
Fourth Edition
**THE MIDDLE EAST
AND CENTRAL ASIA**
An Anthropological Approach

Dale F. Eickelman
Dartmouth College

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PART IV
RELIGION AND EXPERIENCE

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**ISLAM AND
THE “RELIGIONS
OF THE BOOK”**

**WORLD RELIGIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST
AND CENTRAL ASIA**

The key traditions of major world religions remain vital and meaningful through the actions of their carriers, who maintain and shape them over long historical periods and in highly diverse contexts. Thus religious traditions are inextricably linked to the changing relations of authority and domination in which they are shaped and transformed. By definition, world religions are not confined to any one society or cultural tradition. They transcend specific cultures, including their culture of origin. Adherents of world religions are aware, at least in principle, of a diversity of practice and interpretation that ranges well beyond the confines of localized, face-to-face communities. Carriers of world religions often claim that their tradition possesses a core of formative ideals and immutable religious truths, and most share common rituals. Yet these ideals, truths, and rituals must be sufficiently open to reformulation and reinterpretation by their carriers over successive generations and in novel contexts, even if the carriers of these traditions may be unaware that they have been reshaped.

Three world religious traditions have their origins in the Middle East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but there are also a number of more highly localized traditions. These include Zoroastrianism (primarily in Iran); the

Druze of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel; and the Kurdish-speaking Yazidi-s of northern Iraq, each with their own traditions of religious identity and practice. The past and present of these religious traditions intricately intertwine, even if some of their carriers are disinclined in some circumstances or unaware in others of how close these interrelationships are. Jerusalem provides perhaps the most poignant symbol of all that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share and contest in the Middle Eastern context and beyond, and of how the significance given to religious symbols, space, and places ranges well beyond the local carriers of the three religious traditions.¹ The views of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the Middle East toward gender roles provides an example at a more implicit level of a domain in which they share much in common and argue within each tradition in often parallel ways.² At the same time, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century of many areas of Muslim rule, quickly followed by the conversion of the Mongol conquerors to Islam, suggests the surprising reversals of directions that world religions can take. In a similar fashion, Europe and North America emerged in the late twentieth century as major centers of creativity in reformulating and "reimagining" the Islamic tradition.

This chapter primarily concerns the Muslim tradition, although the discussion shows that many of the themes often apply equally to Middle Eastern Christians and Jews. From a Western perspective, the Islamic tradition is frequently construed as the least familiar of the three major religious traditions of the area. Yet the Christian and Jewish traditions in their Middle Eastern contexts also contain many unfamiliar elements. Middle Eastern adherents to all three religions have been subject to the same nexus of political and social developments. For example, the "cultural" distance in Israel between Falasha Jews from Ethiopia or Yemeni Jews, on the one hand, and Jews of European origin, on the other, can be greater than in the relations of these groups with their non-Jewish neighbors in their countries of origin.

Thus the Islamic reform or "renewal" movement that got under way in the Middle East in the late nineteenth century had its parallels among the carriers of the region's other religious traditions, including Egypt's Coptic

Christian community and, until the 1960s, Libya's isolated Jewish community. These developments were in part generated by political and economic developments within the Middle East itself, by intellectual and social developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, and—especially in the case of the Christian and Jewish communities—by an intensified contact with their European coreligionists. In all cases there were subtle and sometimes intense links between these various religious communities. In the Arab East, Christians played a significant role in the formulation of modern Arab political and national identity, and in the Arab West, even some members of the Jewish elite participated in the twentieth-century Moroccan nationalist movement.³

As with other great religious traditions, Islam is rich and varied in its creativity and expression. It is a challenge for Muslim believers and scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to account for the variations of Islam as it has been expressed over 1400 years and in the context of diverse cultural traditions. As a response to this complexity, some scholars dismiss local practices they consider not in accord with "central" Islamic truths as non-Islamic or as incorrect understandings of Islam, even though people who hold such beliefs consider themselves fully Muslim.

To account for these diversities, anthropologists in the 1940s introduced the notion of "Great" and "Little" traditions. When first applied, the Great Tradition/Little Tradition contrast rekindled an interest in how popular understandings of religion—the "little," localized, traditions—were related to more elite, literary ones. It also encouraged attention to the "carriers" of particular religious interpretations and practices—people influential in their own society or marginal to it—so that links among religion, authority, and influence could be explored.

Critical discussion of what is meant by Islam and the Islamic tradition is needed for both analytic and practical reasons. Especially in recent years, a number of studies of Islam have appeared that combine attention to textual analysis, a venerable tradition in the study of Islam, with analysis of the ethnographic and social historical contexts in which notions of Islam are developed, transmitted, and reproduced. Many earlier studies, based primarily on the study of key religious texts or of certain types of religious experience (formal rituals or mysticism, for example), tended to concentrate on the search for an Islamic "essence." This earlier analytic tradition, which is still vigorous,

¹ See Jonathan Webber, "Religions in the Holy Land: Conflicts of Interpretation," *Anthropology Today* 1, no. 2 (April 1985), 3–9, and Glenn Bowman, "Unholy Struggle on Holy Ground: Conflict and Interpretation in Jerusalem," *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 3 (June 1986), 14–17, for short anthropological accounts of "interpreting" Jerusalem. See also F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); and "Jerusalem: Vox Populi, Civitas Dei," *The Economist* (London) (November 7, 1987), 23–26.

