed a share of the booty (spoils of war), which was a major source of income for the period of the Umayyad Empire.

Taken as a whole, my judgement is that the *Ahl al-Kitab* had an institutionalised second class status in the historic empires. It needs to be said immediately that historians agree that it was better to be a Jew or Christian under Muslim rule than to be a Muslim or Jew under the rule of Christendom in Europe. For elite Jews and Christians, they did well with Muslim patronage; the Caliphs, for example, had Christian and Jewish personal physicians for centuries. The peasants bore the burden of additional taxes and there were few avenues for people who wanted “to aspire to better things” as long as they declined to convert to Islam. It is important to keep a historical perspective here as these earlier empires no longer exist and Muslim-majority nation states have to find a new way forward for all their citizens.

Initial conversion

One of the untruths that is repeated is that “people converted to Islam at the point of the sword.” This is to be distinguished from “the Islamic Empire spread by force of arms,” which is true in the initial period. The Qur'an does not permit forced conversion [Q. 2:256], which is not to say that it never happened in Muslim history because, like all peoples, Muslims are not always as good as their religion commands them to be.

The forms of Christianity represented in the lands conquered by the Umayyads were various. It may be that those forms that denied or did not emphasise the divinity of Jesus, e.g., the Arian Visigoths of North Africa and Spain and the Nestorians of Iraq and eastward along the Silk Road to China, found the step of conversion to Islam theologically easier. By contrast, those forms of Christianity that upheld both divinity and humanity or stressed the divinity, e.g., the Byzantines and Catholics in the eastern Mediterranean lands and Spain respectively, and the Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia, have been much slower to convert and substantial communities remain to this day. It is important to remember that the history of the Muslim Middle East has been one of religious plurality with Jews and Christians living peacefully under Muslim rule. The divisions and indeed religious segregation and persecution that we have witnessed in recent decades, with the denial of rights to worship, the expulsion of Jews to the State of Israel, and attacks on people and property are an aberration and not the historical rule.

The conversion of people to Islam in the initial Umayyad and Abbasid Empires took generations and centuries but it is obvious that the majority of those who live in those lands today are Muslims. Five streams of conversion can be indicated. First, there were those people who recognised the godliness of the message and the piety of its

followers and thus came to faith in God as expressed in the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet. Second, those people who wanted to relieve themselves of the burden of paying the *jizya*, although it has to be said that they would then become liable to pay *zakat*, which would not always be a great reduction. Third, those who wanted to join the army and thus receive a share in the booty. Fourth, those who wanted to take a place in the executive and the running of the Empire. Fifth, those who wanted to rise socially, perhaps by marrying into established Muslim families.

We will return to the theme of the spread of Islam by conversion later but first we have to look at the spread of Muslim influence and rule outside the Middle East.

The vehicle of trade

The Arabs had been traders before the rise of Islam but now the sense of their increased importance as the bearers of the final message and their growth in wealth and prestige increased this impulse. The Muslim Arabs traded down the coast of East Africa establishing trading bases from Mogadishu, in the north, to Kilwa in the south, with the special mention of Mombasa and Zanzibar. This trade was underway from the seventh century and the first recorded mosque is on Lamu Island off the coast of Kenya in 750. The principal items of trade were gold, ivory and gem stones, with a thriving trade in slaves, especially based on the island of Zanzibar with them being shipped to the Arab lands. Muslim settlement tended to be in the coastal regions, where the language of Kiswahili was developed from local languages with much Arabic influence. Penetration into the interior was by traders or raiding parties going to capture slaves. Conversion of the peoples inland did not really begin until the 19th century.

There were two trading routes that took Muslims as far as China. One was the great Silk Road that passed up through Central Asia and that had been a medium of trade for centuries. The other was by ship and Muslim sailors sailed as far as China in the eighth century. The first Chinese sea port with a Muslim settlement was in the south-east at Canton, founded in the early eighth century. There is a record of a mosque at Quanzhou on the coast of the South China Sea from around 1009. The Uighurs were mainly converted through contact with those who came to trade overland from the ninth to the 12th centuries. The northern Turkic, Kirghiz and Kazakh peoples were converted to Islam in the 15th and 16th centuries.

India was a crucial staging post in the trade routes to the east. From here, the routes went on to Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and eventually to China. China was the source for silk, porcelain and jade especially, with pepper and spices being important elements of trade with the “Spice Islands.” It is not easy to know when traders became settlers but the first Indonesian Muslim gravestone so far discovered has been dated to 1082. Other Muslim settlements are recorded in northern Sumatra in 1275 and Java from 1475. Muslim settlements on the Malaysian coast date from the 15th century. Some of these merchants brought wealth and a knowledge of wider life and culture and thus were welcomed to marry into ruling families and thus the influence of Islam spread.

In other instances, it appears that the Muslim traders were more interested in commerce than religion and confined their Islamic engagement to the areas around their settlements and mosques.

The spread of Islam into West Africa is also linked to trade coming from Egypt and North Africa across the Sahara. Gold was the principal attraction of trade especially in the Kingdom of Ghana. By the eighth century, there was a clear Arab route to trade for gold in Ghana; to facilitate their journeys, the Arabs dug wells at strategic places on the route. The Berbers came overland to Gao in the late seventh century and yet another route led Arabs to the area around Lake Chad from about 800 onwards. Significantly, conversion to Islam amongst the local populations came some centuries later: The Muslim Kingdom of Songhai was established around Gao from 1010, the rulers of the Lake Chad area became Muslim from 1085, and widespread conversion in Ghana only took place in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Military invasions

India experienced a number of Muslim invaders, whose influence spread over various areas of the subcontinent. After the initial Sind invasion of Muhammad ibn Qasim (695-715) from 711, deeper penetration came about through Mahmud of Ghazna from 1019. By the 12th century, Muhammad Ghuri ruled an area from Afghanistan to Bengal. There was also the Slave Dynasty of Bengal from 1206-1290. Subsequently came the Khiljis (1290-1320), the Tughluqs (1320-1412) and the Lodis from Afghanistan (1451-1526). There was also the raid of Tamerlane, who sacked Delhi in 1398. The most extensive Muslim empire in India was that of the Mughals from 1526 to 1858 but, in spite of all these episodes of Muslim invasion and rule, the number who converted to Islam was always localised and relatively modest. Kashmir had also received attention from Muslim traders from the 11th century.

The Mongols began to move out from Central Asia in 1219 and had swept down to take Baghdad and execute the last Abbasid Caliph in 1258. The Mongols have the distinction of being converted by the people that they conquered. In their northern division, the Golden Horde, also known as the Tartars, became Muslim in the 14th century when they were at their geographical peak, with a territory that stretched from the Urals to the Danube, and from Siberia to the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains. Ottoman Turkey was also extending its territory in the same period by moving as far as Bulgaria and Bosnia in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Sufis and scholars

In Indonesia and Malaysia, the influence of sufis and Muslim teachers, especially from India, is noteworthy. They actually moved out with missionary zeal rather than for trade or conquest. They were able to present Islam in a way that appealed to the natural religious sentiment of the people and could assist people to resist the attraction of Hinduism stemming from Java.

Various individual sufi holy men were instrumental in the spread of Islam in West Africa, with famous centres at Timbuktu, which was the base of the Mali Empire (c1230-c1600). Here we encounter another phenomenon, which is not limited to West Africa, and that is conversion from one form of Islam to another. From the 17th to the 19th century, West Africa saw reform movements to purify Islam from what they took to be elements of African tradition. These were often led by scholars (*ulama*) and were sometimes known as *jihads* as they were fighting for the cause of "pure Islam." A scholar often associated with this movement was Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), who led such campaigns in northern Nigeria, and whose son, Muhammad Belo, set up the Sultanate of Sokoto and became the first Sultan.

Back to the spread of Islam by conversion

It took four to five hundred years for Islam to become the dominant religion from Spain, through North Africa, to the Middle East. During this time, significant developments took place in terms of theology, philosophy, mysticism and law so that the Islam that went to the mission lands further afield from the 13th century onwards was significantly developed from the initial phase of Islam. This greater diversity within Islam made room for different religious emphases in the new lands. This can be seen especially in the more accommodating nature of sufi schools of Islam that gave scope for local traditions.

There is a difference in the nature of conversion between the pioneer generation and those who embrace the faith some centuries later when it is more socially established. To this must be added notions of group conversion rather than individuals who feel called to Islam. When kings and other forms of local leadership embraced the faith, they often brought their people along with them. Later generations, who had been enculturated into Islam, were more adept at conveying the message to their neighbours than the foreign imports of the early years.

There could be economic dimensions to conversion. The Mughal landlords who went to establish businesses in East Bengal, for example, were likely to have openings for Muslim workers. On occasion, the Ottomans paved the way for converts economically. It was not unusual in situations where there was a deeply established pre-Islamic religious tradition, for example in India, for new Muslims to have multiple religious identities and for there to be a certain wavering of religious belonging for some time.

It is notoriously difficult to obtain quantitative data about rates of historic conversion amongst peoples. Much of our evidence dates from some generations later when there can be a degree of folk legend incorporated into the accounts of conversion. This can be seen with miraculous accounts attributed later to early sufi holy men, which give people an agreed legend about their religious origins.

In a situation such as Indonesia, for example, where there was no history of conquest or shared borders with Muslim peoples, it is not easy to determine from where the

missionaries came who brought Islam. Elements such as legends, the occurrences of names, for example on early tombstones, and the prevalence of a particular law school could suggest origins; but were the missionaries from Bengal, Gujarat or directly from southern Arabia?

There is also the question of whether missionary movements were making converts to Islam from the local religious traditions or were they perhaps reinvigorating Muslims who had an embryonic faith from earlier missionary work? The arrival of sufi brotherhoods in China is such a case. Similarly in Indonesia, there was a scholarly settlement in northern Sumatra from the 13th century but little impact appears to have been made until some four hundred years later with the return of indigenous Indonesian sufi groups who had been to study in the Arab lands. Were they able to present a more acceptable version of Islam to the local people?

Part Three: Greek knowledge passes through the Muslim lands

Greek influence in the countries of the Middle East pre-dates the time of Islam by a thousand years. The Greek general, Alexander, gave his name to Alexandria, the Egyptian seaport in the 4th century before the Common Era (BCE). This became a great centre of learning that rivalled Athens. It was here that the fabled Library of Alexandria was established under Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247BCE). In 331BCE, Alexander conquered the Seleucid Empire and thus Persia. Greek influence now stretched from the Mediterranean to the Punjab in India. Under the Ptolemy rulers in Egypt, Greek became the language of administration and of the elite within society. The Syrians at this time were using a form of Syriac-Aramaic as their common language but after Syria became a Roman province in 65BCE, there was a further infusion of Greek influence in culture and learning in the region. By the second century of the Common Era (CE), much of Mesopotamia was under Greco-Roman rule, so we can see that there were centuries during which Greek learning spread its influence from Egypt, through Syria to Persia.

When we speak of Greek learning in this way, we are thinking of a wide range of subjects: the natural sciences, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and logic. In addition, in the Christian centuries, theology had been developed in Greek and so we can see that influence in religious thought as well. With the coming of Greek learning to Egypt, this original deposit was developed with the incorporation of elements of ancient Egyptian thought. If we think of philosophy, then the school of Aristotle was dominant but with significant developments in Neo-Platonism, the school founded by Pythagoras (580-c500BCE). The Egyptian Neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus (c200-269CE), is regarded as its seminal thinker. Another philosopher of the period, Porphyry (233-after301CE), was a Syrian. The last head of the great Academy in Athens, Damascius, was a Syrian and when it was closed by Emperor Justinian in 529CE, he and six other professors of philosophy went to Persia in 532 hoping to find a haven there to carry on with their work. As it happened, they only stayed for a year before moving back to Greece.

Alexandria was also important in mathematics; the scholar of geometry, Euclid (c300BCE), worked there. Dozens of other leading mathematicians of the period studied or taught in Alexandria or were associated with it. In medicine, texts written by the Greek scholars Hippocrates (d.257BCE) and Galen (d.200CE) had been translated into Syriac and were widely used in the medical schools there along with the writings of several other Greek scholars.

Contacts between the Middle East and India date back to at least the 15th century BCE. The pre-Islamic trade routes between Damascus and Alexandria in the north and India in the south should be thought of as two-way routes for the spread of ideas. By the dawn of Islam, Greek thought had made an impact in India through a sea route from Alexandria to Ujjain where it was further developed. There was another land route via Central Asia, so that Bactria in Afghanistan and Marw in Persia had Greek colonies, and thus Greek thought was transmitted to India where some leading Buddhist families are noted for their involvement.

An important point to take before leaving this pre-Islamic period is that when we speak of "Greek thought," we are not using the term Greek as a description of ethnicity but as a linguistic community to which people of various ethnicities and religions contributed. This should be paralleled to the later term "Arabic thought," which is also not an ethnic term but describes scholarship developed in the Arabic language by people of various ethnic groups and religions.

The rise of Islam

When the Umayyad's took Damascus in 637 and subsequently established their capital there, they encountered a higher culture and civilisation than they knew in the Arabian desert settlements from which they came. They continued to employ Greek-speaking administrators for decades and specialists, such as physicians, for much longer. Syriac and Arabic are sister languages and thus Syriac provided a natural way into appreciating the sophistication of Greek thought, based on the books that had already been translated. Just as Greek writings had been translated into Syriac, so there was a natural move to bring these within the knowledge of Arabic-speakers and so another translation movement began that was to take-off in the second half of eighth century.

After the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750, the Caliph al-Mansur relocated the capital to Iraq, where he laid the foundation for the new capital city of Baghdad in 762. This city was planned according to the Persian round city model, such as at Ctesiphon. It was a new creation under Islamic rule, unlike Jerusalem or Damascus, and the caliphal court, government offices and army barracks were housed in close proximity. The river brought access by ship and provided a pleasant and healthy habitat, which soon attracted the building of suburbs surrounding the gated round city. Within decades, it became a cosmopolitan multi-religious city, with Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers and Africans, who were Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The Muslim self-understanding of being the bearers of the final message of Islam and thus a community blessed by God meant that there was a real sense in which they thought that all the knowledge of the world should be brought to the service of Islam. The task of translating that knowledge had already begun, for example, by Abu Muhammad ibn al-Muqaffa (d.757), a Persian convert, who worked for 'Isa ibn Ali, the uncle of the first two Abbasid Caliphs. He was translating works, many of which had been sourced in India, from Persian into Arabic. The garrison cities of Kufa and Basra had already become centres of Qur'anic studies, with the natural emphasis on the Arabic language, and thus Islamic theology. Scholars from these disciplines and cities were called to Baghdad by Caliph al-Mansur and thus it was transformed into a centre of Islamic learning. Baghdad was a natural meeting place where Greek and Sanskrit learning encountered the message of Islam and so the new city became the intellectual power-house of the period.

This was given an enormous boost by the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-808), who sent out agents to purchase Greek works from various countries. This gave an impetus to many private individuals to begin to found their own libraries through collecting

manuscripts and commissioning translations. Part of this movement is associated with the Bayt al-Hikma, or the House of Wisdom, which was founded by the Caliph al-Ma'mun (r.813-833). A regular seminar or *majlis* was established so that scholars could engage in discussion.

The process of translation

Works of scholarship were brought to Baghdad from a variety of disciplines: philosophy, especially the work of Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists, medicine, mathematics and astronomy were particularly favoured. Some were in Syriac, Persian and Sanskrit but eventually more arrived in the original Greek. The initial translation, especially of medical works, was undertaken by Nestorian Christian scholars, who rendered the Syriac into Arabic. Probably the first works translated direct from Greek into Arabic (probably before 803) were Ptolemy's *Almagest* and Euclid's *Elements*. Harun al-Rashid's personal librarian, Abu Sahl al-Fadl an-Nawbakht (d.c815) is noted for his translations from Persian into Arabic.

The critical early figure in this work of translation was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d.c873), who was born in Hira in Upper Mesopotamia, the son of a Christian pharmacist. He learnt Arabic in Baghdad before going to "the land of the Greeks" to master that language. About 826, he returned to Baghdad and began the work of translating medical works from Greek to Arabic. He was presented to the Caliph al-Ma'mun, who appointed him as the director of the Bayt al-Hikma. Here he trained other translators and laid the foundations for later work. He is reported to have translated the works of Galen, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, Euclid and Aristotle plus other writers. He is thought to have translated twenty works of Galen into Syriac and fourteen works into Arabic. Some of the best early translations are reckoned to date from the reign of Caliph Mutawakkil (841-861) with authors such as: Diocorides, Archimedes, Hypsicles, Theodosius, Heron, John Philporus, Porphyry and Ammonius.

From translation to copying

To translate works into Arabic was the first step but the crucial development that followed was to make multiple copies so that the Arabic works could be disseminated around the Muslim world. This was hugely facilitated by the introduction of the mass production of paper, which replaced parchment and vellum as the writing material. This also marked the transition from scrolls to bound books. The production of paper originated in China and reached Central Asia, for example, Samarqand, in the eighth century and thus on to Baghdad by the ninth century. It was now possible to produce large quantities of writing material, copy the translations onto them and bind them so that they would be protected in transit and use. This also fuelled the great Hadith collectors of the ninth century. In Baghdad, the development of inks and new sources of cellulose fibres allowed the process to be industrialised. The skill of the copyist was in precision and penmanship rather than the linguistic ability of the translators. The oldest existing book in Arabic written on paper is dated to 866. Paper production spread throughout the Muslim world, with paper mills reported in the Maghreb as

early as 751, with Damascus and Cairo being noted centres of manufacture. From here it reached Europe in the tenth century.

From translation to original authorship

In order to create an intellectual flourishing, three things are needed: something to prime the process, scholars funded to do the work and a vision to drive it forward. Greek learning was to supply the impulse to prime the process of original work, the Abbasid Caliphs and other wealthy families in Baghdad provided the funds and facilities for the scholars to do their work and being the bearers of the final message of Islam provided the vision.

One of the scholars who marked this transition was Thabit ibn Qurra (d.901). He came from a non-Muslim Neo-Platonist family and was expert in Greek, Syriac and Arabic. He worked in Baghdad originally as a translator and reviser of earlier translations of the works of Apollonius, Archimedes, Euclid, Ptolemy and Theodosius. Later he went on to write a reported 150 works in Arabic covering the disciplines of logic, mathematics, astronomy and medicine.

Mathematics and astronomy went hand-in-hand in Greek thought, and astronomy led also to its sister discipline of astrology. It was not uncommon for scholars to command several disciplines, such as al-Khwarizmi (780-c850), who was born in Uzbekistan and moved to Baghdad, where he worked in the Bayt al-Hikma. He was originally a Zoroastrian who converted to Islam. In his *Kitab al-Jabr*, he developed the Greek science of algebra and applied it to the Islamic laws of inheritance as well as trade and agriculture (This was later translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona and Robert of Chester). The Greeks, Babylonians and Indians had made initial steps in algebra but he developed rules (algorithms), which allowed problems to be solved by general principles. He is credited with taking Sanskrit numerals and developing them into the Arabic numerals that have become widespread today. They were based around the number of enclosed angles, so 1 contained one angle, 2 (Z) contained two, 3 (∑) contained three and so on. He also imported the Indian decimal system, transformed it to run horizontally and developed the zero as a place-holder. In astronomy, he is credited with building the first observatory in Baghdad and developing a star chart. He also drew a new map of the world in 833, worked out various distances and the coordinates of places. He is credited with being the first geographer of Islam.

Translation beyond Baghdad

Scholarship flourished beyond the Abbasid heartlands. The great centre of learning in Fez, Morocco, the al-Qarawiyin, was built by the daughter of the ruler, Fatimah al-Fihri, in 859, who had vowed to use all her inheritance to further learning. It became a renowned mosque-college specialising in astronomy, law, mathematics and medicine in addition to the Islamic religious sciences.

The Fatimids conquered the Muslim Egyptian capital of Fustat in 969 and built the new city of Cairo nearby from 972. They established the mosque-university of al-

Azhar in Cairo in 978. The Fatimids were Ismailis, the branch of the Shi'a that follow a different line of Imams from the seventh Imam of the general Shi'a line, and Greek philosophy played a central part in the development of their form of Islam. The Fatimid Caliph-Imam, al-Hakim (985-1021), established the House of Knowledge in 1005, the library of which is reported to have comprised forty rooms filled with books, of which 18,000 are held to have been works in translation. He set up men's and women's study circles in the al-Azhar. The Fatimids flourished in Cairo until 1171, when Saladin re-took their territory for Sunni Islam, thus transforming the orientation of the al-Azhar University, which remains until today as the single most respected centre of Sunni Islamic learning.

