

# Many Paths to One God: Establishing the Ideals

When Jews speak of their religion, they call it *Judaism* or the *Judaic tradition*. When Christians speak of their religious tradition, they often refer to it as *Judeo-Christianity* because Christianity was an organic outgrowth of Judaism. In the same way, Muslims refer to their religion as part of the Abrahamic or monotheistic tradition because Islam shares the history, basic beliefs, and values of Judaism and Christianity. Muslims consider Jews and Christians to be their spiritual siblings. They are among the *ahl al-kitab*, the “People of the Book” or “People of Scripture.” This is the family of monotheists, those who believe in one supreme God, the creator, the sustainer, the benevolent and merciful judge of all humanity. “The Book” is revelation contained in scripture; Muslims believe all revelation came from the only God, who revealed His will to humanity repeatedly, in various times and places to different groups.

## The Quran

The Quran (“Koran” is the archaic spelling) is Islamic scripture, the book containing Islamic revelation. It is in Arabic, the language of the prophet through whom it was revealed, Muhammad (d. 632 CE). The term *qur’an* means “recitation,” reflecting the belief that the Quran is the word of God

(Allah, from the Arabic *al-ilah*: the [one] god), not the word of the prophet who delivered it. Although the Quran was revealed (or “sent down” [*munzal*, in Arabic]) in the seventh century CE, Muslims believe that it is actually timeless. As the word of God, it is co-eternal with God. Like God, it has always existed. It therefore was not created but was revealed word for word in the Arabic language at a particular time, through God’s final messenger, Muhammad. The Quran says that its specific words reflect a divine archetype of revelation, which it calls “the preserved tablet” (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*, 85:22). Although anthropomorphic language (using human traits to describe God) is recognized as only symbolic in Islam, still it is not uncommon to hear the Quran described as reflecting the eternal “will” or “mind” of God. However, it is described, the Quran is considered eternal.

The term *qur’an* is sometimes interpreted as “reading,” even though Prophet Muhammad is described by the Quran as unlettered or illiterate (7:157, 62:2). Rather than “reading” a message, Prophet Muhammad is described as delivering (or “reciting”) a message that God had imprinted on his heart (e.g., 26:194). At one point, the Quran refers to Gabriel (Jibril) as the one “who has brought it [revelation] down upon your heart” (2:97). As a result, traditional interpreters claim that the angel Gabriel was the medium through whom Muhammad received God’s revelation.

The Quran uses the term *qur’an* seventy times, sometimes generically referring to “recitation” but usually referring to “revelation.” The Quran commonly refers to itself as simply “the Book” (*al-kitab*), a term used hundreds of times to refer to scripture, including the Torah and the Gospels. Muslims therefore frequently refer to the Quran as The Book. They usually use adjectives like “holy,” “noble,” or “glorious” to show their respect for the Quran. They annually commemorate the beginning of its revelation on the Night of Power (or Destiny [*laylat al-qadr*]), during the last ten days of Ramadan, which is the month when observant Muslims fast from sunrise until sunset.

The Quran consists of 114 chapters, called *suras* (in Arabic, *surah*; pl.: *suwar*). The verses of the chapters are called *ayat* (sing.: *ayah*). The chapters range in length from 3 to 286 verses. The first sura is short, but the remaining suras are arranged from longer to shorter (i.e., in descending order of length), rather than in chronological order.

Chapters of the Quran may be referred to by number, but each also has a name, such as “The Opening” (Sura 1), “Women” (Sura 4), and “Repentance” (Sura 9). These names were ascribed after the Quran was canonized (established in its authoritative form) and typically derive from major

references in the chapters. All but one sura (Sura 9) begins with the phrase “In the name of God the Merciful and Compassionate.” Twenty-nine suras are also preceded by a letter or brief series of Arabic letters, whose meaning is unclear. Some scholars believe they refer to elements within the sura itself, some believe they refer to early organizational components of the suras or served as mnemonic devices, and some believe these letters have mystical or spiritual meanings. Whatever their significance, these letters are considered to be part of the revelation itself.