² Carol Delaney, "The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate," *Man* (N.S.) 21, no. 3 (September 1986), 494–513. Muslims, Jews, and Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere possess multiple gender ideologies, making unitary comparisons between each tradition misleading unless comparisons within each tradition and their ongoing debates are also taken into account. For women in the Jewish ultra-Orthodox tradition, for example, see Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder, CO, and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

³ See E. J. Chitham, *The Coptic Community in Egypt: Spatial and Social Change*, Occasional Papers Series 32 (Durham, England: University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986), p. 108. On the situation of Copts, see Luc Barbulesco, "Babylone ou Qahira," *Autrement*, no. 12 (February 1985), 192–97. For the Libyan Jewish community, see Mordechai Ha-Cohen, *The Book of Mordechai: A Study of the Jews of Libya*, ed. and trans. Harvey E. Goldberg (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980); and, for Jews in Middle Eastern societies in general, see Harvey E. Goldberg, ed., *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). On the development of an Arab national identity from the nineteenth century through the present, see Dale F. Eickelman, "Arab Society: Tradition and the Present," in *The Middle East: A Handbook*, ed. Michael Adams (New York: Facts On File, 1988), pp. 765–81.

coincided in part with the ideological premise held by many Muslims that Islamic beliefs and practices are unaffected by historical change.

Recent ethnographic and social historical studies suggest a more complex notion of Islamic tradition than can be extracted by reliance on religious or legal texts. As a consequence, the notion of an Islamic "essence" has been difficult to sustain. The idea of "tradition," after all, need not necessarily imply a fixed or unitary set of principles existing independently of specific political and social conditions. The idea of what is "traditional" changes with generations and between social groups and classes and usually does not involve a unitary set of assumptions. It involves ongoing discussion, debate, and practice. In most contexts, people who have competing notions of religion or tradition coexist. Sometimes they are in opposition, but sometimes the choice between alternatives is not explicit.

Depending on context, carriers of a religious tradition adhere to practices and beliefs that are seen as incompatible by religious authorities or intellectuals (or scholarly observers) and that, therefore, cannot be reduced to a single, cohesive set of principles. In one dimension, these opposing (or complementary) conceptions of Islam are particularistic and significantly intertwined with the local social order. Other conceptions are universalistic, more amenable to generalization and application in a wide number of contexts. These opposing conceptions are co-present and in dynamic tension with one another. Some ideologies, including "reformist" Islam and the beliefs of many educated Muslims, tend to be *universalistic*. Others, including North African "saint" cults (although "saint," for reasons to be explained, can be a misleading gloss), are *particularistic*.

The co-presence of these alternative ideologies and practices, some of which are not formally elaborated, means that the strength of one or another ideological form cannot be attributed *solely* to its relation to a specific social context. Such notions need not be perfectly integrated (and usually are not), nor can the universalistic and particularistic elements be neatly arrayed in terms of center and periphery. Within the Muslim world, there exist multiple linkages among the various ethnic, kinship-based, regional, political, and religious communities that do not arrange themselves into agreed-upon hierarchies. Some pious Muslims claim Mecca as the spiritual center of the Muslim world, which it certainly is from some perspectives. But from other perspectives, the most profound religious innovations do not emanate from the centers, nor are they explicitly planned. In France, for example, labor migration and immigration have brought about more profound religious changes than innovations from traditional religious leaders. New forms of Muslim religious expression in France have had, in turn, a profound impact on Islam as it is practiced in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, the regions of origin for most immigrant Muslims in France. Far from being marginal to the Muslim world, Muslims in Europe are becoming increasingly central, in terms of the

role they play not only in the Muslim world but also in the European states where they reside.⁴

In reaction to an earlier analytic tradition that largely accepted the ideological premise held by many Muslims of the immutability of "true" Islamic belief and practice, an Egyptian Muslim anthropologist, Abdul Hamid M. el-Zein, suggested replacing the term *Islam* by *islams*. His intent was to emphasize the multiplicity of Islamic expression and to show that the "islams" of elite and nonelite, literate and illiterate, theologians and artisans, tribesmen and peasants are equally valid expressions of a fundamental, unconscious (in the structuralist sense) set of principles.⁵

This "islams" approach was a reaction against both the Orientalist search for an ahistorical Islamic "essence" and the somewhat parallel venture of some Muslim fundamentalists who declare their own beliefs and practices "Islamic," in opposition to the practices of Muslims who do not agree with them. Ironically, by considering all expressions of Islam as transformations based on a single set of principles, the conceptual end product of the *islams* approach likewise reduces Islamic tradition to an essentialist, ahistorical core. Ideas and practices take on radically different meanings, depending on who introduces, advocates, and supports them. Some understandings of Islam are more valued than others because of their identification with certain carriers and groups. The *islams* approach, although it focuses attention on nonelite expressions of Islamic belief and practice, neglects the important dimensions of authority and domination in the transmission and reproduction of ideas and organizations, favoring the emergence of particular institutional arrangements or beliefs over alternative, coexisting ones.