The Umayyad Caliphate of Spain established its capital at Cordoba from 756 and began the building of the Great Mosque, which contained a library that grew to be the most significant of the first millennium in Europe. The Great Mosque was an architectural masterpiece with its horse-shoe arches built with a second tier of intersecting arches. Cordoba was a city of advanced civilisation by the ninth century, having paved streets, street-lighting fuelled by oil burners, piped water and sewerage canals. In 951, the Byzantine Emperor made a gift to the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III (d.961) of a monk called Nicholas, who was a noted translator of Greek works into Arabic. In the tenth century, scholars from the Muslim world were attracted to Cordoba and Christian and Jewish students and scholars came to work there from other parts of Europe. The caliphal library, the Library of Knowledge, was reported to have four hundred thousand volumes at its height. Of particular note are the women scholars in science, law and theology who worked there. The Caliph Al-Hakam II (r.961-976) is recorded as having a secretary called Lubnah, who was also his librarian, and a mathematician and poet in her own right. At the same court, there was a book-collector called Fatimah, who made regular trips to Cairo and Damascus. Further, women were prominent as copyists, with 170 women recorded in one district of the city alone, who specialised in copying in the kulfic script. Some of these higher copyists also added marginal notes to augment the texts on which they were working.

All-encompassing knowledge

This was an age in which the frontiers of knowledge were extended in many disciplines. Al-Biruni (973-c1050) from Khurasan, was committed to the science of time. He plotted solar and lunar eclipses, calculated the circumference of the earth and calculated the speeds of the movements of the heavenly bodies. He wrote a treatise on pharmacology and *materia medica*, in which he described more than a thousand medicines. He came into contact with Indian wisdom and was able to read and translate Sanskrit so that he could write on the life and times of India. His work, "The Extant Remains of Bygone Ages," contained a history of religions.

Work in astronomy was forwarded by al-Battani (d.929), who was given the Latin name Albategnius in Europe. He worked in observatories in Baghdad and Damascus, where he further developed the astrolabe and built celestial spheres and quadrants. The chemist, Jabir ibn Hayyan (722-855), Geber in Latin Europe, worked on the process of distillation, the classification of materials and made big strides in

developing acids. Throughout the period, there was an interest in alchemy, the search for turning base metals into gold. Abd l-Wafa (10th century) is credited with observing natural proportions and thus developing the Golden Ratio of width to height (1:1.62), which combines strength with that which is pleasing to the eye and is important in architecture, art and calligraphy. There were developments in mechanics, such as the windmill for grinding corn and pumping water, and pumps to lift water for irrigation.

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (d.c932), Razes in Latin Europe, is regarded as the father of Arabic medicine. This was an area in which Jewish scholars made an important contribution, such as Ishaq ibn Amran al-Isra'eli, who was court physician to the Caliph Ziyadet Allah III (r.902-903) in Qayrawan. He was trained in Baghdad and is credited with introducing Greek medicine to North Africa and Spain. Ibn al-Haytham (965-1039), in Latin Europe Alhazan, was a mathematician and physicist of note. He is called the father of optics and was the first recorded to use the *camera obscura* to observer eclipses. Great strides took place in anatomy, surgical techniques and medicine, in which fields al-Mosuli (10th century) advanced eye surgery, Ibn Sina (d.1037) is noted for his work on fractures and bone-setting, and Ibn Nafis (1210-1288) worked out the pulmonary circulation of the blood.

Focus on philosophy

One of the areas of particular interest was philosophy. It was training to the mind and the key to the other sciences, it also helped Muslims to articulate their faith in the face of sophisticated Christian theology. Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (d.873) was born in Basra of the Arab clan of Kinda. He began his career as a translator and then developed into a philosopher in his own right and is regarded as the father of Arabic philosophy. He belonged to the Aristotelean school and his book “On First Philosophy” is regarded as his most important work, although he is credited with having written three hundred titles on philosophy and science. Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi (d.950) came from Central Asia and worked in Aleppo and Baghdad. He worked on both Aristotelean and Neo-Platonic systems and tried to develop an integrated philosophy. Two of those that he influenced were Moses Maimonides (d.1204) and ibn Rushd (d.1198). Another group of philosophers who worked in Baghdad around the year 980 were the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Safa*), who developed a series of fifty-two epistles covering mathematics, logic, natural science, metaphysics, mystical theology, astrology and magic. They drew mainly from the school of Aristotle but combined it with the thought of Hermes, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato into something of an esoteric tradition.

The two Muslim philosophers with the greatest impact on their own tradition and on Europe were ibn Sina (980-1037), in Latin Avicenna, and ibn Rushd (1126-1198), in Latin Averroës. Ibn Sina was born in Bukhara and worked in Persia, especially in Isfahan. His medical work was seminal and his *Canon* was taught in European medical schools up to 1715. He wrote an acclaimed commentary on Aristotle’s metaphysics and developed his own original contribution to the field. Ibn Rushd was born in Cordoba and became a jurist, physician and outstanding philosopher. He worked in Cordoba and Seville and died in Marrakesh. He was the first of the Arabic

philosophers to write a commentary on Plato's *Republic* but it is for his work on Aristotle that he is famous. He wrote a series of *Middle Commentaries* on his work, which were essentially paraphrases; these were later translated into Hebrew by the Jewish philosophers. His *Long Commentaries* on Aristotle's five major works not only presented Aristotle but took his teaching further in many directions. These were translated into Latin and fuelled the awakening of European scholars to Aristotle's body of work. He had such a stature in Europe, where he was just referred to as "The Commentator" that even those who disagreed with some of his positions and wrote refutations of them regarded him as the outstanding master of Aristotle's work. His *Long Commentaries* were taken to Paris by the Scottish translator, Michael Scot (d.c1236), from which European scholars drew their knowledge of Aristotle. Even when better translations of Aristotle from the Greek became available, his commentaries were read alongside them to draw out the meaning. He figured prominently in the book of Giles of Rome, *Errors of the Philosophers*, written in the thirteenth century.

Greek learning returns to Europe

After 1031, which marked the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate of Spain, the next two hundred years saw the decline of Muslim rule in waves, until it was only to be found in the Kingdom of Granada from 1238 to 1492. As the Christians became more powerful, they realised that it would be possible to further the knowledge of Europe by translating the product of Arabic scholarship into Latin. This happened in various places, such as Barcelona under the translator, Plato of Tivoli, and near Saragossa, but the main centre was in Toledo, which came under the rule of the Kingdom of Castile from 1085. During the time of Muslim rule and to a degree afterwards, Jews, Christians and Muslims worked side-by-side in academic work. This was to change with the Inquisition from the thirteenth century onwards. One of the riches of Spain was that the most influential Jewish systematic theologian of the era, Moses Maimonides (d.1204), wrote in Arabic in the philosophical tradition of Aristotle and thus there was a common intellectual conceptual framework for Muslims and Jews (and later Christians) based on his system.

In early twelfth century Toledo, Archbishop Raimundo (r.1125-1151), perceived that he had a golden opportunity offered by the presence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in the city who between them could command Arabic and Latin. He was encouraged to begin the work of translation by the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (d.1156), who came to Toledo on a visit in 1142. The system of working was for translators to be paired, so that the one who was specialised in Arabic would render the text into basic Latin vocabulary and then the Latin specialist would turn this into grammatical Latin. A number of names are associated with this process including Robert of Ketton, whose name is attached to the first translation of the Qur'an into a European language, Dominic Grundisalvi and John of Seville. It may well be that translations were later attached to their names, so it is not clear who translated which books. Three major translators were Gerard of Cremona (d.1187), who is credited with the translation of over a hundred books, Michael Scot and Hermann the German. In this way seminal works in the philosophy of ibn Rushd, ibn Sina and al-Farabi became

available in Latin. In addition to the philosophical works, many scientific and medical works were translated.

We can trace something of the progression of this philosophy in European centres of learning. The scholastic theologian, Peter Lombard (d.1160), did not display any knowledge of them when writing his *Sentences*. By contrast, John of Salisbury (d.1182), working in Paris, had some knowledge of them. Michael Scot, working in Toledo in 1217, translated the *Long Commentaries* of Aristotle into Latin and is reported to have taken them to the newly established University of Paris.

Another European source of translations was Sicily, which had been the subject of Arab raids in the eighth century and come under Muslim rule in stages from 831-902. It was taken by the Norman, Count Roger, between 1061 and 1091, and then by the German Emperor, Henry VI in 1194. When Emperor Frederick II (d.1250) came to power in 1215, he set up the work of translation. He is reputed to have been able to read Arabic and to have had considerable respect for Islam and Muslims. He set up the University of Naples in 1224 to make the product of Arabic translations into Latin more widely known in Europe. It was in this university that Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) received his education. Frederick also employed the services of Michael Scot as his translator in Bologna from 1220 to 1227.

The thirteenth century saw the rise of the Friars, who took up the newly acquired knowledge. Amongst the Franciscans was Alexander of Hales (d.1245) and amongst the Dominicans, the first two professors of theology in Paris, Albert the Great (1206-1280) and Thomas Aquinas. Albert used the commentaries of ibn Sina and ibn Rushd and Aquinas regarded ibn Rushd as the great Commentator in his writings, even though he disagreed with him on a number of issues. Both the Dominicans realised that the translations of Aristotle that they received in Latin (via Arabic) were in need of improvement and so they pushed for new translations from the Greek texts that had become available to Latin Europe after the Crusaders' sack of Constantinople in 1204. This Greek-Latin translation work was undertaken by men like William de Moerbeka (1215-1286). The Arabic-Latin work of translation had seen almost all of ibn Rushd rendered into Latin by this time but some translations were still being commissioned by Alfonso the Wise of Castile (1252-1284).

On the basis of these philosophical texts, Thomas Aquinas and his successors were able to bring about the systematisation of western Christian theology that powered a renaissance in Europe. They also had their impact in literature, for example, through their influence on Dante, who put ibn Sina and ibn Rushd in his "Purgatory" along with the Greek philosophers. The maps and navigational instruments were used in the European voyages of discovery that opened up the Americas. The medical writings transformed that discipline in Europe and many of the scientific works were consumed and developed in the European High Middle Ages.

Part Four: Sifting and collecting the Hadith

Imagine the situation of those who lived alongside Muhammad in Makka and Madina. They understood him to be the Prophet sent by God to guide humankind on the straight path. He was in the process of receiving the revelation from God in the Qur'an. This revelation is a book of ethical guidance rather than a set of laws. It needed to be interpreted and to be put into practice in daily living. Who other than the Prophet could do this? He was the perfect example of living out the teaching of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an says of Muhammad that he is a "beautiful pattern of conduct" for people to follow [Q. 33:21]. Again the Qur'an instructs people "to obey God and his Prophet" [Q. 8:1] and notes that obedience to the Prophet is obedience to God [Q. 4:80]. Is it any wonder that they paid careful attention to whatever Muhammad said, taught, did or the things of which he approved? His way of living, in the same time, place and context in which they lived, was the best of all ways to live according to God's guidance. Their task was to imitate him in his godly way of life. They had the assurance of the Qur'an that the Prophet "does not speak out of [his own] desire" but that he was inspired by God in such a way that his speech and actions were preserved from error [Q. 53:3-4].

We can say that three types of speech came from the mouth of Muhammad. First, there were those times when he knew that he was not in control but that he was giving voice to the divine revelation that had been sent through him; this was the Qur'an. Second, there were those occasions when he spoke under divine guidance to teach and interpret the Qur'anic message in his own right as Prophet; these are the Traditions of Muhammad or the Hadith. Third, there were a small number of occasions when he received a message direct from God that was not part of the Qur'an but nevertheless it was God who spoke; these are the Holy Hadith or *Hadith Qudsi*.

Muslims believe that during his night journey to Jerusalem (*isra*) and ascent into the presence of God (*mi'raj*) he received knowledge of things that only God knew. He thus had knowledge of the unseen (*al-ghayb*); he knew more than ordinary people because he had been given this knowledge by God. At the same time, Muhammad made it clear that he did not know everything. Some things are known only to God [Q. 7:187; 31:34]. Some people have gained earthly knowledge and experience in their own trade or way of life that Muhammad did not possess. There is a famous example when he was asked by date farmers if this was the best moment for them to manually pollinate the date palms; after an unsuccessful initial experiment, he replied that they had been doing this work for years and so they were better judges of such things than he was.

The Sunni approach to passing on the teaching

We can imagine that the companions of Muhammad would come home at the end of the day and recount some new incident that they had observed or some piece of

wisdom that they had heard. They would tell their families and so there would be children present who would be eager to hear and memorise such reports. We can imagine travellers and desert people who would return from a visit to Madina and be quizzed about new sayings. These would pass around the gatherings by the camp fires and strangers would be valued for their accounts of life with the Prophet. Remember that this was a society that worked on memory and the story-tellers were a much valued profession for the clarity of their memories. Not surprisingly, within a few decades of the death of Muhammad there were hundreds of thousands of such reports in circulation.

People were bound to ask, "From whom did you hear that?" Some could say, "I was in the presence of the Prophet and heard him say…" On other occasions, the answer would be, "I heard it from X, who was there when the Prophet said or did…" Who was the X here quoted? If it was a well-known companion of Muhammad like Abu Bakr or his daughter Fatima or one of his wives, then the statement automatically had a high authority as an accurate report. If it was someone less well-known, then obviously people would ask, "Who's he?" or "Who's she?" In this way, Hadith started to circulate with the names of those who had passed them on attached. These people were called the "transmitters." Sometimes the report might come from a private part of the Prophet's life transmitted by one of his wives. Sometimes the saying or action would be public and so there could have been dozens of people present who heard it and transmitted it to their own circle. We can see that some Hadith have multiple chains of transmitters going back to one or several people who were present to hear the Prophet say something. On some occasions, there might be an odd word that differed in the report of what was said and so we have duplicate Hadith and near-duplicates.

These chains of transmitters, technically called the *isnad* of a Hadith, generally started with someone who was in the presence of Muhammad when he said or did something. Such people were called the Companions or *Sahaba*. In time, the generally accepted definition of a Companion was someone who saw Muhammad whilst a Muslim and died as a Muslim. This could include quite young people; it is generally reckoned that the last of the major Companions to die was Anas ibn Malik, who became a servant of the Prophet's when he was ten years old and died in 711; that was 79 years after the death of Muhammad. In the great canonical collections of Hadith by al-Bukhari and Muslim (more on these later) there are 278 Hadith of which he was the transmitter. The wives of Muhammad were in the best position to transmit episodes from his personal life; of these his young wife Ayesha (d.678) was the most prolific. She appears in the *isnad* of more than 2,000 Hadith. She was the youngest of his wives and people would seek her out for information about the Prophet's life. Some people specialised in remembering and transmitting Hadith, like Abu Hurayra (d.678), who was one of a group that Muhammad trained in spiritual practices and so he was frequently in the Prophet's company. He is reckoned to have transmitted some 3,500 Hadith.

Written and oral transmission

The sayings of Muhammad were passed throughout the community by word of mouth and eventually recorded in all sorts of early writings: history, biography (*sira*), Qur'an commentary (*tafsir*), theology, spiritual training (*tasawwuf*), etiquette (*adab*) and works on politics and the Arabic language. The number of such sayings in circulation in the early centuries would be many hundreds of thousands. It is claimed that Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855) had memorised "a million." It is better to think of these as "sayings" rather than to use the technical term of Hadith as only rarely was the full *isnad* recorded in such works and the sayings had not yet been subject to scholarly criticism. There were disputes within the early Muslim community and sayings were written and attributed to Muhammad to defend the position of different groups. Some individuals, inspired by pious motives, did not want people to be led astray from the correct path and so they linked their own sayings with the Prophet's name. It was not unusual in earlier centuries for people to put words into the mouth of an important person as though he or she had said them. As the Muslim community spread to new geographical regions and thus encountered new challenges, there were occasions on which the community leaders applied the general spirit of Islam to meet them and drew up sayings on the basis of, "What would the Prophet have said if he had been in this situation?"

From the time of the Companions onwards, people drew up their own personal written collections of Hadith (*sahifa*). There was a reluctance to do this within the community as they did not want the Hadith to be confused with the text of the Qur'an. These books of Hadith were handed down from father to son and from teacher to student. They should be thought of as aids to memory because the priority was given to oral transmission, which meant that the pronunciation, phrasing and meaning of the Hadith could also be transmitted. Students would study these books with their teachers, sometimes taking them down by dictation, and then being tested by the teacher listening to the student reading them back and, if necessary, correcting their own manuscript edition. Teachers would give their students permission to teach such books of Hadith when they were sure that they were correctly written, memorised and understood.

A style of collection grew up in which books were written organised by topics (*musannaf*). The best known of these is the *Muwatta* of Malik ibn Anas (d.795). This contained several hundred Hadith but also the sayings of Companions, those of the generation that followed them (the Successors or *Tabi'un*) and also some from Malik himself. This is best thought of as an early work of Islamic law, more focussed on giving guidance on questions of the practice of the early Muslim community in Madina rather than being a systematic collection of Hadith.

By the late 8th/early 9th century, a new style of collection emerged that reflected the growing emphasis on the *isnad* that demonstrated the authenticity of a Hadith. These collections (*musnad*) were arranged according to the Companion who began the chain of transmission from the Prophet. All the Hadith narrated by a certain Companion

were grouped together without reference to their subject matter. The critical point was that each *isnad* had to be traced back to the Prophet himself. This emphasis is drawn from the work of al-Shafi'i (d.820), who founded one of the Schools of Law stressing the authentic Hadith of Muhammad. The best known of these early collections organised according to the *isnad* principle was the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855), which contained some 30,000 Hadith. He was one of the first great travellers in pursuit of Hadith and visited many cities in the Islamic Empire of his time. Even though his *Musnad* is a large collection, it contained only a tiny proportion of the sayings that he knew thus emphasising the importance of a critical analysis based on the authentication of a reliable *isnad*.

The Canonical Collections

The ninth century proved to be a watershed for the collection and classification of Hadith. The two key people here are al-Bukhari (d.870) and Abu'l-Husayn Muslim (d.875; he is normally known simply as "Muslim"). They travelled around the Muslim communities collecting and sifting Hadith. They included only those Hadith that they considered to have a complete and unbroken chain of transmitters linking the saying to the Prophet himself. Such Hadith are called *sahih,* meaning sound in every respect. Their two collections are regarded as the most authoritative of the Sunni collections and are often referred to as the *Sahihayn* or the "two *sahih* collections." Al-Bukhari is reported to have sifted 600,000 sayings to find his final compilation of 7,397 *sahih* Hadith. This was a religious duty for him; we are told that he performed two cycles of formal prayer to seek God's guidance before including a Hadith in his collection. Muslim has a total of 12,000 *sahih* Hadith but both collections contain many repetitions, that is Hadith that are (almost) identical but with different *isnads*. Such multiple chains of transmitters are seen as signs of additional authenticity. Both works are arranged according to topics and divided into many chapters and sub-sections to assist in classification. They form the first two of the six "canonical" or formally accepted collections of Hadith by the Sunni community. A total of 2326 Hadith are found in both collections, which gives them additional authority.

The other four collections that make up the Sunni canon of six books of authentic Hadith were compiled by Abu Dawud (d.889), al-Nasa'i (d.916), al-Tirmidhi (d.892), and Ibn Majah (d.887). A canon comprising the first four of these works was widely accepted by the eleventh century and the full canon, included the last two, was generally agreed by the thirteenth century. All six books together contain almost 20,000 authenticated Hadith and are now available in English translation. This does not mean that they are regarded as a complete collection of the only authentic Hadith or even that they contain all the *sahih* Hadith. Massive compilations of Hadith carried on for several centuries after the canon was regarded as complete.

Further Hadith collections

Together with the ethical guidance of the Qur'an, the Hadith form the basis for Islamic law and this gave rise to collections of legal Hadith called *Akham al-Hadith*. Great

commentaries (*sharh*) were written on the Hadith collections to explain and elaborate on their meanings. These reached their peak in the fifteenth century with the commentary of Ibn Hajar (d.1449) on Bukhari. Some scholars compiled anthologies of Hadith from the canonical collections to help people in their daily lives. The best known of these, which became the standard textbook in the Indian Subcontinent, is the *Mishkat al-Masabih* compiled by al-Tabrizi (d.1337). Attempts were made at comprehensive compilations by scholars like al-Suyuti (d.1505) but later scholars found many Hadith that had been omitted.