People reading the Quran for the first time will notice that it often speaks in the first person (“I” or “We,” used interchangeably) and may assume that this usage indicates the voice of Muhammad. But Muslims believe the Quran is revealed in the voice of God. For example, in the verse about the first night of revelation, the Quran says, “Surely We sent it [revelation] down on the Night of Power” (97:1). In this voice, the Quran frequently addresses Muhammad, instructing him to “say” or “tell” people certain things, sometimes in response to specific issues. For example, when people doubted Muhammad’s role as prophet, the Quran instructs him: “Say, ‘O People, indeed I am a clear warner to you. Those who believe and do good works, for them is forgiveness and generous blessing’” (22:49–50). The Quran also offers advice to Muhammad. When people accused him of being a mere poet or even a fortune-teller, the Quran says, “Do they say that you have forged [the Quran]? Say, ‘If I have forged it, my crimes are my own; but I am innocent of what you do’” (11:35). The Quran also offers encouragement to Muhammad when his efforts seem futile: “Have we not opened your heart and relieved you of the burden that was breaking your back?” (94:1–3). At other times, the Quran speaks directly to the people about Muhammad. Concerning the issue of the authenticity of his message, the Quran addresses the community, saying, “The heart [of the Prophet] was not deceived. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?” (53:11–12). Many of the Quran’s verses seem to be in the voice of Muhammad, addressing the community with the word of God and referring to God in the third person. For instance, we are told, “There is no compulsion in religion. Right has been distinguished from wrong. Whoever rejects idols and believes in God has surely grasped the strongest, unbreakable bond. And God hears and knows” (2:256). But such verses are generally embedded in longer passages that begin with the divine command to “tell them” the information thus revealed.

To whom was the Quran addressed? Although its message is meant for all times and places, the Quran’s immediate audience was the community of

seventh-century Arabia, in which Prophet Muhammad lived. That is why the Quran explains that it is purposely revealed in the Arabic language. Interestingly, and uniquely among monotheistic scriptures, the Quran assumes both males and females among its audience, and frequently addresses the concerns of both. For example, it tells us that God is prepared to forgive and richly reward all good people, both male and female:

Men who submit [to God] and women who submit [to God],  
 Men who believe and women who believe,  
 Men who obey and women who obey,  
 Men who are honest and women who are honest,  
 Men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast,  
 Men who are humble and women who are humble,  
 Men who give charity and women who give charity,  
 Men who fast and women who fast,  
 Men who are modest and women who are modest,  
 Men and women who remember God often.

(33:35)

Still, the overall audience for the scripture is humanity as a whole. The Quran refers to itself as “guidance for humanity” (*hudan li'l-nas*).

The Quran was revealed through Prophet Muhammad to the community in seventh-century Arabia over a period of twenty-two to twenty-three years, but it was recorded and canonized soon after Muhammad’s death. During his lifetime, Muhammad’s followers sometimes recorded his pronouncements; some even memorized and transmitted them orally. After his death, and on the deaths of some of those who memorized the Quran (*huffaz*), the Prophet’s companions decided to establish a written version of the Quran so that it could be preserved and transmitted accurately to future generations. This process was begun by a close companion of Muhammad, Zayd ibn Thabit (d. 655 CE), who collected written records of Quranic verses soon after the death of the Prophet. The third successor to the Prophet (caliph), Uthman ibn Affan (d. 656 CE), is credited with commissioning Zayd and other respected scholars to establish the authoritative written version of the Quran based on the written and oral records. This was accomplished within twenty years of Muhammad’s death. That text became the model from which copies were made and promulgated among various Muslim communities, and other versions are believed to have been destroyed. Because of the existence of various dialects and the lack of vowel markers in early Arabic, slight variations in the reading of the authoritative

text were possible. To avoid confusion, markers indicating specific vowel sounds were introduced into the language by the end of ninth century, but seven slightly variant readings (*qira'at*), or methods of recitation, are acceptable.

Copies of the Quran were produced by hand until the modern era. The first printed version was produced in Rome in 1530; a second printed version was produced in Hamburg in 1694. The first critical edition produced in Europe was done by Gustav Flügel in 1834. The numbering of the verses varies slightly between the standard 1925 Egyptian edition favored by many Muslim scholars and the 1834 edition established by Flügel, used by many Western scholars. (Editions from Pakistan and India often follow the Egyptian standard edition, with the exception that they count the opening phrase, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," of each sura as the first verse.) The variations in verse numbering comprise only a few verses and reflect differing interpretations of where certain verses end.