PRODUCING ORTHODOXY FOR ISLAM: THE "FIVE PILLARS"

Nearly half a century ago, Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggested that in the Islamic case it is preferable to talk of *orthopraxy*, a commonality of practice and ritual, rather than of *orthodoxy*, the commonality of belief, on the grounds that Muslims share common rituals, even if they interpret them differently.⁶

⁴ Gilles Kepel, *Les banlieues de l'Islam: naissance d'une religion en France* [Suburbs of Islam: Birth of a Religion in France] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987). For Britain, see Prina Werbner, "The Making of Muslim Dissent: Hybridized Discourses, Lay Preachers, and Radical Rhetoric Among British Pakistanis," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 1 (February 1996), 102-22.

⁵ Abdul Hamid el-Zein, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977), 227-54. Michael Gilensan, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Arab World* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), adopts a similar stance.

⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 28.

The notion that Muslims share a common orthopraxy also has its limitations. The notion still implies an authoritative formula that is "taught" to be correct, whether by parents, peers, self-appointed mosque preachers, or leading religious scholars. As Talal Asad writes, a "practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims," a notion that has an advantage over the claim of common, "essential" practices or beliefs because it emphasizes the relationship between belief and authority.⁷

In any consideration of what constitutes Islamic practice, it is important to consider three elements: *time*, or the historical contexts in which given practices are introduced and interpreted; *scale*, or the extent to which given practices or traditions are universalistic or particularistic, deriving their strength from highly localized factors; and *internal debate* over "correct" traditions, a dimension that focuses attention on existing power relations within and impinging on particular societies.

Islam is the only world religion to have had a built-in name from the outset. *Islam* (Ar. *islām*) means "submission," submission to the will of God. Whoever submits is called a *Muslim*. These terms occur repeatedly in the Quran. The word *qur'ān* itself means both "reading" and "recital."⁸ It is the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (A.D. 570/80–632), beginning in 610 by the Angel Gabriel. Something is known of how these revelations first came to Muḥammad from verses in the Quran itself. On the first occasion, Muḥammad saw a glorious being standing high in the sky toward the horizon; then this being approached closer and closer to him. Muḥammad's first thought was that the being was God, but later he recognized it as Gabriel. No one is certain which part of the Quran was first revealed to Muḥammad, but many Muslims think it is this verse:

O thou wrapped up (in a mantle),
Arise and warn!
Praise thy Lord
Cleanse thy garments
Shun defilement!
Do not grant blessings
(Expecting) a greater return
For thy Lord, show fortitude.

(Sura 74:1–7, "The Shrouded One"⁹)

⁷ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Paper Series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), p. 15.

⁸ Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*, Modern Middle East Studies 11 (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1986), deals with how modern Egyptian Quranic reciters use their voices to convey the perfection of the words and at the same time communicate moods and sentiments appropriate to various passages and contexts.

⁹ Translation by Dale F. Eickelman.

The idea of the Quran as a fixed text is beginning to be argued and defended rather than taken for granted, in spite of the strong opposition of conservative religious scholars. Thus Egyptian scholar Nasr Abu Zayd, who has published several books in Arabic using standard techniques of literary criticism, was forced in 1995 to leave Egypt and take refuge in the Netherlands. In addition, specialists have long been aware of the issues involved in the collection and writing down of the Quran in the early Islamic centuries. These discussions have been given renewed vigor with the discovery in 1972 of Quranic fragments written in an early Arabic script in the loft of the Great Mosque in Ṣan'ā', Yemen. These fragments are in the form of palimpsests, a parchment on which the original writing has been washed off so that it can be used again. The washed-off script as well as the newer writing display *verse separators*—simple geometrical point patterns used only in the writing of the Quran. Analysis of the texts so far suggests that the arrangement of the Quranic verses may have been altered. For an account of current discussions on the status of the Quran, see Toby Lester, "What Is the Koran?" *Atlantic Monthly* 283, no. 1 (January 1999), 43–56. See an example of the Ṣan'ā' Quran fragments and an explanation of how to read it at <<http://home.t-online.de/home/Christoph.Heger/>>. Also see Gerd-Ruediger Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'ān Manuscripts in Ṣan'ā'," in *The Qur'ān as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 107–11.

Most Muslims hold every word of the Quran to be the word of God. The Quran states that God had earlier communicated His word through other prophets, those recognized by both Jews and Christians, but that over time their messages had become distorted. So Muḥammad was made the "Seal of the Prophets," to warn humankind one last time of their wrong ways and to provide them again with God's word, this time "in clear Arabic."