A tradition grew up within Muslim circles of memorising forty Hadith based on a saying attributed to the Prophet that someone who does so will benefit from his intercession on the Day of Judgement. This led to scholars compiling collections of this number of Hadith on various topics. The best known and most widely used of these collections is the Forty Hadith on the Principles of Religion (*Al-Arba'in*) compiled by al-Nawawi (d.1277).

A separate group of sayings are the Holy Hadith or *Hadith Qudsi*. Previously, we have used the term Hadith to refer to the authenticated records of what Muhammad said, taught, or did and the things of which he approved. Technically these are the *Hadith Nabawi* or the Hadith of the Prophet. These are distinguished from the *Hadith Qudsi*, in which the Prophet is conveying a message from God, although the precise wording is not necessarily of divine authorship (unlike the Qur'an). These *Hadith Qudsi* are generally introduced with a phrase like, “God said in what God’s Messenger related from him…” There have been a few collections of these *Hadith Qudsi* compiled through the centuries and the number varies considerably. The most well-known is the *Mishkat al-Anwar* compiled by Ibn Arabi (d.1240), which contains 101 *Hadith Qudsi*.

Sifting the sayings for authentic Hadith

Imagine al-Bukhari beginning with 600,000 sayings and finding less that 8,000 worthy of being recorded in his *sahih* collection; how was that done? From the eighth century onwards, when there were no more people alive who had seen the Prophet and many of the third generation of Muslims had died, attention was focused on the transmitters. The logic is obvious: Where did each saying originate and how did it reach us? Did all the alleged transmitters exist? Were they reliable? Do we know that two alleged transmitters were in the same place at the same time to hand on the Hadith? Is it possible to corroborate the reports of one chain of transmitters with the testimony of another?

In order to be considered *sahih*, Hadith had to be traced back to someone who could testify to being in the presence of Muhammad when he said or did something. If the original transmitter could only say, “Someone told me that the Prophet said…” then that Hadith could not be accepted as *sahih*. There was a discussion about who could be accepted as a Companion; the first generation of Muslims. Could someone qualify as a Companion if they were still a child when Muhammad died? Did both men and

women qualify as Companions to transmit Hadith? Did the person have to be a believer at the time and what if they gave up their Muslim faith later? What about the character of a Companion: obviously if someone was a known liar, then they could not be regarded as a transmitter, but did they need to live perfect lives and if there was evidence of an occasional lapse of memory, did this render them unreliable?

The scholars discussed these issues and generally agreed that someone who saw Muhammad whilst a believer and died a Muslim could be considered as a Companion, even if they were quite young during the Prophet's life. Women were not only accepted as transmitters but were prized as such because they generally lived longer than men and so there would be fewer links in the chain of transmitters. Companions were expected to have lived upright and pious lives but were not expected to be sinless; the critical question was whether they could ever have been shown to be untruthful in what they transmitted. Emphasis was placed on a Hadith that warned: "Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare a seat for himself in hellfire." There is debate about the number of people who can be regarded as Companions but the number is certainly counted in tens of thousands, however in the six Sunni canonical collections less than one thousand are mentioned as transmitters.

The criteria for accepting the identity and character of a Companion as transmitter were extended to all the transmitters who were said to have handed on a particular Hadith. Their identity was checked; this was not an easy task when people were named after their fathers or as parents of a certain son or as members of a certain tribe or belonging to a particular place. Where they lived was researched and important dates in their lives ascertained, especially when they died. In this way it was possible to check if a certain transmitter could have heard the Hadith in question from the previous transmitter: Were they in the right place at the right time to have met? If a transmitter was a teacher, then did more than one of his or her students transmit the same Hadith; in this way they could be cross-checked. Did the report of an early student agree with what students of a later period reported about the Hadith transmitted by a teacher; was there consistency? Once some transmitters were checked out and could be shown to be reliable, then they could be used to cross-check the reliability of another potential transmitter. This process did not end in the early period but right down through the centuries scholars of Hadith have continued the process of sifting and cross-checking.

Eventually transmitters who were worthy of inclusion in a chain of transmitters (*isnad*) attached to Hadith were classified according to their reliability. Three key categories can be noted: *thiqa*: those transmitters who were regarded as reliable so that the Hadith transmitted by them could be used in legal rulings; *saduq*: those transmitters who were regarded as sincere but Hadith transmitted by them were in need of corroboration before they could be accepted; and *da'if*: those transmitters who were regarded as weak and could only be used to corroborate others. Not all scholars applied these categories in exactly the same way; some set higher standards than others. In time, dictionaries of transmitters were drawn up, the earliest is generally accepted to have been by Ibn Sa'd (d.845) with his Great Book of the Generations

(*Tabaqat al-Kubra*) but this process also goes on down through the centuries. Great emphasis was laid on the earliest generations of Muslims following a Hadith that said: "The best generation is that into which I was sent, then that which follows, then that which follows them."

We have seen the weight given to the principle of contiguous transmission; showing that each transmitter could have been in the presence of the person before them in the chain to ensure that they could have heard it from them. Similarly, we have noted the importance of teachers who passed on Hadith orally, giving their students an explanation of the meaning of the Hadith in question. They required their students to memorise Hadith under their supervision and recite them back to the teacher with their commentary. Many teachers dictated their own collection of Hadith to their students and then gave them permission, after their manuscripts had been checked, to teach those collections to others.

Corroboration was sought to see if a different chain of transmitters passed on the same Hadith from the same Companion. Some Hadith had the same content but were passed through different chains of transmitters originating from different Companions. Sometimes the Hadith had slight variations with the inclusion or omission of a word, for example, in the Hadith already cited: "Whoever lies about me intentionally, let him prepare a seat for himself in hellfire" some versions omitted the word "intentionally." The scholars saw three principal levels of corroboration: those Hadith that had many chains of transmission at every stage (*mutawatir*), which were highly prized as giving certain knowledge; those Hadith with different chains of transmission that had received such a high level of agreement amongst the scholars that their acceptance was approaching a consensus (*mashhur*); and finally those Hadith that had only one or a few chains of transmission (*ahad*) so that they could be regarded as giving only a strong probability of authentic knowledge.

This process led to a scholarly classification of Hadith. We can note three principal classifications here: those Hadith that were regarded as sound in every respect (*sahih*) with an unbroken chain of reliable transmitters going right back to Muhammad himself and which did not contain anything contrary to the Qur'an or the established *sunna* of the Prophet; those Hadith that were regarded as good (*hasan*) with a sound chain of transmitters and corroboration but with some slight weakness, such as one transmitter who did not always show perfect memory, that prevented them from meeting the rigorous standards required to be accepted as *sahih*; and those Hadith that lacked some element for inclusion in these two classifications (*da'if*). Only *sahih* and *hasan* Hadith could be used in legal rulings, while *da'if* Hadith could only be used for character training and in pious practice.

So far only the chain of transmitters had been subject to critical analysis but soon the scholars turned to the content (*matn*) of the Hadith itself. Two schools can be noted here. Those who gave greater emphasis to authentic transmission (*Ahl al-Hadith*) on the basis that the Prophet had higher knowledge than ordinary people as he had received inspiration direct from God and so later generations were not in a position to

criticise the content of an authentically transmitted Hadith. Then there were those scholars who gave a higher place to reason in judging the content of a Hadith (*Ahl al-Ra'y*); they would subject the content to the scrutiny of reason: does it claim something that did not come to pass, like the end of the world, or something out of time (anachronistic) or something that just was not rational. This led to a degree of tension and difference of opinion between different schools about whether a Hadith was reliable or not.

The Shi'a approach to Hadith

Three things mark out the Shi'a approach to the Hadith from the outset. First, Imam Ali, the divinely appointed successor to Muhammad, was the first male Muslim and the constant companion of the Prophet during his lifetime. He was thus in a privileged position to observe and learn from Muhammad the Muslim way of life. From the beginning, as a youth, he was told by Muhammad that he was to be his close friend and successor. It was thus natural that he would mark the way in which Muhammad conducted his life as the "beautiful pattern" of Muslim living. He was married to Muhammad's daughter and his two sons, later to be the second and third Imams, were like sons to Muhammad and so experienced life with him, even though they were boys when the Prophet died. Ali and Fatima were in an ideal position to pass on authentic Hadith to their two sons and so begin a privileged chain of transmission.

Second, in Shi'a understanding, the Ahl al-Bayt or Family of the Prophet, were the bearers of the Inner Light of divine inspiration. They were thus rendered sinless and preserved from error. This inner knowledge gave them a certainty about interpreting the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad as the divinely appointed guides to the community. Not only did they have the privileged chain of transmission from father to son over three hundred years but they were preserved from error in declaring some piece of teaching to be authentic. This means that it was sufficient authentication for a Hadith that one of the Imams should declare it so to be.

Third, the period after the death of Muhammad was one marked by strife and indeed civil war within the Muslim community concerning the rightful succession and how to put the teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet into practice. In Shi'a understanding, a large number of the Companions were present when Muhammad publicly nominated Ali as his successor and they pledged obedience to him. Later, after the death of Muhammad, they did not put his instruction into practice and went back on their oath of allegiance by choosing others to lead the community. This means that many of the Companions, who are central to Hadith transmission for Sunnis, are regarded as being unreliable witnesses and reporters of the Prophet's Hadith. Indeed, some of those who figure prominently as originators in the Sunni chains of transmission were key leaders in the opposition to Ali taking up his rightful role as the divinely appointed head of the community. This enables us to see that one of the central criteria for acceptance of a Companion or someone from a later generation as a reporter of the two most sound classes of Hadith was that they should profess correct belief in the right of the Imams to be heads of the community, or in other words, they should be Shi'a.

The confusion of this early period is compounded by the fact that it is believed that there were several important Hadith collections from the Companions that have been lost although some survived until the period of the Imams. During the time of the Imams, there was less of an emphasis on systematic collections of Hadith as the community always had the Imam on hand to ask. During this period some four hundred books are spoken of under the general title of "the sources" (*usul*). These Hadith were typically recorded direct from one of the Imams and more emphasis was placed upon them after the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam. Only sixteen of these books are still known to exist but the others are held to have been sources for the great Shi'a collections of Hadith that were compiled in the tenth century.

Means of authentication of Shi'a Hadith

The Shi'a Imams are held to be preserved from error by virtue of the Inner Light given to them by God, therefore if one of the Imams authenticated a Hadith that was sufficient evidence for it to be accepted. There are three routes of authentication within the Shi'a system: first, from the Prophet through the transmission of the Imams; second, beginning with one of the Imams and transmitted through later Imams; and third, from an Imam transmitted through a chain of transmitters drawn from his followers. Some Hadith originated with a report by one of the Companions who supported the right of succession of the Ahl al-Bayt that was later approved by one of the Imams and thus authenticated.

Four canonical collections

A massive compendium of Hadith was collected and arranged systematically by Al-Kulayni (d.939) called "The Sufficient Book of Knowledge of Religion" (*Al-Kafi*). This was followed by the work of Ibn Babawayh (d.991) commonly referred to as *Faqih*. Ibn Babawayh had a student known by his title Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1022) who gave greater weight to the use of reason in the science of Hadith. He in turn had a student called Al-Tusi (d.1067) who contributed the final two canonical collections: *Tahdhib al-Ahkam*, a commentary on Shaykh al-Mufid's Hadith work, and *Istibsar*, his own study and classification of Hadith. These four works are considered to be canonical due to their wide acceptance amongst the scholars rather than any claim to them being in themselves infallible.

The Shi'a Hadith have been classified into the same broad divisions of *sahih*, *hasan* and *da'if*. In Hadith regarded as *sahih* and *hasan* in the Shi'a collections, all transmitters had to be Shi'a, but a third class of Hadith, called *muwaththaq*, were accepted when a chain of transmitters included a reliable and trustworthy Sunni. There is no question of criticising the transmission through the infallible Imams but other transmitters have been subjected to scrutiny and directories of sound transmitters have been written. The weight given to reason in the criticism of the content of Hadith varies from one school to another.

Hadith common to both Sunni and Shi'a collections

Many Hadith occur in both collections and are thus shared between both traditions. Some of the Shi'a Hadith are traced back only as far as one of the infallible Imams, which is sufficient from a Shi'a perspective but inadequate for the Sunnis. Those Hadith that support the particularity of Shi'a doctrine tend only to be found in their collections or, if they occur also in the Sunni collections, they are interpreted differently. Sometimes a Hadith in the Sunni collections is found in a longer form in the Shi'a sources with the extension referring to support for a Shi'a doctrine; this can be seen as an addition in one collection or an omission in the other, depending on perspective. Amongst the Companions, some of those held to support the Shi'a understanding of the succession occur in Sunni chains of transmitters provided that they meet the criteria of reliability and trustworthiness.

Part Five: Theologians and their schools

Islam is a way of life; therefore it needs to be lived out. But it is lived out by thinking human beings, who have the ability to reflect, to ask questions and to try to find a way of explaining what they believe and why they believe it. Human beings are natural questioners; therefore this is an on-going process. Whenever a new philosophy or way of thinking comes along, there is a challenge to express one's beliefs in the terms of that new system. This process we can call theology – talking about God and matters related to God. Over the Islamic centuries, there have been great theologians, who have influenced the way in which Muslims express their belief and tackle new questions.

The Mutazilites

Whenever a religion teaches a set of ideals, one of the natural consequences is that we have to deal with those who say that they believe but their deeds fall short of the ideals that are taught; are they still to be considered Muslims? Islam teaches that God is all-powerful; then how can I be held responsible for my actions? These were some of the first theological questions to occupy the Muslim community in the early decades of Islam. Some took the position that God was so all-powerful that God actually determined the life of every human being. Our lives were like living out the script of a play that had been written by God; some even went so far as to say that God compelled all our actions (Jabarites), but then, where did human dignity and human freewill fit in? At the other end of the spectrum, there were those who said that God determines nothing but leaves each person completely free to do whatever they want; human beings, viewed from this position, control their own destinies (Qadarites). The consequence of this position is to say that my works flow from my faith and so others are able to know if and what I believe by looking at my actions. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that "grave sinners" have shown by their actions that they are unbelievers. At the extreme fringe on this end of the spectrum, were those who said that such "unbelieving grave sinners," even (especially) if they claimed to be Muslims, should be executed before they could spread their corruption through the whole community (Kharijites). The vast majority of Muslims took a position between these two extremes (Murji'ites) and said that only God could judge the heart of a man or woman and that therefore the judgement on whether the "grave sinner" had lost faith or not would be determined by God on the Day of Judgement. This meant that if someone professed to be a Muslim, then they must be regarded as such, even if they were a sinner (thus a "bad Muslim"), with the final judgement being left up to God.

It was against this background that the Mutazilite school of theology arose and flourished in the 8th to 10th centuries based in the cities of Basra and Baghdad. By this time, Greek philosophical thought had begun to reach the Muslim scholars and it challenged them to think out and express their beliefs using these concepts. Human reason was seen as the great human dignity, therefore the Mutazilites are sometimes

referred to as the Rationalists, later they preferred to call themselves "The People of Justice and Unity" (*Ahl al-Adl wal Tawhid*).

They articulated five principal bases for Muslim belief. The first was the absolute oneness of God, which entailed a rejection of anything that could even hint at any multiplicity. This meant that they taught the doctrine that the Qur'an was created in time and therefore it was not eternal, so that one could avoid any notion of two eternal entities; God alone is eternal. They opposed any form of dualism or polytheism. God is a spiritual being without any bodily form; therefore God cannot be seen either in this life or in Paradise. They were opposed to speaking about God in human bodily concepts (anthropomorphism) and so such references in the Qur'an were to be understood allegorically or metaphorically, e.g., references to "God's hand(s)" should be understood as meaning the grace or power of God. They were against the idea that an attribute of God, e.g., speech/word, could be separated from the essence of God, and thus any idea such as the Christian notion of "the word of God taking human form" was unacceptable.

The second principle was the justice of God. God is just and speaks only the truth. God has given human beings guidance and said that everyone will face judgement. If human beings are not held to account for their actions by God, then that makes God a liar. Consider the case of two people who are equally tempted to commit a sin; person A commits it and person B struggles with great sacrifice and discipline not to commit it; if, on the Day of Judgement, God "let's off" person A for their sin and does not punish them, then God is being unjust to person B, who resisted the temptation and should be rewarded; the conclusion is that God *must* judge, reward and punish justly. They held that God only wills what is good and neither wills nor creates evil; human beings create their acts through the exercise of their own free will, thus responsibility lies with each individual. God is all good and therefore could not possibly create evil acts.

The third principle is that the Qur'an lays down what is right and wrong, and this is reinforced through the investigation and use of human reason. Those who believe in the guidance of the Qur'an will bear the fruits of their belief in actions. Human reason can predict how God in justice will judge human acts and thus predict the final destiny of the unrepentant great sinner; their destiny is hell but only God is able to judge if an individual is repentant or not.

The fourth Mutazilite principle was to take an intermediate position concerning the sinner. We can observe the actions of others and say that they do not correspond to the actions of one who believes but we cannot pass final judgement on someone and say that they are an unbeliever; therefore the sinner (*fasiq*) occupies an intermediate position between "true believer" and "unbeliever."

The fifth principle was that every Muslim has the duty to promote good and forbid evil; if necessary this must be done through the use of force. Critically, in political terms, this included deposing the unjust ruler.

The Mutazilites as a distinct group within Islam were opposed and marginalised by the dominant Sunni schools, so that they are a tiny community today, but their ideas had a considerable influence in Shi'a theology and elements of Mutazilite thought appear periodically in later Sunni theologies.

The Asharites

The first Sunni theologian to take a decisive stand against the Mutazilites was Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855). He is renowned as a collector of Hadith and the Hanbali school of law is named after him. He based his teaching on the Qur'an and Hadith, which he accepted without further interpretation or discussion. He regarded the discipline of theology to be dangerous as it leads to speculation and thus should be avoided. He taught that the Qur'an is the uncreated word of God and that God has no human form; therefore the references in the Qur'an to God using human concepts are to be understood literally but referred to God, so: God has hands but they are God-like hands not human-like hands. He held that it is for God to judge and punish the grave sinner not human beings. Indeed, human beings cannot pass ultimate judgement on another being; judgement, mercy, justice and forgiveness all lie with God. In 832, ibn Hanbal was in Baghdad when the ruling Caliph al-Ma'mun (r.813-833) moved in the direction of the Mutazilites and tried to force the scholars to agree or face imprisonment. Most accepted the Mutazilite positions but ibn Hanbal refused and was imprisoned for two years.

Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari (873-932) was born in Basra and studied under Mutazilite scholars until breaking with that school in 912. He then went on to seek a middle way between Mutazilite and Hanbali positions. He emphasised that the starting point for theology should be the Qur'an and the *sunna* of Muhammad as contained in the Hadith and narrations from companions of the Prophet; in this way, he moved more in the direction of ibn Hanbal. He saw a literal reliance on scripture alone to be lazy and that reason alone was dangerous, so he sought to combine the two. Reason can only go so far, he taught, thereafter one has to accept on the basis of revealed faith without, in his famous phrase, “asking how” (*bila kayf*). He taught that the Qur'an is the uncreated, eternal word of God and that only the ink, paper and individual letters are created. In a phrase attributed to him: “The word of God is not God but is not other than He; ask not how.” In a similar way, he taught that human beings will really see God on the Day of Judgement but we don’t know how.

He wanted to limit the emphasis on rationalism and taught that the non-rationalist elements of belief transcend human categories and experience. Human knowledge is limited in comparison with God’s knowledge; therefore we have to accept God’s will in all things simply because it is God’s will. He held that the Mutazilites had limited God’s omnipotence by subjecting it to reason and thus showed a lack of faith in God’s justice, mercy and compassion. This means that if God chooses to send the pious to hell and the sinner to heaven, then this must be accepted as God’s will, which is beyond reason and logic. He accused the Mutazilites of turning God into a dry

abstraction and human life into a meaningless series of "causes and effects." What would be the point of revelation, he asked, if reason and logic are enough?

A famous illustration has been handed down of a discussion between al-Ashari and his Mutazilite teacher.

> The scene is in heaven where a child notices that a man has a higher place than he has and so asks God why this is. God responds that this man did many good things in his life and so this is his reward. The child then asks God why he was allowed to die young before he had the chance of earning such a high position by doing good deeds. God responds that God caused him to die young because God knew that if he continued to live to full adulthood he would be a sinner. At this point there is a chorus of voices from hell asking God why they too had not been killed as children.

The law of cause and effect was held by al-Ashari to be inadequate to cover God's relations with human beings.