The Quran is considered to be authentic only in Arabic. Even non-Arabic speakers—the vast majority of Muslims—pray in Arabic. Although Arabs comprise less than one-third of the world's Muslim population, the Arabic language still serves as a symbol of unity throughout the Muslim world. Nevertheless, numerous translations of the Quran have been produced. The first Latin translation was done in the twelfth century, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, abbot of the monastery of Cluny in France. It was published in Switzerland in the sixteenth century. Translations (or, more accurately, "interpretations" of the Quran) are now readily available in virtually all written languages and on the Internet. Still, Quranic calligraphy remains not only the highest form of visual art but a spiritual exercise. Beautifully hand-wrought copies of Quranic verses adorn many Muslim homes—in ink on paper, stitched into fabric, or carved into wood, metal or stone. It is also common for Muslims to wear verses of the Quran in locketts or on necklaces. And each year during the pilgrimage season, a special cloth embroidered in gold with Quranic verses is created to drape the Kaaba (the sanctuary in Mecca which is the object of the annual Islamic pilgrimage, the *hajj*).

Many pious Muslims maintain belief in the miraculous power of the words of the Quran itself. Carrying a small replica of Quranic verses is popularly believed to offer protection against illness or accident. Yet by far the most popular way to experience the Quran is by listening to it. The art of Quranic recitation (*tajwid*) is highly developed and extremely demanding. A student must memorize the Quran, in any of the seven pronunciation

and intonation patterns (*qira'at*) mentioned previously, understand its meaning (even if one is not an Arabic speaker), and observe a number of rules dealing with spiritual attitudes (such as humility), purity, and posture (such as facing the direction of Mecca, if possible). So important is the experience of hearing the Quran properly and reverently recited that learning Quran recitation is traditionally considered a communal obligation (meaning that not everyone in a given community is required to learn Quran recitation, but enough people must do so to ensure that there are sufficient Quran reciters to serve the community).

Gifted Quran reciters are highly respected throughout the Muslim world. In recent years, a number of women have joined the ranks of popular Quran reciters. But even Muslims who are not able to recite the Quran demonstrate their respect for the Book by making sure they are in a state of spiritual purity when they handle it. As in Orthodox Judaism, blood and other bodily fluids are believed to be agents of impurity in Islam. Therefore, the passing of any bodily fluids requires that Muslims wash before touching a copy of the Quran. Thus, for example, women who are menstruating are traditionally not allowed to touch a copy of the Quran.

Most importantly, the Quran is the focal point of all Islamic belief and practice. It is the miracle of Islam. Unlike Jesus, who according to the Quran performed many miracles, Prophet Muhammad brought no other miracle besides the Quran. And although Muslims are utterly devoted to Prophet Muhammad, frequently express their love for him, and consider him eminently worthy of emulation, Muhammad does not occupy the position in Islam that Jesus occupies in Christianity. The Quran does. The Quran tells us that when people asked Muhammad to demonstrate the authenticity of his prophecy by performing miracles as other prophets had done, he simply and reverently referred to the Quran. The exquisite beauty of its language and wisdom of its sublime message are considered beyond compare and impossible to imitate. This belief is conveyed in the doctrine of the "inimitability" of the Quran (*i'jaz*). Thus, whereas Christians consider Jesus' life as miraculous and the basis of their religion, Muslims consider the Quran to be the cornerstone of Islam. Muslims are required to pray five times daily: at sunrise, midday, afternoon, sunset, evening. At each of these times, verses of the Quran are recited in a specified order and number of repetitions (ranging from twice at morning prayer to four times at evening prayer). Extra prayers may be added individually but, again, they are based on the Quran. The weekly congregational prayer (at midday on Fridays) follows the same pattern, although it includes a sermon (*khutbah*), often

based upon a Quranic theme. As well, devout Muslims read the entire Quran during the holy month of fasting, Ramadan. The book is divided into thirty sections for this purpose.

## The Quran and Other Scriptures

The Quran contains numerous references to prior monotheistic scriptures, which it identifies as the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Muslims believe that the Quran reiterates, confirms, and completes these previous scriptures, calling on all people to remember and respect the truths carried in them. Indeed, it assumes people are familiar with those texts. It therefore does not recount their historic narratives. Instead, it uses characters and events familiar to Jews and Christians to make specific moral or theological points. As a result, although references to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, for example, appear frequently, they are not arranged in chronological order.

The Quran refers to its religion as *al-din*, the monotheistic tradition that began with the covenant between God and humanity marked by the obedience of Abraham. (Interestingly, the term *din*, often translated as “religion,” actually means “judgment”; the Quran calls the Last Day, for example, the *yom al-din*, “day of judgment.” The term is related to “obligation,” “debt,” and “law,” as it is in Hebrew.) Adam is actually considered the first prophet because through the story of Adam and his wife in the garden—the same story revealed to Jews and Christians—humanity began to learn that God created us with a purpose. Fulfilling that purpose requires obedience to the divine will, and disobedience will bring suffering and punishment. But Abraham is the first major prophet, given the profound impact of his message.