Any translation from one civilizational tradition to another is treacherous, but a comparison with Christianity is useful here. The Quran should not be seen as the exact equivalent of the Bible. Most Christians see the Bible as a record of the prophets and of Christ, but not directly as God's word, as Muslims see the Quran. This is why many Muslims, even those who do not speak Arabic, regard translations of the Quran as guides to its meaning rather than substitutes for the original. For most Christians the person of Christ, the Son of God, personifies God. In contrast, the Quran insists that Muḥammad is merely the messenger of God. Some Muslims, especially certain mystics, have considered the person of Muḥammad a saintlike figure, but most Muslims consider Muḥammad the most perfect of men. Clearly, belief in the Quran and the eternal nature of its message are important components of the Islamic tradition, but the word of God as embodied in the Quran is made meaningful to



FIGURE 10-1. "How can ordinary men, no matter how much they study . . . understand by themselves the words of the Quran?"—Moroccan *qāḍī*, 1969. [Courtesy of the author.]

Muslims in different political and historical contexts throughout the Muslim world. Much "Islamic" practice depends on *consensus* (*ijmā'a*) of Muslims, especially those considered religious scholars, in any part of the Muslim world. The notion of consensus has precise legal connotations in Islam, but here I am primarily concerned with indicating popular conceptions of religious tradition.

Every Muslim participates in the *umma*, the community of living Muslims everywhere who are committed to what Marshall Hodgson has called the "venture of Islam." The *sharī'a*, the straight path of the ritual observances required of Muslims, is the most visible component of that venture. Muslims differ as to who legitimately succeeded Muḥammad in the leadership of the Muslim world. Sunnī Muslims, who constitute about 90 percent of Muslims worldwide, accept the notion that any Muslim could be Muḥammad's successor in all matters except prophecy, whereas the Shī'a, who constitute the remaining 10 percent and are principally located in Iran, East Africa, India, southern Iraq, Lebanon, and parts of the Arabian peninsula, feel that succession rightly belongs to the descendants of Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima and his son-in-law 'Alī. There are many variations on these principal themes. Despite these differences, Muslims think of Islam as imparting a tone and style to all aspects of their lives—familial customs, sociability, learning, even styles of personal grooming. *Sharī'a* can be translated as "law," but it is

Some contemporary Middle Eastern states regard the *sharī'a* as a main source of laws, while others regard it as *the* main source. For most Muslims, however, the *sharī'a* refers more broadly to divinely ordained norms and ideals of just conduct that bind rulers and ruled alike—whether or not these principles are embodied in a formal legal code. A case recently brought before an English court helped clarify these complementary spheres of the *sharī'a*.

In the summer of 1996, the State of Qatar initiated litigation in Europe and elsewhere against its former ruler, Shaykh Khalifa bin Hamad Āl Thāni, seeking to recover assets estimated at between \$3 to \$7 billion dollars transferred from the Qatar state treasury to his personal accounts. In an English court, Shaykh Khalifa argued that as a ruler, there were no restraints on his use of state funds. He argued that the *sharī'a* bound him only to the extent that it was explicitly incorporated into the constitution and laws of Qatar. In a letter to *The Economist*,* Qatar's minister of justice, Najeeb bin Mohamed al-Nauimi, argued otherwise and offered one of the clearest recent statements of the relation of *sharī'a* and legal obligation in a modern Muslim society:

In describing the litigation between the state of Qatar and its former emir, Sheikh Khalifah Bin Hamad al-Thani,** you fail to mention Islamic law.

When Sheikh Khalifah recently transferred vast sums from the public treasury to his personal bank accounts in Switzerland, England, and elsewhere, he violated state budget laws enacted during his own term as emir. More fundamentally, he violated *sharia*, the Islamic law that governs all Qatari heads of state and the people they serve.

Contrary to the suggestion made in your article, a legal distinction between the state's purse and that of its ruler is not "radical," and certainly not new. The *sharia* makes it clear that state funds are not the personal property of the *imam* or, in this case, the emir. Indeed, it is his duty to ensure that the public treasury is devoted to public purposes. He may receive enough to provide for the reasonable needs of himself and his family, but if he takes more he is guilty of *ghulul* (theft).

Sheikh Khalifa himself took decisive steps to honour and institutionalise these rules when he deposed his predecessor in 1972. One of his first official acts as emir was to issue a decree halting the practice by which Sheikh Ahmed received payments directly from oil companies operating in Qatar. Sheikh Khalifah ordered that this money be restored to the public treasury for the general budget of the state.

On October 18, 1996, Qatar and its former ruler reached an out-of-court settlement that halted litigation.† Nonetheless, the case publicly reaffirmed the strength and pervasiveness of *sharī'a*, both as enacted in legislation and as generally upheld, in contemporary Muslim political and social life.

* Najeeb bin Mohamed al-Nauimi, "Qatar's Purse Strings," *The Economist*, October 5, 1996, p. 8.

** "Qatar: Whose Cash Is It?" *The Economist*, August 31, 1996, p. 39.

† John Mason and Robin Allen, "Qatar Settles Billion-Dollar Suit," *Financial Times* (London), October 21, 1996, p. 3.

much more than the concept of law in English usage. Religiously speaking, the *shari'a* governs all aspects of one's conduct as a Muslim.

Delineating the basic themes and the five "pillars" (Arabic pl. *arkān*)—the declaration of faith, the five daily ritual prayers, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca of faith—is a useful point of departure for considering how Islam is locally received, understood, and debated. Most Muslims agree on five pillars of faith. I say *most* because many Muslims modify or deny the normative nature of some pillars because of their own interpretations of Islam.¹⁰

The declaration of faith (*shahāda*) is that there is no god but God and Muḥammad is His messenger (*rasūl*). This simple declaration of faith is so elemental that all Muslims can agree on it, whatever other differences they may have had for thirteen and a half centuries.