When it came to human acts, al-Ashari tried again to steer a middle path. God creates all acts, both good and bad. God creates the evil act but God does not will it. This is a necessary consequence of the all-powerful nature of God. But God is good, so why does God create evil acts? The answer must lie in human need not God's need, so the argument was made that human beings can only thus appreciate the good by comparison, so we thus come to learn that evil is not just the absence of good but the real and existing counterpart of good.

Al-Ashari grappled with the question of determinism and the responsibility of people for their actions. He saw the danger in extreme determinism, that it leads to moral laxity: "What is the point in me fighting against my weaknesses when God made me weak and has determined all my actions?" At the same time, if God is all-knowing, then how can we avoid saying that God created each one of us to be either faithful or unfaithful? On human responsibility, al-Ashari tried to balance the all-powerful nature of God with giving humans sufficient freedom to be liable to judgement by developing the doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*). The argument went as follows: All acts are created by the will, knowledge, decision and decree of God; thus primary causality (that the act is done) belongs to God. Just before each act is done, the human being acquires accountability for how it is done and thus becomes responsible for the act and thus liable to judgement and punishment; so secondary causality (how the act is done) belongs to the human being. This means that God knows the outcome of every human act but does not determine it.

The Maturidiyya

The Asharites grew to become the largest of the theological schools within Sunni Islam but another school was founded by the contemporary scholar al-Maturidi of Samarkand (d.944). He regarded the Asharites as being too conservative and wanted to give more of a role to reason in supporting doctrine. He taught that human beings are able and obliged to gain knowledge of God and that through reason independent of

revelation we can come to thank God. He interpreted the anthropomorphic sayings in the Qur'an in a metaphorical way but held that we can see God in the life hereafter.

The attributes of the knowledge and power of God were accepted by al-Maturidi as real and eternally subsisting in the essence of God; therefore "God is eternally the creator" even though the creation is temporal. Likewise he taught that speech (*kalam*) is an eternal attribute of God.

On human acts, he held that God creates the root of all acts but that human freewill gives them their good or evil specification. Similarly to al-Ashari, God knows the outcome of human acts but does not predetermine them. So, God leads astray only those that God knows will choose to go astray and leads to the right path those that God knows will choose the right path; the initial choice rests with the human being not God.

Finally, he taught that faith is the inner assent of the human being expressed by verbal confession and not through works; so if one confesses the *shahada* then one is a Muslim. Further, the faithful sinner may be punished by God but will eventually enter Paradise.

Al-Ghazali

We have seen so far two of the early aspects of Sunni Islam: the rationalist Mutazilites, and the two great theological schools associated with the names of al-Ashari and al-Maturidi. To these must be added the mystical dimension, often identified with the term sufi and traced back through such figures as Hasan al-Basri (d.728) to the Prophet himself. A major factor in the religious development of Islam was the encounter with Greek philosophy and thus the attempt to express Muslim belief in philosophical terms. Key figures in this development were al-Farabi (d.950) and ibn Sina (d.1037). The person who tried to reconcile these various elements was al-Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) was born in Tus, Iran and grew up at the time of a reinvigoration of Sunni learning under the ruling vizier, Nizam al-Mulk (1020-1092), who had established centres of learning, Nizamiyya Colleges, in places like Nishapur and Baghdad. As a young man, al-Ghazali received training in sufi practices and then travelled to Nishapur, where he studied Asharite theology in the Nizamiyya College. As a brilliant student and teacher, he was called to the Nizamiyya in Baghdad in 1085 where he taught and wrote for ten years. Towards the end of this time, he wrote one of his major books "The Incoherence of the Philosophers" (*Tahafut al-Falasifa*), in which he used philosophical arguments to show that philosophy does not always lead to ultimate truth and does not bring rational insight into the transcendent God. This meant, in his judgement, that revelation was the most important source of religion but that this must be combined with religious experience to bring one to knowledge of God and God's existence.

In 1095, al-Ghazali seems to have experienced a life crisis that prevented him from teaching and brought to him the awareness that he had been seeking prestige as a teacher rather than seeking that which would lead to eternal life. There then began a decade of travelling in search of spiritual knowledge and training. The scholars are divided about his whereabouts during this time but he appears to have travelled to various places, finally returning to his home town of Tus, where he established a residential sufi training centre (*khanqah*). From here he was persuaded to return to teach in the Nizamiyya in Nishapur from 1106 to 1109, before returning to his *khanqah* where he died in 1111.

It was in 1106, that al-Ghazali wrote his most influential work "The Revival of the Religious Sciences" (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*), in which he tried to integrate his philosophical and theological learning with his spiritual experience. The book is divided into four sections dealing with worship practices (*ibadat*), social customs (*adat*), vices or faults of character that lead to perdition (*muhlikat*), and virtues or qualities that lead to salvation (*munjiyat*). Al-Ghazali saw the pre-embodied soul as being of pure, eternal substance. In order to grow in ultimate knowledge of God, the soul had to attach itself to a body so that it can exercise reason. In the body, the soul is subject to the corrupting influences of anger, desire and evil, and thus needs to be disciplined through both the outer practices of religion and inner mystical sufi practices. The inner practices enable the soul to grasp the spiritual core of the outer practices and thus bring the person to justice and wisdom.

Al-Ghazali had a significant influence on medieval Jewish and Christian writers, such as Maimonides (d.1204), Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) and Dante (d.1321); his name was transformed into Algazel in Latin

Al-Tusi

Another integration of philosophical and theological concepts took place within the Shi'a tradition. This was initiated by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201-1274), who was also born in Tus, Iran and studied at the Nizamiyya in Nishapur. He is regarded as a comprehensive scholar, contributing to the study of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, ethics, history and geography, as well as philosophy and theology. He lived at the time of the Mongol invasion and thus the overthrow of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad (1258) and the rise of Shi'a influence. His main philosophical influence was ibn Sina and he spent years living with the Ismaili communities in Alamut and elsewhere, during which time his philosophical understanding of Islam deepened.

His commentary on ibn Sina defended the philosopher's Islamic reputation and revived his school of philosophy in the East. Al-Tusi wrote in both Arabic and Persian, and the Persian influence can be seen coupled with Aristotle in his political ethics. He developed a philosophical support for the Imam as a "Philosopher-King," who would lead the community in virtue. He emphasised the family as the central component of society and stressed mutual respect and the importance of education. He systematically formulated the fundamental tenets of Shi'a belief and practice in his

book “The Definition of Fundamental Beliefs” (*Tajrid al-Itiqadat*), on which many subsequent scholars wrote commentaries. Towards the end of his life, he oversaw the construction of the Maraghah Observatory, which opened in 1261, and which was the focus of a new centre of higher learning, of which al-Tusi was the Director.

One of his pupils in philosophy, who also wrote a commentary on his *Tajrid*, was Hasan ibn Yusuf al-Hilli (1250-1325). Al-Hilli is credited with the foundation of the Usuli school within Shi'a Islam, which is today dominant. The word *usul* means foundational principles, as in *usul al-fiqh*, the foundational principles of jurisprudence. Al-Hilli established reasoning (*aql*) as the central tool in developing law. He systematically addressed the terminology and methodology of critical Hadith scholarship and set it on a solid basis. His systematic works on theology are still basic texts in universities and *madrasas* today.

Ibn Taimiyya

At the same period in history, a contrary intellectual movement was afoot pioneered by Taqi al-Din ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328), who was born and lived almost all his life in Damascus where he studied under some of the great Hanbali scholars. He wanted to return to the purity of Islam, as he saw it, based strictly on the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet. He stressed the need to understand Islam through the lens of the pious predecessors (*salaf al-salih*), the first three generations beginning with the companions of Muhammad, who lived most faithfully according to the message. Anything that could not be traced back to the Qur'an and Hadith had no place within Islamic thought or practice and must be regarded as innovation (*bid'a*) and thus removed. This made him a deeply controversial character and fierce polemicist, who was opposed to the philosophers, the Shi'a tradition, ibn Arabi (d.1240) and other sufis, and al-Ghazali.

His position was “to describe God only as he has described himself in his Book and as the Prophet has described him in his *sunna*.” Although he is thought of as a strict Traditionalist and was accused of anthropomorphism on account of his literal interpretation of the Qur'an, he was certainly not unthinking but rather stressed intellectual struggling (*ijtihad*) within these parameters by those who were experts in the field (*mujtahid*). He spoke of a “happy mean” (*wasat*) between tradition, reason and freewill. Although he was brought up as a member of the Hanbali school, he preferred his own *ijtihad* and was against those who automatically followed one of the schools of law in an unquestioning way (*taqlid*).

Ibn Taimiyya was a lifelong bachelor, so periods in prison were more opportunity than deprivation, and he wrote many of his books whilst imprisoned for criticising the prevailing sufi practices or on charges of anthropomorphism. He held that Islam needed political power, as in the days of the Prophet and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, to that it could command the good and forbid the evil in society, which he saw as a duty placed on the State. In order to do this, the State needed the guidance of religion and so there was a mutual dependency between State and Islam. He had a considerable following amongst ordinary people, partly due to his role in fighting off

the Mongol invaders from Damascus, in which action he fought with valour, and has also had a huge influence on later generations of Muslims, who wanted to purify their Islamic beliefs and practices.

Part Six: Islam and other faiths

There are more Muslims in the world today than there have been at any other time in human history and yet, fourteen hundred years after the death of Muhammad, they account for only around 20% of the world population. Through the expansion of Muslim families, the Muslim population is increasing and, in certain parts of the world, relatively significant numbers of people are coming to Islam for the first time, yet there is no sign that the whole of humankind is on the verge of mass conversion and so the relationship between Islam and other faiths is of ongoing importance.

It was ever thus! In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Makka and Madina were multi-faith societies and other religions were present in neighbouring countries in all directions. During the early centuries of the Islamic Empire, Muslims were a minority of its citizens. Muslim rulers have always had to consider the status of their non-Muslim subjects throughout the centuries and in all territories. Even in those Muslim countries today that forbid public assembly for worship to non-Muslims, there are still hundreds of thousands of adherents of different faiths.

Back to the beginning

When God created the first human beings, they came from a single seed [Q. 7:189]; therefore we can speak of all human beings who have ever lived as belonging to the one human family [Q. 2:213]. God is not the god of one people, tribe, ethnic group or religion in Islamic understanding, but rather the one and only God, who created all human beings fundamentally equal [Q. 49:13], sharing the two great human dignities, to be the loving servant (*abd*) and the regent (*khalifa*) of God on earth. All human beings were created to worship, obey, serve and love God without exception. There is no room for a doctrine of election in Islam that says that God is concerned only with one group of people; God is the God of all humankind and has no favourites. For this reason, the Qur'an tells us that no people on earth has been left without guidance; at least one Prophet has been sent to all the peoples of the earth [Q. 10:47; 16:63]. The Hadith in which the Prophet speaks of 124,000 Prophets makes the point nicely; we know from the Qur'an of only twenty-five Prophets by name, which leaves 123,975 vacancies to be filled by Prophets who are unknown to us. Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have discussed whether the Buddha or Zoroaster, to name but two candidates, might have been true Prophets sent by God. This understanding of the oneness of humankind in the sight of God should set the attitude of Muslims who encounter new cultures and peoples. Instead of thinking that they live in total ignorance of God-given revelation, the attitude should rather be that God's Prophets have been at work in every community at some stage in their history and thus there should be an openness to perceive the remnants of the earlier planting, even if people have moved a long way from their natural state (*din al-fitra*).

God alone knows the human heart and thus only God can sit in ultimate judgement on any human being [Q. 88:21-26]; it is not possible for anyone to say "you/they are going to hell." Even Prophet Muhammad himself is sent only to deliver the message

of the Qur'an as the ultimate guide to salvation and to warn people of the Day of Judgement and their duty to follow [Q. 33:45]. God is just and so the person who knows the guidance of the Qur'an and decides not to follow it is in a manifestly different situation to people who have never heard the message or even the name of Muhammad. For people who have heard the message of Islam from Muslims who were unjust or oppressors of human dignity or exploiters, we have to ask just how free they were to hear and respond to the true teaching of the Qur'an unclouded by the conduct of those who brought it. The best amongst humankind are those who are filled with God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and that is an inner disposition, which God alone can judge. Every human being will be held to account for their lives on the Day of Judgement and the just and merciful God will make the ultimate decision.

Until the coming of the Qur'an we can say that the earth was populated by peoples of various religions, some at least of which were capable of leading people on a godly path depending on how closely they followed the *shari'a* laid down by the Prophets who had been sent to them. The coming of the Final Message to the Last Messenger brought about a change in the condition of all people. Islam understands the Qur'an as the final revelation to be followed by all humankind and Muhammad to be the universal Messenger. The Qur'an speaks of itself as the criterion (*al-furqan*) by which all else is to be judged [Q. 3:4; 25:1] and thus Islam is the only currently existing Straight Path that leads to human fulfilment in this life and the reward of Paradise; that leaves open the possibility that there might be other less clearly defined and meandering paths that might guide people aright during such time as they have not had the chance to hear and respond to the pure message of the Qur'an. Millions of people on earth today still live in such circumstances. God guides to Islam whomsoever God wills [Q. 2:142]; that is for God to know and judge. For those on the Straight Path, their duty is clear: first, to follow it and second, to invite others to do the same.

A classification of religions

From the perspective of the Final Message, we can classify the religions of the world into five categories: those who worship something other than God, those who have no place for God in their ways of life, those who cannot identify the revelation that stands behind their religion, those who claim a revelation or prophet after the Qur'an and Muhammad, and the people identified as being the followers of earlier revelations.

No idol-worship

The Arabs in the time of Muhammad worshipped many idols of their own or their forefathers' making. This was the world into which the Qur'an was revealed and its earliest message was the worship of God alone and an end to idolatry. This became the criterion to judge if someone had become a Muslim or not; have they left behind the idol-worship that they inherited? There was no room for "multiple belonging" on this question. Some Muslim historians have indicated that some of the Arabs continued to hold on to their idols even after they had become outwardly Muslim and

used to carry them to *salat* tucked under their arms or between their legs, and thus they would fall to the ground when Muslims were commanded to adopt a wide stance at prayer and raise their hands to their heads during worship. Such "hedging of one's bets" was unacceptable in the pure and absolute monotheism of Islam. Such practices amounted to associating partners with God (*shirk*) and this could not be tolerated.

The Qur'an is explicit in saying that *shirk* is the one sin that God will not forgive [Q. 4:48]. To divide God into parts is *shirk*. To say that one worships God plus anything else (the ancient gods of our people, a local holy person, a semi-divine person or to attribute divinity to any of God's creatures) is *shirk*. The first action of Muhammad when Makka became a Muslim city was to order that all the idols that surrounded the *ka'ba* should be destroyed so that there would be no more idol-worship. All forms of polytheism (the worship of many gods) and henotheism (the worship of a hierarchy of gods) are *shirk*. There are modern forms of *shirk* as well that are equally forbidden: e.g., to worship money, power, nationalism, racism, sexism or ideologies.

Any forms of religion that include carved, painted or imagined images have always been problematic for Muslims. Are they idols that are worshipped? The religions of India that use images (collectively grouped together as Hinduism) have raised such questions for Muslims. Some of their followers are adamant that they are monotheists, worshipping the one invisible God, and that such images are only representations of some aspects of God's many attributes. Other believers will speak of a multitude of gods that are worshipped. The reality in a particular case is not easy to discern and suspicions of *shirk* are raised concerning any image that appears to be worshipped. No blanket judgement can be given and at times, such as during the Mughal Empire, Muslims have accepted that some of the religions of India were monotheistic and indeed probably what remained of the teaching of the earlier Prophets that were sent there.

Judaism, like Islam, shuns all forms of images that can be associated with God but some forms of Christianity use statues, figures in glasswork and crucifixes (images of Jesus on the cross) as part of their worship. This usage needs to be clarified for Muslim eyes to show that such images are not worshipped but serve as a reminder to people to worship God alone. In Eastern Christianity, it is common to find icons that are understood to be "windows" that lead the believer to the worship of God but the way in which they are treated has caused questions to be raised in Muslim perception. It is for the theologians of such traditions to articulate the way in which they are understood and used to clarify such practices for Muslims lest there should be any misunderstanding.

God is real and exists

Religion, in Muslim understanding, entails the worship of God, therefore a way of life or religion that has no place for God or that denies the existence of God or does not engage in talk of God is problematic. Can such be called a religion at all or should it rather be thought of as a philosophy of life? Atheistic philosophies, such as atheistic

communism or secular humanism clearly come into this classification. Religions such as Buddhism, which in many of its forms is non-theistic, have also proved problematic. There are forms of Buddhism that understand themselves to be theistic but their concepts of the divine are some way from that which pertains in the Abrahamic religions.

Religion is based on revelation

As we have seen, God has sent guidance and Prophets to all the peoples of the earth but some of those peoples have lost touch with their original revelations and can give no account of them in their religious systems. Many of the ancient traditional religions of different parts of the world would fall into this classification. Some peoples have maintained a real sense of the transcendent and the life of the spirit but other practices have been included over the millennia. Religions that worship the forces or phenomena of nature, such as the sun or other heavenly bodies, trees, rivers or natural objects, have always proved problematic. Some have kept elements that are in accordance with the guidance of the Qur'an, such as a profound sense of the inter-connectedness of the whole of creation and human responsibilities towards it, but others have practices, such as human sacrifices, that are clearly contrary to divine guidance. Some of the ideas that have been grouped into modern practices associated with movements such as the New Age cause concern for Muslims as to their origins. The question will always be: Where is the revelation on which such practices are based? Religion, in Islamic understanding, is revealed and not constructed by human beings. The Qur'an does not accept the defence that “these are the ancient traditions of the ancestors” [Q. 31:21; 2:170]. Similarly anything that could be described as “ancestor worship” is forbidden as *shirk*.

Muhammad and the Qur'an are the last

The finality of the Qur'an as the last revelation is central to Islam and thus any religion that claims to have a subsequent revelation is unacceptable in Islamic understanding. The Book of Mormon (1822) given to Joseph Smith (1805-1844), for example, could not be accepted by Muslims as a genuine revelation from God. Similarly, the finality and universality of Muhammad is absolute in Muslim understanding, therefore claims to be a later prophet cannot be accepted. The understanding of the Baha'is that Baha'u'llah (1817-1892) was the divinely-sent prophet of a new world order has not been accepted by Muslims. Divergence of understanding about the status of Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (d.1908), whether he was a minor prophet (plus various other claims) or a reviver of the faith of Islam, has led to the Ahmadiyya being declared outside the fold of Islam by Muslim scholars.

The Sikhs are self-confessed monotheists, the followers of ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak (b.1469) to Guru Gobind Singh (d.1708), and thereafter the guruship passed to the book of writings, the Guru Granth Sahib. The status of the Gurus in relation to prophethood and of the book in relation to revelation has been problematic for

Muslims since the 16th century. Muslims could not accept the Gurus as Prophets or the Guru Granth Sahib as a revealed scripture.

The followers of earlier revelations

The Qur'an makes explicit the respect for people who follow earlier revelations in the case of four groups: Jews, Christians, Magians and Sabeans [Q. 2:62; 5:69; 22:17]. They are all called in the Qur'an *Ahl al-Kitab* or People of the Book. This is confirmation that they received at least one Prophet sent by God who brought revealed guidance that enabled him to establish a *shari'a*. The Qur'an is also explicit in saying that the People of the Book worship the same, one and only God, as Muslims [Q. 29:46].

The Sabeans have generally been associated by Muslim scholars with the Mandeans, who are today a small religious group found in parts of Iraq and Iran. Their history is obscure but their religious books tell of a supreme being, whom they call the Lord of Greatness, and a line of messengers, one of whom was John and who is associated with the Prophet Yahya, who is called by Christians, John the Baptist, which ties in with their principal religious rite, that of frequent baptism for purification. One of their important scriptures is called the Book of John. They use a form of Aramaic in both writings and worship. There is stress on living a moral life and on the life hereafter. Scholarly opinion, working on their writings and practices, links them with Judaism and the "Baptisers" who followed John the Baptist, although their origins may pre-date him as a baptism of purification was not something new in his time.

The Magians have generally been associated with the Zoroastrians, the followers of the Persian Prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in the West), whose dates are uncertain but today is generally reckoned to have lived in the 12th century before the Common Era. He taught the worship of the Wise Lord (Ahura Mazda) and some of his writings have been assembled to form part of a body of scripture. He is understood by Zoroastrians to be the bearer of the great revelation. The Zoroastrian religion became the official religion of the Persian Empires in the centuries before the rise of Islam and thus cast an influence from Egypt to the Punjab in India. In the 10th century CE, some Zoroastrians left Iran for India, where they are known as the Parsees (coming from Persia). In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew mentions the Magi as coming from the east to pay their respects to the infant Jesus; it is likely that this is a reference to the Magians/Zoroastrians, who were noted for their study of the heavenly bodies.

The final two groups, the Jews and the Christians will be discussed in more detail in Part 7 of Bearers of the Final Message.

Part Seven: The Islamic critique of Judaism and Christianity

In Part Six, we saw that four groups are mentioned in the Qur'an under the title of People of the Book: Jews, Christians, Sabeans and Magians but in fact the Magians are only mentioned by name once, in Q. 22:17, and the Sabeans three times, in Q. 2:62, 5:69 and 22:17. There are many other references to the People of the Book and Muslim commentators generally apply them to Jews and Christians. The term is used with this restricted meaning in Part Seven.

There are some fifty-four references to the People of the Book in the Qur'an, the key ones being:

2: 105, 109
3: 64, 65, 69, 70-72, 75, 98-100, 110-115, 199
4: 123-124, 153-159, 171
5: 15-19, 59, 65-66, 68, 77
29: 46-47
33: 26
57: 28-29
59: 2, 11
98: 1-8

At times, these verses are addressed to both Jews and Christians and at others, it is not clear if they refer to one group or both. On a couple of occasions, the content makes clear that one group alone is meant. Q. 4:153-157 are addressed to the Jews, who ask Muhammad to bring down a book from heaven and who are accused of killing some of their Prophets unjustly and claiming to have killed Jesus. Q. 4:171 is addressed to Christians, who are corrected for going to excess in speaking of Jesus as the son of God and saying of God "three."

The thrust of the Qur'anic message to the People of the Book is that there is a continuity in the guidance that God has sent to all Prophets and that the Qur'an comes to confirm the messages that were sent before it [Q. 5:59]. The Qur'an is not a new message but the definitive deposit of the perennial guidance and the criterion by which they can be judged [Q. 2:53; 3:3-4]; therefore it acts as a corrective to errors that have come into the earlier messages over the centuries [Q. 4:46-47; 5:15-19]. At the heart of true religion is a belief in pure monotheism (*tawhid*). This was the faith of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a believer in pure monotheism (*hanif*) [Q. 3:65, 67-68; 4:125]. This was the faith taught by the Prophets Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Anything that jeopardises this pure monotheistic belief must be purged as an error in the ways that Jews and Christians have interpreted their scripture [Q. 9:30-31]. The second key belief is that God speaks to humankind through a chain of Prophets, of which Muhammad is the last and the seal [Q. 33:40]. Not to accept any of the Prophets of God mentioned in the Qur'an is an act of disbelief; therefore part of the correction of Jewish faith must be for them to acknowledge the prophethood of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians will only come to true faith when they acknowledge the final Prophet that God has sent [Q. 5:81] and the Qur'an that he received [Q. 3:199]. In these ways, they will have access to the sources

that will correct errors in their faith and practice. When speaking of the Jews and Christians, the Qur'an habitually uses a phrase such as “a party amongst them,” which thus prohibits blanket judgements and leaves open the possibility that some of them have remained on the paths originally laid out for them by their Prophets [e.g., Q. 3:113-116; 5:66]. Moses, Jesus and all the Prophets were protected from error, so the errors that have crept into Judaism and Christianity cannot be attributed to them but must be due to later generations going astray.

Some specific critical comments on the People of the Book

The Jews and Christians have been careless in preserving intact the Books that were sent to them (*Taurat* and *Injil*). If they had them in their pristine form and consulted them, then they would see that the Qur'an confirms the earlier messages [Q. 6:90-91; 46:12]. This would lead them to acknowledge the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad [Q. 5:19, 41-44]. In some cases, the Qur'an speaks of more than carelessness but rather concealment, the punishment for which will be hellfire [Q. 2:174]. Moses and Jesus laid down a *shari'a* for their followers; the Jews and Christians are told to implement their own scriptures, which would bring them back to this correct path [Q. 5:68]. Had God so willed, God could have made one community of humankind following one *shari'a* but in God’s wisdom, God created different communities with their respective *shari'a* so that God might test them concerning the fidelity with which they followed it. All will ultimately return to God’s judgement when any differences will be made clear. However, the Muslims are cautioned not to follow other communities by erring from the revelation that has been given to them [Q. 5:48]. This caution is repeated and the People of the Book are reported to be jealous because God has sent a Prophet to the Muslims and are thus eager to lead Muslims astray also [Q. 2:105, 109]. This devious behaviour can lead some of them to pretend to believe whilst secretly raging at the Muslims [Q. 3:119] and making a pretence at conversion so as to destabilise others [Q. 3:72]. The Jews and Christians are required to believe in all of God’s Books, including the Qur'an, and not just some of them [Q. 2:89-91] and rejection of them can amount to being amongst those who cover up the truth knowingly (*kafirun*) [Q. 2:105].

A complex judgement

There is a differentiation between the People of the Book and the polytheists when they are defeated in battle. The People of the Book are to be subdued, humbled and required to pay the military tax (*jizya*), whereas the polytheists are to be attacked, besieged and killed unless they repent and become Muslims [Q. 9:5, 29]. In another place, the Qur'an groups together the faithless amongst the People of the Book with the polytheists, who all face condemnation to hell [Q. 98:1-6].

The Qur'an points out that some of the People of the Book are on the path laid out for them by their Prophets and others have gone astray; it is not possible to make a blanket judgement [Q. 3:113-116]. A critical question for Christians would be

whether they still believe in the pure monotheism taught by Jesus or have left the path of true faith by inventing a tripartite God of their own imagining.

The People of the Book have the privileged status of being able to share food with the Muslims; their food and the *halal* food of the Muslims is acceptable to both [Q. 5:5]. In the early days of Muslim migration to Britain when *halal* meat was not available, some of them would go to the Jewish *kosher* butcher to buy their meat. Contemporary Christians, who slaughter animals in the tradition way, with the invocation of the name of God and a swift cut to the throat to kill and release the blood, *may* (monotheists?) find that their food is *halal* for Muslims too. The same verse of the Qur'an [Q. 5:5] says that Muslim men may marry women from the People of the Book; thus without their conversion to Islam and on the assumption that they will continue to worship in their own traditions.

In Q. 2:62 and 5:69, those who are on a godly path – the Muslims and the People of the Book – who have faith in God and the Last Day and act righteously will have no fear or grieve, they will receive their reward. However some Muslim scholars have argued that these verses have been replaced (abrogated) by Q. 3:85, which says that anyone who follows a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them. The discussion hinges of the meaning of the term "Islam;" does this indicate Islam as founded on the basis of the Qur'an and *sunna* of Prophet Muhammad or does this have the more generic meaning of *islam*, which is the total submission to God alone and thus would include the People of the Book? The majority of Muslim scholars have taken the former position and said that even though the People of the Book might be worshipping God, their worship will not be accepted from them by God because all worship after the coming of the Qur'an and Muhammad must be offered through the vehicle of Islam, that is, recognising the authority of the Final Message and Last Messenger. A minority of Muslim scholars have taken the latter position.

The ambivalent critique of the Jews

The pure monotheism of the Jews is not questioned in the Qur'an except for one peculiar assertion. In Q. 9:30, the Qur'an asserts that Jews claim that Uzayr is a son of God. This is linked in the same verse to a parallel claim by Christians concerning Jesus. Although four groups are spoken of as sons of God in the Hebrew scriptures (the whole Hebrew people, angels, some Kings of Israel and righteous Israelites – all under particular circumstances) and this is a term connoting special favour in the sight of God, it absolutely does not under any circumstances parallel the Christian usage of the title Son of God of Jesus, which is totally unacceptable to the Jews.

Uzayr is generally held to be a reference to the learned priest Ezra, who was sent to Jerusalem to re-establish Jewish practice after the Temple was rebuilt when the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon in 538BCE. He was the person who made the formal reading of the Torah to the assembled people and once again put its teaching into practice. The Torah is the guidance that leads the Jews on a godly path (thus leading them to salvation) and therefore there could be a linguistic influence here from

the Hebrew word *Ozer*, which means saviour. There were Messianic sects of Jews around at the time when the Qur'an was revealed; that is, those who believed that a saviour figure had come. Scholars thus hold that some of the Jews of Madina belonged to such a group and are addressed in this verse. It is as though what is condemned is that both (these) Jews and Christians claim to have "a son of God as saviour" – one group calling him Jesus and the other Uzayr.

Any beliefs that attribute an offspring to God or breach God's pure monotheistic nature are unknown and unsubstantiated by Jewish scholars.

The Qur'an affirms the covenant that God made with the Jews [Q. 5:12] and God is always faithful to covenants [Q. 9:111]. It was however the Jews who broke the covenant and thus incurred God's curse [Q. 5:13]; they turned away from the guidance given to Moses on Mount Sinai [Q. 2:63-64]. Again, the Qur'an does not give a blanket judgement but records that a party amongst them are "an upright group" [Q. 5:66]. Muhammad is told to consult with them concerning the meaning of the Qur'an [Q. 10:94]. Indeed, in the early centuries of Islam, it was common to find scholars consulting Jewish converts to Islam for background information from the Bible about stories mentioned only in outline in the Qur'an; this genre of literature was called *Isra'iliyyat*.

When Muhammad presented himself to the Jewish clans of Madina, the histories suggest that he expected them to recognise his prophethood and join him. However, the Jewish understanding that prophets of God arise from the Hebrew nation did not permit this. The Qur'an affirms that there was originally mention of "the unlettered Prophet" (*ummi*) in the Jewish scripture [Q. 7:157]. Further, the Jews are accused of killing God's Prophets [Q. 2:61, 91; 3:21, 112, 181-184].

Jews are referred to by name in the Qur'an some twenty times (*yahudi, yahud, hud, hadu*) but there are also references to them as the Children of Israel (although this sometimes includes Christians) and collectively under People of the Book. Sometimes the reference has to be inferred by Qur'an commentators. They are accused of arrogance in considering themselves to be pure [Q. 4:49], and in thinking that only they will go to heaven [Q. 2:111]. Further they are accused of believing that they will not taste hell or if they do then it will only be for a short time [Q. 2:80; 3:23-24]. The People of the Book are accused of claiming exclusive rights over the mercies of God [Q. 57:29] and specifically the Jews are charged with saying that God's hands are tied instead of being wide open to all humankind [Q. 5:64].

Q. 5:82 singles out the Jews as being strongest in enmity towards Muslims and they are laden with "wrath upon wrath" for their disbelief [Q. 2:90]. They are accused of taking usury even though it was forbidden to them by God [Q. 4:160-161], on account of which a party amongst them will be punished, although in the next verse, others will be rewarded for recognising the Qur'an in addition to their own scriptures [Q. 4: 162]. Again, there is never a blanket judgement because some of the Jews (together with Christians) are praised for falling in prostration to God and being moved to tears

when they hear the Qur'an recited [Q. 17:107-109]. Muslims are counselled not to take “the wrongdoing” amongst the Jews and Christians as friends for fear that they follow them into wrongdoing [Q. 5:51].

One of the serious charges levelled against the Jews in the Qur'an is the way in which they have discharged their custody of their scriptures, especially the guidance revealed to Moses, the *Taurat*. They are accused of making parchments to display the Torah but concealing much of it [Q. 6:90] and believing in parts but disbelieving in others [Q. 2:85]. Part of the original *Taurat* has been forgotten [Q. 5:13]. Some Jews are accused of perverting the meaning of some words in their scripture and “hearing but disobeying” or “hearing without listening” and “twisting their tongues” around it [Q. 4:46; 5:41]. Even in one place they are accused of writing portions of scripture with their own hands to profit thereby [Q. 2:79]. This distortion of the scripture is known by the technical term *tahrif*, which is applied also to Christians [see also: Q. 2:75; 3:78]. Those who were given the original *Taurat* but do not keep it are likened to an ass that carries books but does not profit from them [Q. 62:5]. Hellfire is promised to those who conceal part of their scripture [Q. 2:159, 174], such references are generally followed by an invitation to repent and be forgiven by God [Q. 2:160].

Needless to say that many of the charges levelled against the Jews by the Qur'an have been disputed as misunderstandings of what orthodox Judaism believes. The importance of a continuity of scripture, which is confirmed by the Qur'an, and the need to affirm the whole chain of Prophets ending with Muhammad lies at the heart of such charges.

Critique of central Christian doctrines

The Islamic critique of Christianity goes right to the heart of its particular doctrines: the Incarnation, the Trinity and the death and resurrection to eternal life of Jesus. It is not the Qur'an’s intention to enter into theological debate with Christian theology: Clarify your terms, Explain what you mean by that, Would not this be a more exact formulation? etc. Rather the Qur'an sets out to emphasise clearly its central tenets: the utter transcendence of God (*tanzih*), pure monotheism (*tawhid*), and the creaturehood and prophethood of Jesus. As a pure and sinless Prophet of God, these errors cannot be attributed to Jesus or to the scripture (*Injil*) that was sent down (*tanzil*) to him; therefore they must be errors, misunderstandings or inventions of those who call themselves his followers in later generations. On one occasion [Q. 5:47], the Qur'an refers to the Christians as *Ahl al-Injil* or People of the *Injil* and tells them to judge themselves by its content; unfortunately Christians no longer possess the text of the *Injil* as revealed to Jesus (for more detail on the *Injil* see Series I, Part Four). The Qur'an sets out to correct these errors, not through dispute with Christians but by stating the truth revealed from God, which must in essence be the same as that which was sent down to Jesus and in all other revelations.

The Christians

There were Christians of various kinds all around the Arabian Peninsula in the time of Muhammad: from Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the north, to Ethiopia in the west and Iraq in the east. On the Peninsula itself, there were Christians in the Yemen and penetrating into the deserts to the north. The Christian writer, Paul of Tarsus, goes into the Arabian desert to make sense of the experience that he had on the Road to Damascus (Galatians 1:17). The Roman Province of Arabia was created in 106CE and five representatives from it attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. Hermits lived in the desert and traders and pilgrims would have crossed it; therefore we must assume that some of the Muslims knew the Christians that the Qur'an was correcting. There is indeed an account in the writings of the early Muslim historian al-Azraqi (d.837), although this might be a legend, that there was an icon of Mary and Jesus on the inner wall of the *ka'ba* when Makka became a Muslim city and Muhammad ordered that it should not be obliterated.

In the Qur'an, the Christians are called *al-Nasara*, the Nazarenes, which was a common term for them in Syriac as used in the New Testament referring to Jesus [Matthew 2:23; John 19:19] and to the Christians [Acts 24:5]. The technical Arabic term, *Masihiyyun* is not found in the Qur'an. They are corrected in the Qur'an for going to excess and told to stay within the bounds of scriptural truth [Q. 4:171; 5:77]. They are affirmed as the nearest to the Muslims in affection [Q. 5:82], where their monks are singled out and praised for their humility but in Q. 9:31 and 34, the monks are criticised for leading people astray, living off their wealth and barring them from the way of God. Indeed the Qur'an regards monasticism as being a Christian invention without foundation in the guidance of God [Q. 57:27]. Muslims are advised not to take Christians as friends for fear that they would lead them into wrongdoing [Q. 5:51], and they will never be satisfied until the Muslims leave Islam for Christianity [Q. 2:120]. The Christians are praised for having hearts full of tenderness and mercy [Q. 57:27] and promised a double reward from God if they convert to Islam [Q. 57:28]. God has made a covenant with the Christians but they have forgotten part of their guidance [Q. 5:14]. The Qur'an has come to correct the errors that have entered into their doctrines [Q. 5:15-19].

Prophet Jesus in the Qur'an

There are twenty-five passages in the Qur'an concerning Jesus (*'Isa*). Eight come from *suras* revealed in Makka and seventeen from *suras* revealed in Madina; this reflects the growing awareness of Christian presence, especially the Byzantine Empire, in the later period. They are listed here in the generally accepted order of the revelation of *suras*, which helps to make this clear:

Makkan
19: 16-40, 88-95
43: 57-58, 81-82
23: 50

21: 91-93
42: 13-14
6: 83-90

Madinan
2: 87, 135-141, 252-253
3: 42-64, 81-85
33: 7-8
4: 156-159, 163-165, 171-172
57: 26-27
66: 10-12
61: 14
5: 17-18, 46-47, 72-78, 109-118
9: 30-31

The most widely used title of Jesus in the Qur'an is “son of Mary” (*ibn Maryam*), which occurs twenty-three times. There are rare occurrences in Arabic literature when someone is called “the son of their mother” but the obvious meaning here is to emphasise that Jesus has no father as Mary was a virgin and to correct the erroneous title used by Christians “Son of God.” On eleven occasions, he is given the title *al-Masih*, the Messiah or Anointed One. His descent from David is not mentioned in the Qur'an, rather he is of the line of Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Imran and Mary [Q. 3:33-34].

There are two accounts of his conception and birth [Q. 19:16-33; 3:42-47] from which we learn that his mother, Mary, was a virgin, who was visited by an angel/spirit messenger from God, who is identified with Gabriel, the angel of revelations [Q. 2:97; 16:102; 26:193]. Mary conceives by divine command and gives birth to him in seclusion under a date palm, being provided with miraculous food, drink and comfort. Mary is referred to as one who guards her chastity and thus there is no suggestion of human, angelic or divine intercourse [Q. 4:156]. God breathed his spirit into her “opening” (*farjaha*), which is generally interpreted as her womb [Q. 21:91; 66:12] although some later commentators have attempted to be more discreet and speak of the angel blowing up her sleeve or the hem of her dress. The emphasis is on the word of divine command and the parallel is with the creation of Adam, who is brought to life by the divine breath/spirit [Q. 15:29; 32:9; 38:72]. The new-born Jesus speaks from his cradle [Q. 3:46; 5:110].

Both Jesus and Mary are spoken of as a sign to people of God’s creative power [Q. 23:50], thus, as in the case of Adam and Eve, stressing that God is capable of a miraculous bringing to birth. The same *sura* goes on to mention that God has no son [Q. 23:91] and that there is no deity other than God [Q. 23:117]. Jesus is spoken of as “a word from God” [Q. 3:45; 4:171 and implied in 3:39 and 19:34]. This is a word (*kalima*) of divine decree; in this instance the command given through the angel “Be” and Mary was made pregnant with Jesus. This is even clearer in Q 4:171, when the word is spoken of as being cast into the womb of Mary. Although his virgin birth is

particular, he is not thus to be interpreted as divine but rather a sign of God's mighty power, which is the case with Adam and Eve, human beings created with no parent at all. The reference in the same verse to Jesus as being a spirit from God is linked with the word that is breathed (breath/spirit being the same Arabic word). Commentators have also seen this as being the spirit of prophecy, which was given to Jesus at his conception but was also given to all Prophets at a subsequent time in their lives.

Jesus is referred to as the servant of God and an exemplar for his followers [Q. 4:172; 19:30; 43:59]. Both he and his mother "eat food," thus stressing his humanity [Q. 5:75]. As a creature of God, he could have been destroyed at any time had God so willed [Q. 5:17]. He is called a mercy from God [Q. 19:21], a terminology shared with Muhammad [Q. 21:107]. He is called both a Prophet (*nabi*) [Q. 19:30] and a Messenger sent with a revelation (*rasul*) [Q. 3:49, 53; 4:171; 5:75; 61:6]. He will be eminent both in this world and the next [Q. 3:45] and the same verse speaks of him as one brought near to God. Although he is spoken of as a sign to humanity [Q.19:21], he is sent exclusively to the Children of Israel [Q. 3:49; 43:59]. Like other Prophets, he is supported by the holy spirit [Q. 2:87, 253; 5:110].

Jesus is taught both the scripture that was sent to Moses (*Taurat*) and his own particular scripture (*Injil*) [Q. 3:48; 5:110]. He attested the truth of the *Taurat* [Q. 3:50; 5:46; 61:6], clarified some issues that were disputed by the Jews [Q. 43:63] and made lawful some things that had been forbidden for the Jews [Q. 3:50]. Like all the Prophets, he taught the worship of God alone [Q. 5:117]. He also cursed those who disbelieve [Q. 5:78]. He is listed as one of the five "resolute Prophets" sent with a new *shari'a*: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, with whom God made a solemn covenant [Q. 33:7 see also 42:13]. However, the Qur'an notes that humankind are to believe in all the Prophets without distinction [Q. 2:136, 285; 3:84; 4:152].