The second pillar is the *ṣalāt*, or five daily ritual prayers. All Muslims are supposed to cleanse themselves ritually, face Mecca, and pray at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and dusk. In towns, prayer callers climb to the top of minarets, even when loudspeakers are prevalent, and announce each prayer. Muslims may pray where they want; the use of mosques is not obligatory, although many believers congregate in mosques at least on Fridays for the mid-day prayers. The obligatory prayers are fixed in form and content, although personal invocations to God may be added to them upon their completion. Many Muslims say that the uniformity of these prayers symbolizes humankind's equality before God as well as their submission to His will.

Almsgiving (*zakāt*) is the third pillar. In some countries at certain periods the *zakāt* has been an obligatory tax on all Muslims who can afford to pay it. The Quran enjoins the wealthier to set aside part of their wealth for the destitute of the Muslim community. Most almsgiving throughout the Middle East remains personal; the donor often has a direct contact with his clients, unlike the anonymous pattern of giving that prevails in many Western societies.

The fourth pillar of Islam is fasting (*ṣawm*), which occurs each lunar year during the month of Ramaḍān. Adult Muslims in good health are expected to fast, and despite the fact that many people privately may choose not to do so, public fasting is observed almost everywhere. During Ramaḍān, Islam is consciously brought into daily activities; religious lessons are given nightly on the radio and television and in mosques. Ramaḍān is the month of repentance and purification. Some Muslims rationalize the fast by praising its supposed medical virtues in cleansing the vital organs of the body. Yet, as indicated in Chapter 9, its more important meaning is the ability of Muslims to follow the code

¹⁰ The codification of orthopraxy into "five pillars" is an internal development of the Muslim community, not just an "Orientalist" convention. See, for example, an "authoritative" handbook written for English-speaking Muslims, *Introduction to Islam*, enlarged edition, ed. Muhammad Hamidullah, Publications of the Centre Culturel Islamique (Paris), 1 (Hyderabad, India: Habib & Co., 1959). The following account of the formal steps in the pilgrimage, the fifth pillar, is based primarily on Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Muhammadan Festivals* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), pp. 15–49; and *Aramco World Magazine* 26, no. 6 (November–December 1974).



FIGURE 10-2. Pilgrims often visit local shrines before departing for Mecca. Tunisia, 1973. [Courtesy Nicholas S. Hopkins.]

of conduct fixed by Islam and thus to demonstrate their self-discipline and control over self. The fast carries a variety of elaborate interpretations, as Lloyd and Margaret Fallers indicate in their account of the fast in Turkey, Richard Antoun in his account of rural Jordan, and Marjo Buitelaar in her account of women and Ramaḍān in Morocco. The public manifestation of the community's ability to observe the fast is a key and universal aspect of belief and practice.¹¹ Eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse are prohibited between dawn and sunset, and, more significantly, Muslims are expected to engage in spiritual self-renewal. At night, in contrast, sociability is in many ways increased; visiting among friends and relatives is intensified, and the practical meaning of what it is to be a Muslim is enhanced for the entire community.

The fifth pillar is the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca, obligatory once in a lifetime for every Muslim who is economically and physically able to do so. Even more than the month of fasting, the pilgrimage is an obligation that removes Muslims from the constraints of ordinary, particular obligations. From the moment pilgrims set out on the journey, they are removed from ordinary society and become "liminal" in the sense of the term made popular by Victor

¹¹ L. A. Fallers, assisted by M. C. Fallers, "Notes on an Advent Ramadan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (March 1974), 35–52; Richard T. Antoun, "The Social Significance of Ramaḍān in an Arab Village," *Muslim World* 58 (1968), 36–42, 95–104; and Marjo Buitelaar, *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: Women's Participation in Ramadan* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1993).

Turner.¹² Pilgrims agree to dedicate their lives to Islam and must be in a state of ritual consecration to make a valid pilgrimage. They may not uproot plants or shed blood; if they do so, they must atone for it by ritual means. Sexual intercourse is also forbidden. If pilgrims die while on pilgrimage, they are thought to enter paradise immediately.

During the pilgrimage, ordinary social relationships with kinsmen, neighbors, and others assume diminished importance. One's identity as a Muslim and brotherhood in Islam are of paramount significance. Every step of the way becomes highly symbolic of the pilgrim's wider identification with Islam; the web of particularistic social relationships is supposed to be transcended. Ritually speaking, some Muslims regard the Ka'ba as the symbolic center of the world, however peripheral it might be in terms of the ordinary social and political systems in which pilgrims are otherwise enmeshed.