Jesus worked all three of the standard classes of miracles: nature miracles, healing miracles and raising people from the dead [Q. 3:49] but these are all linked in the same verse with being at the command and through the will of God rather than through any power or volition of his own. They are clear signs of the mission of Jesus, accomplished at the divine command [Q. 5:110; 61:6]. He is asked by his followers to ask God to send down a table laden with food from heaven [Q. 5:112-115], which God does and which has been interpreted by the commentators as a reference to the Eucharist but the next verse goes on to stress that Jesus is not divine and not to be worshipped [Q. 5:116]. This verse, which portrays Jesus being questioned by God at the Judgement as to whether he ordered his followers to take himself and Mary as gods beside/beneath God, to which question he answers in the negative, is a caution against excessive veneration of Jesus and Mary in Christian devotion and iconography. It has been suggested that a heretical sect of Christians, the Collyridians, who appear to have taught a threefold god, comprised of God, Jesus and Mary, is addressed here but against this theory it must be noted that they are not recorded as having penetrated into the Arabian Peninsula.

In three ways, Jesus is particularly linked with Muhammad: both are a mercy from God [Q. 19:21; 21:107] and were surrounded by a group of helpers (*ansar*), both are inspired by God [Q. 4:163; 42:13] and Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad [Q. 61:6].

In Q. 19:33, Jesus is recorded to have spoken from his cradle and said, "Peace is to me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I am raised alive." As with all human beings, death is inevitable for Jesus as is the resurrection at the end of the world, in which all will share.

The Qur'an speaks of the apparent end of Jesus' earthly life in Q. 4:157-159, in which is recorded that the Jews did not kill Jesus, as they had killed some of the earlier Prophets, "they neither killed him nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them." A few Muslim commentators have suggested that Jesus was put on the cross but did not die but was taken down alive; a similar belief to the Christian heretical group the Docetists, but the majority of commentators have interpreted this verse to mean that Jesus was never put upon the cross but that a substitution took place and someone else was made to look like Jesus and was crucified in his place. The commentators have suggested a variety of identities for the substitute: a volunteer from the followers of Jesus, Judas Iscariot, who the New Testament identifies as his betrayer, or one of those who was sent to arrest Jesus. This is in keeping with the verse of the Qur'an that speaks of God never failing one of his Messengers [Q. 14:47], thus not allowing such an ignominious fate to come upon Jesus. Q. 4:158 speaks of God taking Jesus up to himself and Q. 3:55 is generally interpreted by the commentators to mean that Jesus was taken up alive into heaven, although some have interpreted it to mean that he was taken up alive and somewhere between earth and heaven his soul was taken from him and then restored to him in heaven. Accordingly, most commentators take the reference to his death in Q. 5:159 as being to his future death at the end of the one and only life that he will resume when he returns.

Q. 43:61-68 is generally interpreted by the commentators to refer to the return of Jesus in the Last Days as a sign of the end of the world. Muslim tradition has it that he will then lead the great battle of good against evil, which will include Jesus correcting the beliefs of those who claim to follow him, in which the forces of good will be victorious and Jesus will rule the world (in concert with al-Mahdi variously understood by the scholars) for a period of time, at the end of which he will experience his one and only death. He will then be buried in the grave space that awaits him alongside Muhammad in Madina. This will be the cue for God to give the order to the angel to blow the trumpet to signal the end of the world when all living things will die. After a bleak period, the trumpet of the general resurrection will be sounded, at which all human beings who have ever lived will be resurrected and appear before God in judgement. In company with the other Prophets, Jesus will act as a witness at the judgement against his followers [Q. 16:89 but see also 5:117 in which the past tense is used by Jesus at the judgement].

From the foregoing it is clear that no salvific importance is attached by the Qur'an to the death of Jesus. He was neither killed nor crucified by the Jews and there is no reference to his death, entombment for three days and eventual resurrection to eternal life as is commonly believed by Christians.

The pure monotheism of Jesus, the son of Mary

As we have seen [Q. 5:117], according to the Qur'an, Jesus taught the worship of God alone and never told his followers to worship him instead of or alongside God. Jesus is not to be identified with or associated in divinity with God [Q. 5:17, 72]. To call Jesus the son of God is either to call him God or to associate him with God, therefore Q. 5:17 emphasises that he is a creature of God, who God could destroy if God so willed. Any notion of God becoming incarnate in a human being breaks the absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*), which is central to Islam. The idea of God having an offspring, a son of God, is categorically denied by the Qur'an [Q. 112:3].

Arabic and the Qur'an know of two terms that connote a son: *ibn* and *walad*. The term *ibn* can connote a metaphorical relationship of love and high honour and the term *walad* connotes an offspring. The term *walad* is used fifteen times in the Qur'an to refute any suggestion of God having an offspring; these usages are generally directed against the idol-worshipping pre-Islamic Arabs, who had families of gods in their pantheon, including *Allat*, *al-Uzza* and *Manat*, who were spoken of as "daughters of God." The idea of God having an offspring (*walad*) is categorically refuted by the Qur'an [Q. 2:116-117]: God has no physicality and no consort and thus cannot be held to have generated an offspring. "Far exalted is God above such things" [Q. 4:171; 52:43]. To generate an offspring requires a pair of equal genus and God is not paired with any creature [Q. 42:11] and thus could not possibly generate a human offspring. The term *walad* is used of Jesus on two occasions in the Qur'an, in both of which it is refuted [Q. 4:171; 19:34-36].

The term *ibn* is used only once of Jesus in the Qur'an [Q. 9:30], which evokes the comment: "That is an opinion that they mouth, imitating the opinions of the faithless of former times." The statement here is understood to be a reference to the pre-Islamic idol-worshippers and one could also refer it to the ancient Greek gods, who used periodically to couple with human women to produce "sons of the gods." Any such interpretation is refuted by the Qur'an. Muslim commentators who point to the metaphorical use of *ibn* see it as a sign of high honour conferred on Jesus that has been exaggerated by his wayward followers. This interpretation is substantiated by the following verse [Q. 9:31] in which the Christians are accused of taking their teachers and priests as lords instead of God; it is these Christian scholars who are responsible for misinterpreting the *ibn* in a literal way and thus inventing the doctrine of the divine sonship of Jesus.

The same stress on pure monotheism (*tawhid*) can be seen to underlie the concerns of the Qur'an about any use of three-terminology by Christians. In Q. 5:77, Christians are charged with following the errors of those who went astray in the past. This is

held to be a reference to the polytheistic idol-worshippers, who ascribed partners to God (*shirk*). They are told not to go to excess and exceed the bounds permitted by scripture. In Q. 5:73, they are cautioned not to say of God that God is "the third of three" (*thalith al-thalatha*); such would be tritheism, a belief in three gods, and thus unbelief (*kufr*) in the pure monotheism of God. The same rebuttal of tritheism can be seen in Q. 5:116, which records Jesus rebutting the claim of saying that he, together with Mary, is a god beside/beneath God. The oneness of God is again stressed. The third reference makes the case even more explicitly [Q. 4:171]: "Do not say three. Desist!" Again, the accusation is made that this "elevation of Jesus to divine status" is Christian excess and going beyond the bounds of scriptural religion. These references to any three-ness in God have been understood by the Muslim commentators as a reference to and rebuttal of the Christian doctrine of Trinity, which later commentators see as a form of tritheism and violating the pure monotheism of God.

In conclusion

Christians are charged by the Qur'an with going to excess in their understanding of the Prophet Jesus by elevating him in a way that is against the teaching of the Qur'an and thus also contrary to the *Injil* that was given to Jesus, which contained in essence the same message. The charge is laid against Christian leaders, who have fabricated doctrines concerning Jesus that have no scriptural warrant. Further, they have perpetuated a falsehood about the "death and resurrection" of Jesus. In this way, their community has been led into grave and manifest error for which the only solution is repentance, turning to the mercy of God and correcting their beliefs to bring them in accordance with the Qur'an. Christian theologians will want to say that they that they have not gone to excess in their doctrine of Incarnation and that the doctrine of the Trinity does not amount to tritheism but Muslim scholars are adamant that anything that even in the slightest challenges the absolute transcendence of God (*tanzih*) and pure monotheism (*tawhid*) is thus rendered unacceptable and an error.

Part Eight: Looking again at Islam and women

(see also: Building a Just Society, Part One: "The family as the basis of society," and Standing before God, Part Seven: "Modesty: the special character of a Muslim")

The first human beings (male and female) were created from a single entity (*nafs*) [Q. 4:1] and all human beings are equal [Q. 49:13]. The Qur'an is guidance for all humankind without distinction. Although Muhammad was a man, his exalted nature is not in his maleness but in his humanity, he is *al-insan al-kamil*, the Perfect Human Being. As such, he is the guide for all human beings on the path that leads to Paradise. God is neither male nor female; God is above such things. God is transcendent, beyond our world, therefore God does not speak earthly languages as we do, rather God is exalted beyond all such limitations [Q. 112:4]. We can talk of God "speaking" the word or speech of God (*kalam allah*) but we cannot adequately understand or articulate what that means. However, we now come against a problem: when God wants to communicate to human beings through revelation, God has to express that communication in a form that human beings can understand. This requires the use of human languages with all their limitations. The use of human language is a necessary consequence of God's revealing the Book of God to the peoples of the earth.

In the case of the Qur'an, it was conveyed to the Prophet in the language that he understood [Q. 12:2; 41:44; 43:3]. Arabic, like many other languages, uses male personal pronouns when it speaks of God; "He created the heavens and the earth." It also uses the masculine form to speak of both male and female human beings unless it is clearly addressing just males or just females, therefore the language "looks masculine." After the first few decades of Islam, when women were prominent in preserving the text of the Qur'an, passing on the teachings of Muhammad, and helping the leaders to interpret the customary practice of the Prophet, men became dominant in Qur'anic commentary, systematising the Hadith collections, and drawing up the *shari'a*. This meant that, consciously or not, these key documents of Islam were written from a male perspective. These men were writing in societies that were male-centred in their public, official, economic and legal aspects. This colouring needs to be scrutinised to ensure that the spirit of Islam has not been clouded by being viewed through a male lens.

It is a common feature that ideals in any system can be distorted into realities that fall far short of them. It also has to be admitted as a general norm that men have used religion as a way to control women. One of the best means to do this has been to reserve to men access to education in the religious sciences so that women hear from men what the religion teaches rather than being able to access and research it for themselves. Modern feminist historians will tell us that it is a norm that after a major breakthrough in the condition of women has been achieved by a revolutionary teacher it only takes a few generations before the male-centred customs return to dominate the picture. This is especially important in the history of Islam because, for most people,

the thing that shapes their Islamic way of life is the *shari'a* rather than the primal texts of the Qur'an and Hadith. The *shari'a* was drawn up by men.

Women had little or no access to education in Muslim societies, just like other societies, until the last century. Since then, we have seen a growing tide of Muslim women coming to command the necessary academic tools to access the sources and scholarly heritage of Islam. Not surprisingly, they have contributed new insights and have questioned some of the received reading of the past. Some male scholars have likewise realised that they need to examine their assumptions afresh and have thus critically re-examined things that their forefathers took for granted. One bright light on the horizon is the large number of women who are now enrolled as students in many universities and centres of higher learning in the Muslim world and in western countries.

Women's contributions to contemporary Islamic literature

In the next couple of paragraphs, I note some of the contributions made by Muslim and other women to the field of the academic study of Islam and Muslims. Some male writers who have re-examined the position of women in Islam are also included. I have limited myself to works in English, most of which have been published in the last quarter-century. A full bibliographical reference is attached at the end of this article.

If we take the Qur'anic text itself, women have begun the process of translating it into English. We can look to the complete translations of Aisha Bewley (1999) and Laleh Bakhtiar (2007), and the selected excerpts of Camille Helminski (1998). Like all translations, they are interpretations but they serve to give, as Laleh Bakhtiar puts it, "a fresh view of Quranic discernment." Similarly women scholars have begun to read the text from a woman's perspective, which challenges assumptions and gives a fresh insight into the unchanging text. Two prominent examples of such scholars are Amina Wadud (1999) and Asma Barlas (2002).

All too often, history is written from a male perspective, concentrating on male leaders and thinkers but the twentieth century saw the rise of women scholars, like Fatima Mernissi (1993) and Nabia Abbott (1986 and 1998), who delved back in history to find women whose contributions have received limited attention. To make the role played by Muslim women better known, classical works have been edited and translated, such as volume eight of the eighth/ninth century biographer, Muhammad ibn Sa'd's great work *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (1995). The contemporary scholar of Hadith, Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a graduate of the Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow, has been researching for more than a decade to trace women scholars and teachers of Hadith through the centuries. In a work running to some forty volumes in Arabic, he has compiled biographies of some 8,000 such women and published an introduction to the work in English (2007).

Aisha Bewley (2004) has compiled a biographical dictionary of hundreds of Muslim women throughout the centuries, and Sachiko Murata (1992) has translated and arranged thematically many extracts on gender relationships in Islamic thought. The early years of the Muslim community in Madina provided Fatima Mernissi (1991) with a vision of the role of women within the society shaped by direct experience of Muhammad in implementing the guidance of the Qur'an.

Some male Muslim scholars have responded to the challenge raised by women's critique by re-examining the *shari'a* positions, such as the Indian Bohra scholar, Asghar Ali Engineer (1992), the Sudanese scholar-politician, Hassan al-Turabi (1973) and the Bangladeshi barrister, Mohammad Ali Syed (2004).

A genre of feminist writing in Islam has arisen, through historical surveys, like that of Leila Ahmed (1992), and regional studies, such as Margot Badran (2009), Nawal El Saadawi (1980), Haleh Afshar (1998) and Faegheh Shirazi (2009). The encounter between contemporary western perspectives on gender relations and Islam figures in the literature on converts to Islam, which can be seen within the European context in the research of Anne Sofie Roald (2004) and Kate Zebiri (2008), often with particular reference to women in the case of Anne Sofie Roald (2001). Even more material has appeared in a North American context in the form of sociological studies by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad et al. (2006), Carolyn Moxley Rouse (2004) and Anna Mansson McGinty (2006), as well as the experiences of converts, such as Carol Anway (1995) and Debra Dirks et al. (2003).

Some preliminaries

After decades or centuries of European colonial rule in Muslim societies, we are experiencing a revival of discussion about what constitutes an Islamic society and how that should best be implemented both in Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim-minority contexts. A larger proportion of Muslims in the world today live as minorities than at any time in Muslim history. It is unfair to take various Muslim-majority countries as models of what an Islamic society should look like; if this were just then the current struggle would not be taking place. In phenomena such as the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Arab Spring, we can see the social crucible engaged in trying to define just what a contemporary society based on Islamic principles might look like. It would be equally unfair to take a snap-shot at a certain point in that development and say "that is it;" history must be allowed to record a mature verdict.

The presence of hundreds of millions of Muslims living as minorities brings with it the opportunity to define Islamic culture in a quite new context. Muslims in such contexts are seeking a path that is defined on Islamic principles in the context of, for example, contemporary western feminist discourse. A discourse based on assumed notions of "equality" is dangerous as there is a tendency to normalise male conduct along the lines of: "if a man can do something, why can't a woman." The nature of Arabic as a masculine language has already been noted. If fifty women are present

and no men, then the language will speak of women; if one man joins them, then the language will be male. The consequence of this is that a Qur'anic reference to "men" must be understood as meaning "human beings" unless the context makes it clear that reference to the male gender is intended. Sometimes the Qur'an makes this point explicitly by repeating the same injunction for "Muslim men" and "Muslim women" [Q. 33:35].

The human condition

When the Qur'an speaks of the creation of humankind [Q. 4:1], the language is carefully gender-neutral: "Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul (*nafs*, soul, inner self, identity), and created its mate (*zawj* spouse, one of a pair) from it (*min* can mean from or of: of the same type, of like nature), and, from the two of them, scattered numerous men and women." Thus the Qur'an avoids biblical imagery of Eve being created as a derivative of Adam. Such human beings (*insan*) are created "in the best of forms" [Q. 95:4]. Similarly, the human being was created by God from clay and ennobled by receiving the in-breathing of the spirit of God [Q. 38:71-72]. All human beings have the same dignity and duty to be the servant (*abd*) and regent (*khalifa*) of God.

It is a characteristic of creation that everything was created in pairs [Q. 51:49], not just human beings but also plants, animals, day and night, mercy and justice, attraction and repulsion, positive and negative, and so on. God alone is not paired [Q. 42:11; 112:4]. The elements of the pair find their meaning in relationship to the other; they fit together in their differences [Q. 36:36; 53:45; 3:36] and the pair take comfort in each other [Q. 30:21].

When it comes to the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden [Q. 7:19-25], the Qur'an again avoids the gender imbalance of the biblical story and uses the Arabic dual form throughout: both of them are tempted and both of them succumb to the temptation. Indeed, in the parallel Qur'anic account [Q. 20:116-121], Adam is singled out for mention although both succumbed to the temptation. When it comes to the other end of human existence, entry into Paradise, the Qur'an makes explicit that "not a single soul" shall be dealt with unjustly [Q. 21:47] and that both men and women will receive their just rewards [Q. 40:39-40], for "you are all on the same footing" [Q. 3:195]. There is no priesthood in Islam, therefore no male priesthood, therefore both men and women have equal direct access to the divine guidance, mercy and forgiveness, and both are individually responsible for their actions. The wives of the Prophets Noah and Lot rejected their guidance and went to hell; their husbands could not protect them [Q. 66:10]. Asiyah, the wife of Pharaoh, was married to an unbeliever, who is seen as an example of godlessness, yet she is regarded as one of the four perfect women of Islam [Q. 66:11]. Note also that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is held up as an example of faith and "She confirmed the words of her Lord and his Books, and she was one of the obedient" [Q. 66:12].

Early Muslim women

In the first generation of Muslims, women converted to Islam independently of their families or male relatives. We know of Fatima, the sister of Umar (later to become the second Caliph), who converted alone before him and who was instrumental in his own conversion. When women took their oath of allegiance to Muhammad, they did so in their own right and not through a proxy. Their oath of allegiance [Q. 60:12] was the same as for that of a man, except that they were not expected to take up arms in defence of the community. When Muhammad accepted an oath of allegiance, his customary practice was that the new convert should place her or his hand into the hand of the Prophet; in the case of women, Muhammad covered his hand with a cloth to avoid intimate contact with her.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Hudaybiyya, those "under guardianship" who fled to Madina were to be returned to the idol-worshippers of Makka unless they had their guardian's permission. The Makkans argued that this should apply also to married women who, they argued, were under the guardianship of their husbands. Under the direction of the Qur'an, Muhammad tested them to ensure that their escape was for the sake of God and not to escape some worldly circumstance and then refused to allow them to be sent back [Q. 60:10]. A Muslim woman could not be married to an unbeliever and so they were divorced and in some circumstances they returned their dowries to their former husbands to avoid injustice. Some Muslim women in Makka endured torture rather than give up their Islamic faith and return to their family's idol-worship. The first Muslim martyr, a woman, Sumayah bint Khubat, was killed in such circumstances.

Women were instrumental in bringing members of their families into Islam and sometimes made conversion to Islam a condition of their acceptance of a proposal of marriage. We read of Umm Saleem, who accepted her husband's conversion to Islam as his marriage gift (*mahr*) to her. Umm Salama, one of the wives of Muhammad, is recorded as saying to him that the Qur'an speaks to men but not directly to women; this is understood to be the occasion of the revelation of the verse of the Qur'an that parallels men's and women's virtues and rewards in every line [Q. 33:35]. The women of the community protested that they could not hear the Prophet's teaching because of the noisy men and so Muhammad set up separate women-only study circles to devote time to their education.

Throughout Muhammad's time in Madina, the women offered their five daily prayers in his mosque in the same congregation as the men but in separate ranks behind the men's ranks. He had a separate door built for the use of women only, so that they could come and go freely. On one occasion it is recorded that Muhammad was leading the prayer and heard a child crying; knowing that the child's mother would be in the congregation and thus concerned about her child's distress, he speeded up the prayer to bring it to an early conclusion so that she could go to the child. The women of the community attended the festival gatherings ('Ids) and public meetings; even women who were not praying during the time of their periods attended festivals.

During the battles in the time of Muhammad, the women of the community, including some of the wives of Muhammad, had their station bringing water to the men who were fighting and caring for the wounded. In exceptional circumstances, some even took up arms and joined in the fighting.

Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was a business woman who initially employed him as her manager. Her business supported the family. Similarly, Asma, the daughter of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, was a business woman and the second Caliph, Umar, appointed a woman as the market supervisor. The Qur'an uses parallel phrases to show that both men and women are entitled to the proceeds of their businesses [Q. 4:32]. This principle is seen in a woman's right to own and dispose of her own property and inherit money or goods in her own right. Muhammad used to visit some of the older women in Madina, eat with them, take a nap there and pray in their homes. It was especially noted that he visited them when they were ill. Elderly women, who are not interested in seeking a marriage partner, may relax their style of dress ["leave off their outer cloak" Q. 24:60].

The example of Abraham's wife, Sarah, in receiving guests and waiting on them becomes a lesson in Muslim hospitality [Q. 11:69-73]. Women in the early Muslim community are recorded as being interpreters of the Qur'an, transmitters of Hadith, skilled in medicine, calligraphy and poetry, and engaged in leather work and weaving. Both men and women are to engage in building up the community "bidding what is right and forbidding what is wrong" and to be diligent in the twin pillars of prayer and almsgiving [Q. 9:71]. There is a famous instance in which the Caliph Umar tried to restrict the amount of money that a man could give his wife as a marriage gift (or a woman could require). He announced this in the mosque, whereupon one of the women present stood up and challenged him that he was forbidding something that the Qur'an permits [Q. 4:20]; he acknowledged that she was correct and withdrew his guidance.

The social revolution brought about by the Qur'an and Muhammad

One important aspect of the life of the Bedouin clans of the desert in pre-Islamic times was raiding. This was a display of courage and skill, which characterised manliness. Such raids were not about killing people but rather capturing animals, goods and women. This practice coloured the esteem in which children were held. A boy could grow up to take part in raiding and other activities to support the clan, whereas a girl was a potential target for such raids. This situation is reflected in the practice common amongst the Arabs at the time of Muhammad of killing some of their new-born girl babies by burying them alive. This female infanticide is declared to be evil, and thus forbidden, by the Qur'an [Q. 16:58-59]. The raising of these innocent girls is one of the signs associated with the Day of Judgement [Q. 81:8-9]. The whole approach to daughters is criticised in the Qur'an where the news of such a birth caused the father's face to darken with suppressed agony [Q. 16:58] and where they are criticised for preferring sons for themselves whilst speaking of the angels and some of their female idols as "daughters of God" [Q. 17:40; 43:16-17].

The society into which Islam came saw children as belonging to the mother's clan, therefore the identity of the father was of little importance. This meant that women could have multiple partners without prejudice to inheritance through the male line. Women had a degree of control of their own sexuality and a woman could indicate the end of a relationship with a partner by turning the entrance of her tent in another direction. There was no period of abstinence from sex for the woman after the end of such a relationship because paternity was not the deciding issue. This situation gave a degree of social status and independence to some women as can be seen by the fact that Khadija, the first wife of Muhammad, employed then proposed marriage to him without the impression that this was breaking any social norms. They were married some fifteen years before the coming of the Qur'an, therefore this reflects pre-Islamic society.

The structure of society was radically changed with the coming of Islam. Men and women were to enter into a contract of marriage [Q. 24:32], adultery was forbidden for both partners [Q. 4:15-16], as was sexual activity before marriage [Q. 24:2,33], and the ending of such a relationship had to be through a declaration of divorce [Q. 65:1-7]. Society switched to emphasise male descent and inheritance, therefore women were not only to be faithful whilst married but were to observe a period of sexual abstinence (*idda*) after the end of a relationship, either through the death of a husband or through a divorce, so as to be sure of the paternity of any child that she was carrying. This period was set at three menstrual cycles after divorce [Q. 2:228] and four months and ten days in the case of a widow [Q. 2:234].

Looking again…

The process of re-examination of text, assumption and expression, has resulted in looking again at certain issues. In the following, we examine a few to see the direction that this scholarship is taking.

Witnessing a financial transaction

The Qur'an counsels that financial transactions should be sealed with a written contract [Q. 2:282]. Witnesses should then be brought "from those whom you approve as witnesses" to witness the transaction. Two Muslim men are the preferred combination of witnesses "and if there are not two men, then a man and two women... so that if one of the two defaults the other will remind her." At first glance, this suggests that a woman only carries half the weight of a man as a witness and indeed this is the way that it has often been read. However, closer inspection suggests that this is not quite so simple. First, this is a specific contextual example of witnessing a financial transaction or "a loan for a specified term." In seventh century Arabia, men were much more acquainted with financial matters than women because they were the ones who usually conducted business affairs. Second, both male and female witnesses are to come "from those whom you approve as witnesses," in other words, there is no suggestion that any of them should be incompetent as a witness as such. This is confirmed by the reference to the second woman being there "to remind" the other.

The Qur'an speaks of witnesses in several other places. In Q. 5:106-107 the context is one of witnessing a will in which two just people (*ithnani dhwa'adlin*) are required, if possible, they should be pious Muslims but if not, for example if death is approaching whilst on a journey, then non-Muslims will suffice. We could consider circumstances in which the presence of men could hardly be countenanced, for example, a woman who is dying in childbirth or in the women's baths, when two women would act as witnesses. In Q. 4:15 and 65:2 the requirement is for witnesses from amongst yourselves (*minkum* includes both sexes) and in Q. 24:4 just "witnesses" are required without reference to gender. The context of Q. 65:2 is of divorce in which two witnesses are required, whilst four witnesses are required in the other two cases, both of which refer to an allegation of sexual misconduct. There is no suggestion that any of these witnesses might be unreliable or untruthful; if that were the case then they would be unacceptable as witnesses, as confirmed by Q. 5:106. Multiple witnesses reflect the gravity of the offence not unreliability or a suggestion that some witnesses are defective on account of gender. The context of Q. 24:6-9 is a case where a man accuses his wife of adultery with no witnesses except his own accusation. In this case, he is to swear four times that she is guilty of the offence and then a fifth time invoking the curse of God upon himself if he is lying. The woman so accused can counter by swearing a similar four oaths and then the fifth invoking God's curse if she is lying. If this process is followed, then the marriage is dissolved, no further action is taken and the two are left to the final judgement of God whose curse they have invoked if they are lying. Here we see that the witness/testimony of the man and the woman are given equal weight.

The Qur'an does not lay down a specific evidential requirement for civil or criminal matters; rather there is a spread of opinion amongst the scholars based on various Hadith. In no other case is the requirement of two men or one man and two women repeated in the form that is given in Q. 2:282 in the context of a financial transaction, therefore some contemporary Muslim scholars have argued that this reference is contextual and not a statement of a general norm.

Polygamy

The Qur'an permits a Muslim man to marry up to four wives in Q. 4:2-3. Again the context is important as it refers to doing justice to orphans. The verse was revealed just after the Battle of Uhud in which seventy men were killed, leaving behind them widows and orphans. This represented ten percent of the Muslims who took part in the battle and thus was a significant problem. These were the first few years of the Muslim community in Madina and many of the women's families would still have been idol-worshippers in Makka, so they could not go back to them. For a widow, with or without orphan children, to be left without male support and protection was unthinkable. The theme of doing justice to orphans and treating them with kindness is one of the most often repeated in the Qur'an [Q. 4:10; 6:152; 17:34; 89:17; 93:9; 107:2].

The concern of the Qur'an here is to "do justice" to the widows and orphans. This is emphasised in Q. 4:3 where men are cautioned that if they fear that they may not be able to do justice to more than one wife, then they should remain married to one alone. This theme is emphasised in Q. 4:129 where the difficulties of doing justice to multiple wives is noted: "You will not be able to be fair between wives, even if you are eager to do so." According to Q. 30:21, marriage is ordained by God so that the partners will take comfort in each other and affection and mercy will grow between them. Rather than being a normative provision for limited polygamy, many scholars have seen this as a provision under exceptional circumstances where men should take widows and orphans into their households as co-wives in an effort to do justice to them trusting in the mercy of God; the norm being monogamy. The example of Muhammad here is important. He married widows and divorced women; indeed amongst his wives, only one of them, Ayesha, had not been married before.

Disharmony within marriage

The Qur'an uses the term *nushuz* on two occasions [Q. 4:34 and 4:128]. It carries the meaning of misconduct, ill-treatment and rebelliousness, and is generally understood as misconduct leading to disorder within the family by failure to abide by Islamic principles for living. In Q. 4:128, it is used of men and can be grounds for a woman to seek a divorce. In Q. 4:34, it refers to a married woman. Here it results in a fourfold approach. First, the husband is to discuss the matter with his wife, advise her and seek a consensual agreement. If this fails, then the second step is for the partners to separate in bed and sleep apart. This is serious as this is a step in the direction of divorce. It provides a time of mutual "cooling-off" and obviously has an effect on both partners.

Should this cooling off period not bring about a reconciliation and change of conduct then he is to admonish her physically. The Arabic term used here is *daraba*, which has a range of meanings. Its apparent meaning is "to strike" but it is used in the Qur'an also with the meaning of "to strike out on a journey" [Q. 4:101] and also in the sense of God striking or setting out a parable for people [Q. 66:10-11] or Muhammad setting out such a parable [Q. 18:32,45]. Arabic also has an intensive form of the verb *darraba*, which would bring in the meaning of "to beat, to hurt or to injure"; this form is not used here. This is the third and last private step in the procedure, having the sense of "look where this is leading." Those commentators who interpret it literally as "to strike" are at pains to point to its symbolic nature: thus al-Tabari "with a toothstick (*miswak* - the short piece of fibrous wood used for cleaning the teeth)" and Razi "with a handkerchief." The Prophet himself comments in a Hadith: "How can you beat your wife during the day and then sleep with her at night?" All Schools of Islam agree that there should be no violence between the partners in a marriage, including what would today be termed "verbal abuse." Should this third step not bring about a reconciliation and return to observance of the Islamic way of life, then the couple are to seek arbitration from within both families.

The same verse, Q. 4:34, speaks of righteous women being obedient and taking care of that of their husband's that God has required them to guard. This raises the question of to whom the women should be obedient. The Arabic used here *qanit* can be translated as "devoutly obedient." The term is used of men being obedient to God [Q. 2:238] and also as a characteristic of pious men [Q. 3:17]. In the verse that parallels men and women, it is used of both equally [Q. 33:35] and it is also used of pious women [Q. 66:5] and in particular of Mary, the mother of Jesus [Q. 66:12]. This points to women being obedient to God and therefore taking care of those things entrusted to their husbands.

The Qur'an speaks of women having "rights similar to the obligations laid upon them... and men have a degree above them" [Q. 2:228]. The term translated here as degree (*darajah*) has the meanings of step, rank or grade. The Qur'an uses the term to speak of degrees in the afterlife [Q. 17:21]. God raises to a higher degree those who have faith and acquire knowledge [Q. 58:11; 12:76]. From those who are raised to a higher degree more is expected; theirs is the greater test [Q. 6:165]. Men have indeed been raised to a higher degree according to Islam in the sense of responsibility, for example, in having the responsibility to support their wives and children and discharge all the household expenses and not abusing their power, for example, in not acting recklessly in divorcing their wives by repudiation, approaching them during their periods, claiming back their marriage gifts, or failing to support divorced wives during the time that they are raising their children [Q. 2:221-237].

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Part Nine: The Art of Islam

Can you imagine any human being without a concept of beauty? Something beautiful: words, nature, music, a bird in flight, colour, a building? Surely every one of us has some relationship to something beautiful. What impact does this beauty have on us? We might say: "It stirs my soul." "It moves me." "It lifts my spirits." We could say that the experience of beauty is a spiritual experience. Indeed it seems to touch the depths of our spirit, which in where we are able as human beings to have a relationship with God. There is a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad that says: "God is beautiful and God loves beauty." Indeed, the encounter with the beautiful is an encounter with God. We have the saying: "All that glitters is not gold." This could be taken here to mean that some things that appear to be beautiful in fact are not but they belong to the category of false delusion. The "apparently beautiful" must be examined with a degree of caution to see if it truly lifts the spirits to God or to some other ungodly object.

Back to Makka

Muhammad lived in the idol-worshipping city of Makka for most of his life. The Arabs of that time had made many idols that they worshipped. These were blocks of stone or carved wood, stone or clay. It was into this context that the message of pure monotheism (*tawhid*) came and the criterion of being a Muslim was whether one had turned one's back on the many idols and worshipped the one God or not. This enables us to see the absolute prohibition of any object (statue, carving, painting) that might be worshipped instead of the worship of God. Such objects represent "false beauty;" they do not lift the spirit to the one God alone and are thus forbidden as "false gods."

This can give us our first definition of the art of Islam: "the art that expresses submission to the one God."

Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet, do not appear on a blank page of history but rather into a world that already had some forms of art. The first gesture of Islam in this regard was one of purification; anything that did not accord with the message of Islam was excluded. We can see this not only in the exclusion of idols but also in various forms of pre-Islamic Arab poetry and satire. That which placed "false gods" before the eyes and hearts of the believers was excluded. As the Muslim empires spread to new territories and cultures, this process of exclusion of that which did not accord with the message of Islam continued but it was joined by a counter-part process of taking in and adapting those cultural and artistic forms that were encountered that fitted with Islamic perspectives. In time, various artistic forms were developed that particularly expressed an Islamic world-view.
This leads us to a second and complementary definition of the art of Islam: "the art that expresses the world-view of Muslims."

Images of living creatures

The prohibition of any image that might be worshipped instead of God [Q. 5:90] already noted has often been extended in Muslim thinking to all representations of living creatures, although such are not forbidden explicitly by the Qur'an. There are several Hadith and accounts of episodes in the life of Muhammad that point in this direction. The most widely cited Hadith runs: "Angels do not enter a house in which there is a representation of a living creature (*taswir*) or a dog." With only a minute number of exceptions, e.g., a *mihrab* in Mosul from the 11th century, throughout the Muslim centuries and various cultures, this prohibition has been upheld against any representation of any animate object (humans and animals) in mosques.

When it comes to buildings other than places of worship, there is a wider range of interpretation by Muslim scholars. Some extend the absolute prohibition and so do not allow any representation of living creatures in their homes or public buildings. Other scholars restrict this to a prohibition of Prophets and angels. Other Muslim scholars restrict this to anything that could be worshipped instead of God, i.e., things that could be taken as idols. This opens the way for the depiction of animals and humans in homes and public buildings such as palaces, bath houses, places of rest and recreation, and on pottery, utensils and manuscripts. This interpretation can be seen in many Muslim empires throughout the ages: Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, the Umayyad Caliphate of Spain, Mamluks in Egypt, Safavids in Persia and the Ottomans. Sometimes we find animals represented without their heads as a reminder of the stricter interpretation.

With the coming of photography in the modern period, this has brought a challenge to many Muslims. Is it permissible to have photographs of family members within the home? Opinions vary: some will avoid all such photographs, some will permit them but not in a room in which prayers are offered, some will permit them even in such a room but not in the direction of prayer (*qibla*) and some will turn them face-down at times of prayer. There is an account from the time of the Prophet when he ordered that a decorated wall-hanging should be moved from the direction of prayer in the home of one of his wives so that it would not distract him at prayer. The over-riding concern of avoiding any hint of a return to idol-worship can be seen clearly.

The arrival of television prompted a further discussion amongst the scholars, which was resolved by most through the understanding that television pictures are not permanent representations (they disappear when the television is switched off) and so they were permitted. There are live television streams transmitted on the internet from the Sacred Mosque of Makka and the Prophet's Mosque in Madina.

The decoration of buildings

The original Prophet's Mosque in Madina was a primitive building with a perimeter wall and a roofed portion from which the Prophet led prayers. Over the centuries, this has been rebuilt several times and extended hugely to its present form. The first

Muslim decorated building was the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which was competed in 691. This was decorated inside with verses from the Qur'an executed in artistic writing, which was the beginning of the use of calligraphy in Muslim buildings. An important point may be noted here; the decoration was executed by Christian craftsmen, who had such skills, which were not yet developed amongst Muslims. The art of Islam is thus seen to be inspired by the world-view of Muslims but is not restricted to Muslim artists. Such Byzantine Christian artists were also employed in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, which was completed in 715.

This form of decoration was enhanced once Muslims came into contact with Greek geometry from the great age of translation under the Abbasids. The style is generally subsumed under the title of Arabesque, comprising geometrical, vegetative and calligraphic forms. This gives us another critical pointer to the art of Islam; it tends to abstraction and not literal representation. The beautiful forms employed elevated the souls of the beholders to seek the divine and not the imitation of an earthly object. When floral patterns were used, they abstracted the form away from any particular flower, leaf or tree into something that sought geometrical replication and symmetry, thus lifting the spirits of the believers from the mundane particular to the abstract quest for divine intimacy.

There were periods in Muslim history, e.g., in the 13th century, when schools of painting developed that included portraits of men and women, always fully clothed in modest ways, in the Persian, Turkish and Indian Muslim cultures. Even sometimes, we find representations of the Prophets and angels during this period but the principles of respect and abstraction were observed by obliterating the faces of those represented with a white form-less oval.

Architecture as an expression of the art of Islam

Various architectural forms were developed within Muslim culture. In the time of the Prophet, those who called people to prayer merely climbed to the roof of the highest building near the mosque and called from there. A tower to elevate the caller (*minaret*) was first introduced in Basra around the year 666. The *minaret* became a universal architectural form and was developed according to the architectural styles and material of the various cultures where Islam became embedded: square towers, cylinders, polygons, spiral external staircases and pagoda-shaped roofs. The first recorded prayer niche (*mihrab*) in a mosque was built in the Prophet's Mosque around 710. The *mihrab* marked the direction of prayer and thus was a natural visual focus within mosques and so was decorated in elaborate and intricate abstract styles.

The first dome that graced a Muslim building was, of course, the Dome of the Rock but domes soon became a universal theme in Muslim architecture. They took their styles from local culture: pointed, bulbous, hemi-spherical and onion-shaped. The dome had practical advantages: it provided an additional volume of air and dispersed the heat of the congregation, and it acted as a sound-enhancer for the voice of the *imam*. It had also an aesthetic character: it symbolised the vast expanse of the desert

and served as a reminder of the infinite magnitude of God. Domes were used not only in mosques but also in other buildings, such as mausoleums.

An element of Islamic architecture was to flood the building with light, remembering the symbolism of God as light [Q. 24:35], thus elevating the spirits of the worshippers. In addition to windows to allow the light to penetrate the building, arches played an important role: from the simple rounded, to the horse-shoe and so to pointed arches, even in double tiers to provide extra height and light. In arching and in all elements of Islamic architecture, symmetry was a crucial factor; it is a combination of the natural and the geometrical worlds. In time we see the symmetry in external as well as internal forms, e.g., the pairing of *minarets* and the balancing of component buildings such as the mosque and *dhikr* hall on either side of the Taj Mahal. The Taj and the Alhambra Palace in Granada must surely rank as world master-pieces in any list of architectural splendours.

Objets d'art

As Islamic influence spread, so further cultural artistic forms were embraced according to Islamic principles. Pottery and ceramics were adopted from Persian, Chinese and Byzantine cultures and used for practical objects as well as works of art. Again the typical motifs were calligraphy, vegetable forms and geometrical patterns with occasional human and animal representations. Finely figured objects were made in metal, from iron amalgams to silver and gold, and in crystal, glass and ivory.

Poetry, Music and dance

Poetry became the high-point of verbal art in Islam, which was executed in all the major Islamic languages. It found particular expression amongst sufi writers, who used the poetic forms to express deeper emotions concerning God and the creation.

Islam has always had a cautious attitude towards music in general because of its association with forbidden practices such as wine-drinking and illicit sexual encounters. The nature of music is to work on the human senses to transport the soul into new experiences; it is something therefore that needed to be kept under control to ensure that such experiences were godly. The harmony of sounds has a beauty to the human ear but it also has an inner dimension. Al-Ghazali drew attention to this and spoke of the outer form being accessible to anyone but the inner dimension needing to be appreciated by the believing heart. The sufis in general speak in similar terms, saying that the inner dimension of music stirs the heart to seek God and thus music has an important part in some sufi schools. The *nay* or end-blown reed flute was especially favoured in those schools influenced by sufi masters like Rumi, who said that its sound "laid bare the human soul."

Those schools of Islam that give a more restricted place to music limit it to the unaccompanied human voice and simple rhythm instruments, such as the single-sided Arab drum (*daf*). The human voice is powerfully used in the elongation of sounds in

the calling of the *adhan*, which can have a profound impact, especially when the call is taken up from several *minarets* in sequence. The modulation of the voice in recitation of the Qur'an enables the words to have an impact that transcends their meaning and there is a long tradition of songs in praise of the Prophet (*nasheeds*).