In recent years, more than a million pilgrims annually have made the voyage. Its timing changes each year, for as with other key Islamic rituals, the time of the pilgrimage is set by the lunar calendar. In the past, as with equivalent rituals in Europe, the pilgrimage was a long and arduous journey from which many never returned. Every step of the way was fraught with danger, but this enhanced its spiritual richness. A voyage of a year or longer was not uncommon for pilgrims coming from North Africa, so that before they left on the *hajj*, they set their affairs in order in case they failed to return. Even in the mid-nineteenth century, when modern sea transport and relative peace and security made the pilgrimage easier, it still had its uncertainties. For many, it was a voyage of intellectual, and even commercial, discovery. Religious scholars at Mecca and along the way had contact with major intellectual currents elsewhere. Merchants could use the pilgrimage as an occasion to establish bonds that were of use in the conduct of international trade.

There are many descriptions of the transformation that the pilgrimage effects in Muslims, and of its ritual significance. In most parts of the Muslim world, it is a pious act for pilgrims to write an account of their journey for the guidance of others, although it is the unusual pilgrims whose accounts best reveal the intense meaning that the pilgrimage carries for the community of the faithful. Indeed, changes over time in how these accounts are written provide important indicators of altered social conceptions of person and self.¹³

Malcolm X was one such unusual pilgrim. Given the bitterness of his experience with race issues in America, his remarks are especially poignant. He remarked on the fact that the tens of thousands of pilgrims "were of all colours, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all

participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe could never exist."¹⁴ He observed color patterns in the crowds—like stayed with like—but concluded that "true brotherhood" existed when these patterns implied no hierarchies of superiority and inferiority.

The claim of some Muslims that Mecca is the spiritual center of the Muslim world is subject to political interpretations, a point to which we shall return. For the moment, it suffices to note that Muslims possess identities in addition to that of Muslim. These coexisting identities were implicit in the attitude of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–1970), Egypt's leader in the heyday of the Arab nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s. In his speeches and political acts, Nasser encouraged participation in the *hajj* as a demonstration of the power of the nonaligned nations in world politics and, in particular, of the strength of Arab nationalism. Nasser's endorsement of the pilgrimage also displayed to the leaders of conservative Arab states such as Saudi Arabia his view that most Arab pilgrims were not only committed Muslims but also Arab nationalists, both Sunni and Shi'a, sympathetic to his political message. It would be difficult to ascribe primacy to any one of these identities at a given time or to separate "religious" from political and other sensibilities. It is equally difficult to assign a hierarchy of motivation to all Muslims or to the adherents of other religions in the fulfillment of their religious obligations.

There are nine ritual steps to the pilgrimage itself.¹⁵ Here my intent is not to present a structuralist explanation of the significance of these events but to outline them and to suggest some aspects of their symbolic richness. (1) First is the donning of the *ihram*, a white seamless garment that for many Muslims symbolizes the pilgrims' search for purity and their separation from the ordinary world. The *ihram* may be donned anywhere along the route up to the fixed points marking the confines of Mecca. No jewelry or other personal adornment may be worn, nor are pilgrims supposed to engage in disputes. Provided that the pilgrims have declared their intention (*niyya*) of making the pilgrimage, they are ready to enter the *haram*, the sacred enclosure of Mecca itself, thought to have been established by Abraham and confirmed by Muhammad. Non-Muslims are not allowed within its confines. Then (2), on the eighth day of the lunar month of Dhū l-Hijja, the month of the pilgrimage, pilgrims proceed to Mina, a small uninhabited village five miles east of Mecca. There they spend the night meditating and praying.

¹² Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions* 12, no. 3 (February 1973), 191–230.

¹³ See Barbara D. Metcalf, "The Pilgrimage Remembered: South Asian Accounts of the Hajj," in *Muslim Travelers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, Comparative Studies in Muslim Societies 9 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 85–107.

¹⁴ Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), pp. 338–39.

¹⁵ See, in particular, the sensitive, beautifully illustrated account by the Turkish scholar Emel Esin, *Mecca the Blessed, Madinah the Radiant* (London: Elek Books, 1963), which cites copiously from literature concerning Mecca and the pilgrimage. See also Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, "Pilgrimage to Mecca," *National Geographic* 154, no. 5 (November 1978), 581–607. Numbers in the following discussion, identifying the stages in the pilgrimage, are keyed to Figure 10–3.

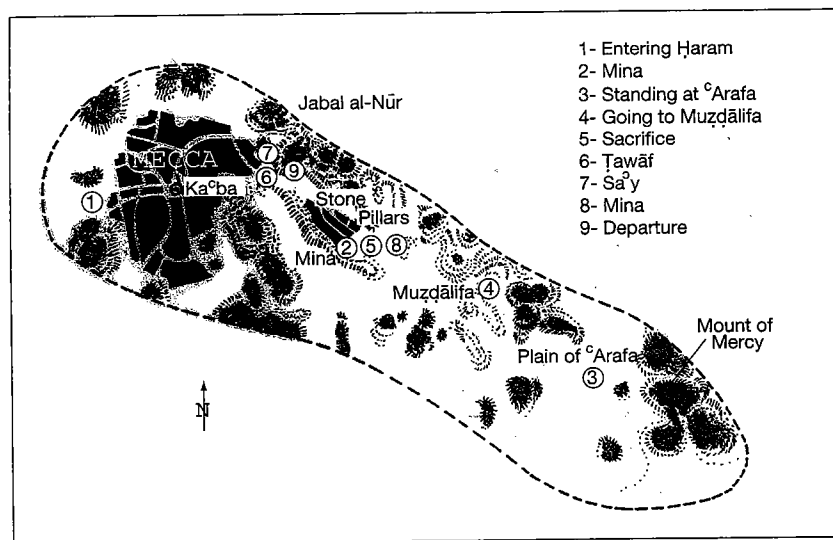


FIGURE 10-3. Principal steps of the *hajj*. [Based on an illustration in *Aramco World Magazine*, November–December 1974.]