Dance is a limited artistic expression in the art of Islam. We have records of the Prophet approving of children's dancing and the performance of African warriors. Some single-sex dancing developed, especially amongst women in private. For some sufi groups, rotating and rhythmic movements formed a vehicle to promote the soul's flight into the divine embrace.

The pinnacle of the art of Islam

Many of the art forms that developed within Muslim societies can be seen as accommodating and refining local cultures according to Islamic principles but perhaps the pinnacle of the art of Islam is seen in the art of calligraphy. It was, above all, the art of writing beautifully the word of God from the Qur'an and thus a vehicle for conveying the sublime nature of the sacred text. The lines, curves and intricacy of calligraphy work on the soul in such a way that it is rightly called "visual *dhikr* – the prayer of the constant remembrance of God."

Part Ten: Muslims in the contemporary world

The difficulty with talking about the contemporary world is that by definition it is always changing and so anything is likely to be out of date as soon as it is written. It is important to begin by looking at how Islam came into the modern period around the world.

The European Colonization and its aftermath

From the end of the 15th century, the European sea-going powers began to dominate shipping and thus expand their empires through conquest and trade. In time, much of the Muslim world was ruled by the European imperial powers, especially Britain, France, Holland and Russia by the 18th and into the 20th centuries. Great natural riches were taken from the colonised lands and the colonial powers benefited from trade; this contributed to the end of the great Muslim empires. This colonial expansion led to the rise of Europe and fuelled the industrial revolution. The result in many Muslim countries was to leave a sense of emptiness, a decrease in self-respect, a lack of awareness of their histories and a sense of resentment against the colonial masters. Part of this decline also affected their intellectual life and the lack of development of Islamic thought. Only the leisured classes have time to spare for intellectual activity and they were more likely to embrace European education so as to curry favour with their imperial rulers and thus advance themselves in society. Most of those who eventually came to power in the newly independent Muslim lands were the product of this European education.

Muslim communities kept the memory of former times alive and sought to preserve classical Islamic thought for future generations. Four trends can be detected in this situation. The first group, the majority, held fast to the traditional interpretations handed down to them and concentrated on living a pious life, often in rural villages. The second embraced the best of what European thought had to offer and sought to re-interpret the legacy of Islam in modernist ways. The third saw that the decline of Muslim power was caused in part by a departure from the pure foundations of Islamic thought and practice. They sought to purify Islam by returning to the sources and having nothing to do with their European rulers. The fourth held that there could be no true Islam without political power and so set about building revivalist movements that would integrate private piety with guidance for the whole of society, and thus the rise of “political Islam.”

Amongst the great reformists of that period were men like Ahmad Sirhindi (d.1624) and Shah Waliullah (d.1762) in India, Mehmet Birgivi (d.1573) and Qadizade Mehmet (d.1635) in Turkey, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897), who taught Islamic unity in Iran, Egypt, India and Turkey, Abd al-Kader (d.1883) in Algeria, ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792) in Arabia, and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) in Egypt. They sought to awaken Muslims to their heritage and revive Islam in their societies.

Nineteenth century "liberalism"

The invasion of Egypt by Napoleon's armies in 1798 was a body blow to the Arab world. It opened up for the élite urban classes the opportunity to drink deeply from European thought, culture and political structures. Muslim intellectuals travelled to France and brought back ideas of a free press, constitutional rule and an emphasis on liberal education. This trend stretched into Syria to the east and across the Maghreb to the west. Progress in society was to be gained by embracing European ways of thinking and organising life. This resulted in the translation of European works into Arabic but for the élite, French language and culture was the goal. The drive for modernisation led to economic problems and debt, which resulted in French and British assistance, culminating in Egypt becoming a British colony in 1882.

A similar movement can be seen in British India. After the British used military force to put down the Indian Mutiny (First War for Indian Independence) in 1857, there was no more hope for a return to Mughal power, with the last Mughal Emperor being sent into exile in Burma in 1858. The key "liberal" reaction was led by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), who worked for a rehabilitation of the Muslim community in the sight of the British rulers. He travelled to England for a visit in 1869-70 and came back with a sense that there was much to be commended in the English way of thought and life. He established the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh (later Aligarh University) modelled on an Oxbridge collegiate style and sought thereby to reform educational methods in India. He wanted to take all that was good in European modernity and claim it as conforming to the principles of Islam. Similarly, he wanted to interpret the Qur'an in naturalistic ways.

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and Arab Nationalism

The Ottomans rose to power in 1281 and came to rule much of Anatolia, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East during their height in the 16th century. From 1453, they had their capital at Istanbul (formerly Byzantium and Constantinople). At the time of the 1914-18 War, they sided with the Germans and subsequently lost their Arab lands. This brought about the rise of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (d.1938) who responded to the shame at the loss of the Empire by disbanding the Caliphate in 1924 and forcibly secularising Turkey from then onwards.

The British had made multiple and contradictory promises to various parties during the 1914-18 War. They had promised Arab leaders self-determination if they would rise up and help to defeat the Ottomans. Both the Hashemites and the house of ibn Saud had been promised control of the Muslim Arab heartlands. Meanwhile Lord Balfour, speaking on behalf of the British government, was giving support to the Zionist movement to favour the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine *it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine*. In the aftermath of the war, the Egyptians won a degree of autonomy under British rule as a result of their uprising in 1919, whilst the French crushed a similar uprising in Syria in 1925-7.

After the fall of the Ottomans, their former Arab territories were carved up into areas of French and British "influence" by the Sykes-Picot agreement, which in effect drew the map of the contemporary Middle East and installed rulers in various countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This gave rise to a spirit of Arab nationalism, which came to fruition with the comprehensive defeat of the combined Arab armies in the 1948 war with the newly created State of Israel. In Egypt, the Free Officers took power under Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1952 and established their independent authority by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956. An attempt was made at Arab unity through the creation of the United Arab Republic in 1958, comprising Egypt and Syria but with the latter being distinctly in a secondary position. The UAR lasted only three years, until 1961, when a group of Syrian generals (including Hafez al-Asad) took power in a military coup. Such military-led governments/dictatorships became endemic, including the rise of Qaddafi in Libya and Saddam Hussain in Iraq. All of them were marked by severe repression of the common people and imprisonment, torture and death for many who wanted to establish another way forward. The line of military rulers in Egypt continued through Sadat and Mubarak, with the likelihood of a return through al-Sissi. The on-going strife in Syria is obvious, with Bashir al-Asad taking over from his father.

The rise of "political Islam"

In the 20th century the struggle for independence from colonialism and the re-invigoration of Islamic learning led to reform movements in Egypt, such as the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, or the Muslim Brotherhood, with which the names of Hasan al-Banna (d.1949) and Sayyid Qutb (d.1966) are associated. They sought to reinterpret Islam and gain political power for a reformed Islamic State. Their efforts were paralleled in India and later Pakistan by Abul A'la Maududi (d.1978) who sought to transform the young Pakistan into what he called a 'theo-democracy.' In Turkey, Saïd Nursi (d.1960) founded the Nurculuk Movement as a spiritual force against secularism.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 and continued as a grass-roots organisation. After the death of al-Banna, it became a more revolutionary movement under its main theoretician Sayyid Qutb, who was executed under the Nasser government in 1966. During Nasser's time, the Brotherhood was banned and many of its leaders and supporters were imprisoned. During the second half of the 20th century, it "went underground" and sought to serve those most in need in society with the expectation that the day would come when there would be free elections and then the masses would remember who had served them. Things were given a new impetus by the decisive defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 war with Israel. Now the spirit was that Arab nationalism had failed to deliver and "Islam is the answer" to development in the future.

Nasser died in 1970 and was replaced by Anwar Sadat. He brought in new policies of opening up to American capitalism and released many of the Brotherhood supporters from prison, although the Brotherhood as an organisation was still banned. The move

to foreign investment meant that many of the poor were further impoverished and foreign debt and dependency rose. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the oil-producing Arab states substantially increased the price of crude oil and thus began the flow of vast riches to those countries. This created the need and money for foreign labour and so many workers from Egypt and other countries went to these more conservative Wahhabi-influenced societies where they imbibed those understandings of Islam and then brought them home on their return. During the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood experienced further oppression and military suppression in Syria.

A crucial date in the formation of the modern Middle East is 1979. It was in this year that Sadat signed the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty, which was seen by many Arabs as abandoning the rights of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland. It led to Sadat's assassination in 1981. Also in this year, the Ayatollah Khomeini launched the Iranian Revolution. Although this was in a Shi'a context, it demonstrated for the first time in modern history that Islamic religious and political power could be combined to bring in a new form of Islamic government. This transformed the mind-set of those who favoured political Islam from an idealised hope to a real practical reality for which they could strive. In the same year, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and there was a concerted effort by the Western powers to support the internationally recruited Muslim fighters who went there to assist in driving them out of the country. This demonstrated the military might that could be raised in the name of defending Muslims facing oppression. It took ten years for the Soviets to be defeated in Afghanistan but it had shown that Muslim fighters, inspired by Islamic principles, were capable of defeating a super-power. This created a methodology that would be implemented in Bosnia and can be seen at work in Syria today.

President Sadat, styled "the American-leaning Pharaoh" by his enemies, was assassinated in 1981 and replaced by another Egyptian general, Mubarak. This brought in another long period of iron-fisted rule and oppression in a "police state." The urban élite continued to prosper whilst the rural poor were further impoverished. The Arab dictators sought to preserve the *status quo* by passing on their rule to their sons: Qaddafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt and al-Asad in Syria can be cited as obvious examples but the trend stretch on into the Maghreb. This provoked two reactions: those who sought political Islam continued to serve those in need and await free elections and young urban people wanted to break free from this undemocratic oppression. The latter movement was fired by the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit-seller in December 2010, thus leading to the "Arab Spring." The former movement profited by the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood was swept to a landslide victory in the elections that followed. The cycle has again been set in motion with the return of military rule and the re-outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Two factors are new in the 21st century situation: mass communication and demographics. Through the rise of satellite television and the internet it is now possible for news to be conveyed instantaneously around the world, not just by the ruling powers but also by individuals. We must take seriously the phenomenon of

young people in Tahrir Square in Cairo being able to hold up a smart-phone and transmit video footage to the world instantaneously so that armed suppression of the masses can no longer be done out of sight. This not only has an impact on "world opinion" but also profoundly on young Muslims in other countries who can see the suffering of their Muslim brothers and sisters. As a general rule, we can say that two-thirds of Muslims in the world today are aged under thirty-years-old. Many are living in relative poverty and they feel that they have no future in their native countries. At the same time, through electronic media, they are able to see the relative opulence of those who live in the West and so there is a pull to formal and illegal migration that is stronger than in earlier generations. This can be exemplified by those who risk everything to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe; in their estimation, they have nothing to lose.

A wider perspective

The resolution of the communal situation in British India by the creation of the state of Pakistan in 1947 (East Pakistan until the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971 and the modern Pakistan created from the former West Pakistan) has not yet proved itself as the ideal Muslim state. There has been an unresolved tension throughout its history between Pakistan as a "homeland for Indian Muslims" and as an "Islamic State." There have been decades of military rule and a general perception of corruption amongst the political classes and wealthy élite. The demographics are again noteworthy with an expansion from less than 40m at its creation to something around 170m today with the concomitant preponderance of young people with little hope of a better future.

With the rise in more militant expressions of Islam, we have seen marked inter-religious tensions in some Arab countries that have for centuries been multi-religious. The expulsion of Arab Jews after the creation of the State of Israel and the flight of Christians from Palestine, Iraq and Syria can be noted. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim population on earth, which deliberately set itself up at independence as a multi-religious society, there are groups who want to see a more dominant role for their form of Islam. The division of Sudan along largely religious lines must be noted, as must the plight of millions of non-Muslim workers in oil-rich Arab countries. Inter-ethnic conflicts can also take on a religious colouring, as in the Central African Republic. The legacy of communities advantaged through Christian missionaries and western funding to the disadvantage of Muslim communities in the same countries underlies present tensions, especially in parts of Africa.

The transition from European colonial rule to independence was by no means always smooth and peaceful. There were bitter wars of independence, e.g., in Algeria, that still leave their legacy. Often the colonial masters left a situation in which the new ruling classes were predisposed to economic and political close relationships to the advantage of the Europeans and the emerging élite. The colonial rulers generally felt it necessary to leave a legal code behind them for the independent country, which owed more to European law than to the local and religious nature of the independent

population. There have been struggles to seek to bring these more into line with the principles of *shari'a*. The nature of international funding and international trade often means that western powers have an on-going major share in the economic lives of countries and the profits from natural resources.

Muslims have become more critical of Western support for corrupt regimes and the activities of various Western powers in Muslim lands have given rise to a suspicion of the West's intentions and a concern over the spread of Western culture and values. Global trading and the advertisement of a consumer-dominated lifestyle have caused many to realise that multi-national companies are often more powerful than developing governments and that they repatriate their profits with limited gain for local people. This runs alongside a desire by many younger Muslims to embrace selectively elements of those lifestyles that they find attractive.

International relations are seen by many to portray double-standards in the implementation of International Law. Dozens of UN Resolutions are seen to go unheeded when they concern the plight of the Palestinians or the population of Kashmir whilst the shaky foundation of a Resolution is seen to be a mandate for war as in the case of Iraq. The internationalisation of domestic conflicts has led to great destabilisation in the case of Iraq and Syria where non-native fighters are supported by rich countries wishing to export their political or religious interests.

Minority Muslim communities

One of the phenomena of the last seventy years is that millions of Muslims have migrated to other countries or, in the case of India, were left behind by Partition. There are now hundreds of millions of Muslims who live as minorities around the world.

Europe

From the 16th century onwards, with the rise of the European age of discovery, which led to trade and thus more contact with Islam, Muslims were to be found in the sea-going nations of Western Europe. They were diplomats, travellers or returned prisoners who had converted, traders or servants brought back by imperial families. In time members of the ruling élites from colonised countries would send their sons to Europe for an education and some of them stayed and settled. The early Muslim communities in Europe were often around sea-ports or in the big cities, such as Cardiff, Marseilles and Venice.

After the 1939-45 war many European countries were in ruins and manpower was short owing to the number of men killed or injured in battle. This was also the beginning of the end of the European colonies and with withdrawal often came sizeable numbers of Muslim citizens, who settled in the European imperial country; the case of Algerians coming to France might be cited as an example. Many in the former colonised countries were desperate for work and with the shortage of labour in

Europe, a steady flow of migrant workers arrived to assist in post-war rebuilding. The normal pattern was to draw from former colonies: so Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia for France, the Indian Subcontinent for Britain, and Indonesia and Suriname for the Netherlands. In Germany, migrant workers were recruited from Turkey, with which Germany had long-established ties. Turks and Moroccans especially came to work in other Northern European countries, such as Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. From the 1960s onwards, there was a legal transition from migrant workers to settled immigrant communities, which means that the vast majority of European Muslims are now citizens of a European country and therefore are free to relocate anywhere in the European Union.

Another contributory cause for Muslims coming to Europe has been as refugees fleeing war, poverty or political unrest. The list of countries from which they came is long, including Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan, amongst others. Such refugees are to be found in all countries of Western Europe and most, over the years, have received permanent right of residence or citizenship. These Muslim communities are generally statistically younger than the general population and so with family expansion we can expect the number of European Muslims to rise in coming decades. There is likely to be a shortage of people of working age in Europe as this century progresses and so we may expect more Muslims to come and settle as active members of the workforce. In addition there have been significant numbers of Muslim converts in Europe, most through marriage but many after intellectual enquiry and opting for the values of Islam.

North America

There were almost certainly some Muslims who had outwardly converted to Christianity amongst the early Spanish settlers in the Americas but they were absorbed into wider society. A significant number of the African slaves that were brought to the Americas were Muslims but they were forcibly converted to Christianity, although traces of them are found in small pockets and there is a record of at least one group amongst them who were able to write a copy of the Qur'an from memory after their arrival. The descendants of former slaves provide the recruitment ground for the African American Muslim communities, who today number around one-third of American Muslims.

The first migrant group appears to have come from Greater Syria (modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) in the last quarter of the 19th century. They were significantly added to by more educated political refugees after the 1939-45 war coming mainly from Egypt, Iraq and Palestine as well as those escaping from the Soviet system in Eastern Europe. From the later 1960s onwards there was a steady stream of professional Muslims coming to make a new life in North America. In Canada, these were often coming from former British colonies, including a large Isma'ili community of East African Asians. A significant group of Iranians settled in North America during the second half of the 20th century. In addition there are those

who came as war refugees: Afghans, Kurds, Iraqis, Lebanese and Somalis. In the latter part of the 20th century, there was an increase in Islamic practice and commitment, which saw the establishment of a significant number of mosques and other community centres.

Trends in the modern world

A key issue amongst Muslims throughout the modern world is education. The richness and diversity of Islamic learning from earlier generations is not widely known. This can lead to people holding tight to narrow understandings and not allowing the range of opinions on matters on which no consensus has emerged that was typical in earlier societies. This intellectual heritage is being claimed but it takes time to train a sufficient body of scholars for the task across the whole range of academic disciplines. This on-going tradition of Islamic thought is slowly being revived and brought to bear on questions that were unknown until the modern period. By reintegrating Islamic disciplines alongside other areas of study, the breach that all too readily opens between "religious" and "secular" scholarship is being healed progressively, to the benefit of all.

Many developments have taken place around the world in the theory and practice of the education of children and adults in recent decades. This necessarily prompts the question of how to lead new generations of Muslims into exploring and understanding the richness and balance of their faith and heritage. Children growing up and being educated in contemporary societies are accustomed to learn in new ways and through a whole range of educational media. Muslims are faced with developing the appropriate use of these new methodologies and technologies in the education of their own rising generations. The internet and the whole information technology revolution is playing an enormous role in rediscovering the classical traditions, which can lead to some difficulties in making balanced judgements due to the lack of guidance from a learned teacher.

One of the critical developments in the modern world is the education of women. In western countries, girls and boys have equal access to universal education and the number of Muslim women going to university is on a par with and often exceeds the number of men. Throughout the Muslim world, a similar substantial trend in the expansion of female education can be observed. This holds true also for education in the Islamic sciences. Women are accessing the scholarly tools necessary to engage with the sources and intellectual development of Islamic thought with the outcome that they are reading the tradition from their perspective, thus liberating them from the partial knowledge available to their foremothers mediated through men and allowing them to question received interpretations. They are not only the first teachers of their children but also are contributing insights that will impact on a future generation of scholars. This must be seen as a significant engine of change in future Muslim communities worldwide.

The development of the nation state is a relatively new thing in Muslim history. The decline and break-up of the Muslim empires brings the challenge of finding appropriate ways of governance for the emerging Muslim nations. What political structures are best suited? How are the Islamic principles of equality and individual responsibility before God to be incorporated? What is the responsibility of one nation towards others? What role is there in civil society for traditional institutions, such as sufi orders, endowed charitable foundations and *madrasas*? The huge and growing gulf between rich and poor nations brings challenges for seeking an Islamic solution to issues of globalisation, the displacement of peoples, fair trade and the growing ecological problems (especially global warming) facing the world.

The development of Muslim communities in industrialised societies, whose roots lie outside Islamic culture, brings with it the issue of developing the overarching ethical and cultural norms of Islam in these new contexts. Some of what Muslims have found in the modern world promotes and advances the higher principles of justice, equality and care for all, but other aspects are less compatible with Islamic principles. How are societies to create a space in which Muslims can be faithful to God and a godly way of life in a liberal democracy which is shared with fellow citizens who operate on sometimes significantly different ethical and humanitarian principles? How are the particularities of Islamic codes of conduct to exist in a context of one secular territorial legal system? In a world of sound-bites and fleeting media attention, there is a real problem to create a climate that encourages impassioned reasoned discussion, which promotes an informed context against which questions can be debated and in which the view of the consensual middle ground is not swamped by the clamour of the extremists.

The rise of extremism under the banner of Islam

As we look back through this snapshot of the contemporary situation of Muslims in the world, it is clear that there are historic injustices, vast disparities of wealth and economic, political, military and cultural exploitation – *some* – of those on the losing end of each equation are Muslims but *by no means all* and Muslims *have no monopoly on suffering in the world*. However, we can only understand the rise of extremism against such a background and then see it as one response – a response that, in the judgement of the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars and leaders, is a misguided distortion of Islamic values and teachings. We have seen earlier in this course that indiscriminate killing and the use of terror as a tactic can have no part to play in genuine Islam (see Series III, parts 10 and 11). It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through a time in which there is a struggle going on for the spirit of Islam. It is a struggle that affects everyone and not just Muslims – the first step in this struggle is to Understand Islam.