The next morning, the pilgrims move as a group to the plain of 'Arafa for the central rite of the pilgrimage, the (3) "standing" before Mount 'Arafa, the Mount of Mercy. They face Mecca, meditate, and pray. Many stand from noon to sunset. Some climb almost to the summit of the 200-foot mountain, at the foot of which the Prophet is supposed to have delivered his last sermon.

Just before sunset, a cannon sounds and the pilgrims proceed to (4) Muzdālifa, a few miles back toward Mina. There they worship and sleep under the stars, after gathering a number of pebbles for use on the following day. The next morning, before daybreak, they return to Mina, where they throw the pebbles at three white-washed masonry pillars, especially the one thought to represent Satan, who three times tried to persuade Abraham not to obey God's command to sacrifice his son. Throwing the pebbles symbolizes the repudiation of evil.

(5) For the Feast of the Sacrifice (*'Īd al-Kabīr*), all pilgrims who can afford to do so buy a sheep or other animal for sacrifice and give away part of it to the poor, although given the quantity of meat sacrificed, most of it is not consumed (the Saudi government arranges for its shipment to needy Muslims throughout the world). This sacrifice has a range of meanings. It commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son; it symbolizes the readiness to give up what is dearest to the pilgrim if commanded by God; it offers thanksgiving to God for having communicated with humans, and it reminds pilgrims

to share their blessings with the less fortunate. Muslims throughout the world vicariously share in the elation of the pilgrims by performing their own sacrifices on the same day.

Once pilgrims have offered their sacrifices, they have completed a major part of the pilgrimage. Men shave their heads and women cut off a lock of their hair to symbolize their deconsecration. Pilgrims are now free to bathe and remove the *iḥrām*, although the prohibition on sexual intercourse remains.

The pilgrims next proceed directly to Mecca and perform (6) the *ṭawāf*, the circling. They circumambulate the Ka'ba seven times on foot, reciting a prayer on each circuit. This circling is said by some to symbolize the unity of God with man and of heaven with earth and reminds believers of the importance attached to the Ka'ba by the Patriarch Abraham, his son Ishmael, and Muḥammad. During the circling, many pilgrims try to touch the black stone that is embedded in one corner of the Ka'ba.

The key ceremonies of the pilgrimage are now completed, and pilgrims have the right to call themselves *ḥājji*-s. Most pilgrims, however, proceed to the "Place of Abraham," where Abraham is supposed to have offered his devotions to God. Then pilgrims reenact (7) the "running" (*sa'y*), the search for water by Hagar, the wife of Abraham (and Sarah's rival in the Bible). Hagar ran back and forth desperately searching for water for herself and her child until the Angel Gabriel appeared, stamped the ground with his heel, and brought forth water from the well of Zamzam for them. Pilgrims drink from this well before starting the running; many return home with bottles of water from it.

Pilgrims then customarily return for a third and last time (8) to Mina, where they cast their remaining pebbles at each of the three pillars—seven stones at each pillar for each day of the pilgrimage. This is also a time to visit with other pilgrims and to bid farewell to friends. Their final visit is to Mecca again, where pilgrims again circumambulate the Ka'ba (9) before returning home.

There is a rich tradition of myths associated with each step of the pilgrimage, and these myths have been variously interpreted throughout the Muslim world. If the pilgrimage is intended to convey the unity of the Muslim world, it also underscores its diversity. The *hajj* may hold the same significance for all Muslims, but the visit (*Ar. ziyāra*) to neighboring Medina where the Prophet set up the first Islamic government, carries a special significance for Shī'i Muslims, whose beliefs are discussed in detail in the next section. The al-Bāqī cemetery near the city is supposed to contain the grave of Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter, and four of the twelve Shī'i imams. In 1924 the Saudis banned access to the cemetery, but as a major concession to Iranian pilgrims, they reopened it in 1986 for visitation and prayer.

Over the past few centuries there have been repeated conflicts over Shī'i access to these tombs. Since the Iranian revolution, conflict has intensified. In part, the Iranian Shī'a have been denied access to other revered Shī'i shrines in southern Iraq since the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war in 1980, and there were

incidents throughout the 1980s in Mecca involving Iranian pilgrims (some 18 percent of the annual total), culminating with a violent confrontation on July 31, 1987, in which 402 people died, including 275 Iranian pilgrims.¹⁶ One reason for the violence is the political undercurrent challenging the legitimacy of Saudi custody of the holy shrines and conservative Saudi claims to leadership of the Muslim world. The fact that the Saudi monarch officially changed his title from "His Majesty" to "Servant of the Two Sacred Shrines" (*khādīm al-ḥaramayn al-sharifayn*) in 1986 suggests the importance the Saudi leadership attaches to its Islamic identity.

THE SHĪ'A

The Iranian revolution of 1979 dramatically demonstrated the continued vitality of the Shī'i tradition and its political influence in the modern world. Shī'i belief and practice constitute a *source of motivation* to social action, not just a convenient vehicle for expressing social and economic discontent.¹⁷ Said Amir Arjomand asserts that Shī'ism constitutes a world religion in its own right in a *sociological* sense—he is fully aware that most Shī'a, like other Muslims, assert the unity of Islam and the integrity of the Muslim community. Nonetheless, the Shī'a know that their beliefs and practices set them apart from Sunni Muslims in how they interpret Islam and express their belief.

The word *Shī'a* means "party" or "sect." This label reflects the origin of Shī'ism as a political movement in seventh-century Arabia. 'Alī (r. 656–661), the son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, was the fourth of Muḥammad's caliphs (*khalīfa*-s), or successors.¹⁸ 'Alī was assassinated by his opponents, as was Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, in 680. The Shī'a consider both men martyrs. After 'Alī's assassination, the party of 'Alī in Kufa, in southern Iraq, demanded that succession be vested in 'Alī's descendants alone. This legitimist claim continues to be a principal Shī'i belief. One contributing factor to Shī'ism, at least in its formative years, was the tension between newly conquered non-Arabs and their Arab rulers. In doctrinal terms, the Shī'a hold that the only legitimate successors to Muḥammad were his descendants through his son-in-law 'Alī and his daughter Fāṭima. Yet adherents of Shī'a Islam are no more homogeneous than those of Sunni Islam. At the beginning of the Islamic era, most politically active Shī'a engaged in movements of protest and

awaited the return of a *mahdī*, or "rightly guided one," to redress injustices and return the Muslim community to its proper course.¹⁹

With the exception of the Zaidi Shī'a of northern Yemen, one component of Shī'i doctrine is *taqīya*, or "concealment." In the face of persecution, the Shī'a are allowed to dissimulate their real beliefs if their expression would result in grave physical danger or a threat to the community. Thus 'Alī, whose caliphate was contested throughout his lifetime, "concealed" his belief in the right of his descendants to be Muḥammad's successors because of such a threat. This doctrine has allowed the Shī'a to adjust to diverse situations. This is the case for the Alevi (Ar. 'Alawī) Muslims of Turkey, Iran, and Syria (where the current president is an 'Alawī). Their rituals and formal beliefs are such that some of their Sunni, and other Shī'i, neighbors have not accepted them as Muslims.

Religious leadership in the Shī'i community relates closely to the level of popular support. Strictly speaking, there are no formal, appointive patterns of institutional leadership among the Shī'a, but pervasive informal ones enable Shī'i men of learning to mobilize their followers. Because the patterns of leadership are informal and not centrally directed, they have been difficult for hostile governments to penetrate and suppress.

Mullah-s, or village preachers, are associated with each mosque, as are a number of lesser religious figures. At the higher level are the *mujtahid*-s, scholars and leaders who by study and personal piety are recognized by their followers and peers as capable of making independent judgments and interpreting Islamic tradition. In contemporary Iran, *mujtahid*-s acquire recognition by publishing books outlining their methods and views for public comment. At a level above *mujtahid*-s are scholars called *āyatullāh*-s, a term that literally means "sign of God"; and at the very apex of the hierarchy of deference is a scholar called the "Supreme" *āyatullāh*, the *āyatullāh al-'Uzma*, considered the most learned scholar of his age and one whose piety is beyond question. Recognition at this highest level has been in the hands of a group of 30 or 40 religious scholars residing at Qum, one of Iran's holy cities, many of whom are related by intermarriage and common studies or are descendants of leading religious scholars of the past. Leadership still depends in the end on a contemporary reputation for religious learning.²⁰

¹⁹ The notion of a *mahdī* is not unique to the Shī'a. The takeover of the Great Mosque at Mecca in November 1979 by a band of armed militants, mostly Sunni, who proclaimed that one of their number was the *mahdī*, indicates the continuing political potential of such a belief and its challenge to traditional religious authorities. See Joseph A. Kechechian, "The Role of the Ulama in the Politics of an Islamic State: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 1986), 53–71, esp. 58–63.

²⁰ Leonard Binder, "The Proofs of Islam: Religion and Politics in Iran," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, ed. George Makdisi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 118–40. On the complex social and familial ties among leading Shī'i scholars, see Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). Even in Iran of the late 1980s, not all clerics agreed that Khomeini was the best living *āyatollah*. See A. V. Khan, "Ayatollah Attacks Khomeini Regime as Worse Than Shah's," *The Independent* (London), November 11, 1987, p. 10.

¹⁶ For an account of this confrontation and prior ones, see Martin Kramer, "Behind the Riot in Mecca," *Policy Focus*, Research Memorandum 5 (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1987).

¹⁷ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3.

¹⁸ See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shī'a Become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (January–March 1955), 1–13, for an account of how the "basic principles" of Shī'i thought and practice came into being.