The story of Abraham is familiar to all monotheists. He was an aged Iraqi shepherd who had longed for a child for years. God chose to favor Abraham with a child, but then asked him to demonstrate his obedience by killing his beloved son. At the last minute, God spared the child, but Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son rather than disobey the command of God sealed the agreement between God and humanity. God promises eternal reward to all who submit to the will of God; “one who submits” to the will of God is a *muslim*. Likewise, God promised punishment for willful disobedience. One of the disagreements between Muslims and Jews concerns the identity of the son Abraham was willing to sacrifice. Although the

Quran does not state it explicitly, Muslims believe that Abraham intended to sacrifice his son Ishmael (Ismail), rather than Isaac (Ishaq), and that Muslims are thus spiritual descendants of Abraham through Ishmael and his mother Hagar (Hajar).

As well, according to Islamic teaching, Abraham's act was personal; its reward was not bequeathed to successive generations. The patriarch serves as a model for others to follow, but each individual must earn his or her own reward from God by likewise submitting to the divine will:

Those to whom We gave the Book  
and who follow it accurately,  
they believe in it; and whoever disbelieves in it,  
they are the losers.  
Children of Israel, remember My blessing  
with which I blessed you, and that I  
have preferred you above all others;  
and fear a day when no soul shall substitute  
for another, and no ransom  
will be accepted from it, nor any  
intercession will help it,  
and they will not be assisted.  
And when his Lord tested Abraham  
with certain words, and he fulfilled them.  
He said, "I make you a leader  
for the people." He said, "And what of my progeny?"  
He said, "My covenant does not extend to oppressors."  
(2:121–124)

In other words, it is not the group one belongs to that determines salvation; the Quran says that it is demonstrating submission (*islam*) to the will of God through good deeds that brings reward. Nevertheless, Muslims agree that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son was of utmost importance; in thus demonstrating his commitment to the will of God he established the foundational covenant between God and those who believe in Him. Jews and Muslims are both descendants of Abraham and heirs to that covenant.

Through another great messenger of God, Moses (Musa), the Torah was revealed. Mentioning the Torah eighteen times, the Quran reminds believers that its guidance continues to be valid. The Quran actually describes itself as "confirming the truth of the Torah that is before me" (3:50) and calls on believers to "bring the Torah now, and recite it" (3:93).

Believers are expected to be honest, charitable, care for the needy, fast, obey dietary regulations, and overall to honor God and respect His creation, just as the Torah instructed.

The last great messenger before Muhammad was Jesus ('Issa). Mentioned twenty-five times in the Quran, Jesus is called the Messiah (although the meaning of that term is not made clear), the son of a virgin, and one who brought great signs from God. His message, the Gospel, is confirmed and described as consistent with the messages of all prophets. Speaking through Muhammad, the Quran says that God is sending the same religion (*din*) that He sent through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, saying: "Establish [true] religion [*din*] and do not be divided about it" (42:13). But the Quran does assert that those who believe that Jesus is divine, the son of God, and part of a divine trinity, are mistaken:

O People of Scripture, do not exaggerate your religion or say anything about God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His word which He sent to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messenger and do not say "Three" ... God is only one. (4:171)

Still, like the messages of the other prophets, Jesus' message is true, according to the Quran, and the Jews were mistaken to reject it.

Muhammad is presented as the last in the succession of prophets sent by God to reveal the divine will: "And when Moses said to his people, 'O my people, why do you hurt me, though you know I am the messenger of God to you?' ... And when Jesus, son of Mary, said, 'Children of Israel, I am indeed the messenger of God to you, confirming the Torah that is before me, and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad'; then when he brought them clear signs, they said, 'This is sheer sorcery'" (61:5-6). ("Amhad" is a variation on the name Muhammad and refers to Prophet Muhammad in this passage. Muslims believe that the prediction of the coming of Muhammad was deleted from or misinterpreted in Christian scriptures, for example, John 16:6-15.)

Thus, although this monotheistic religion had been accurately revealed before the time of Muhammad, the Quran says that the communities that received those scriptures had become confused about it (42:14). Whether through ignorance or by deliberately distorting the message, many Jews and Christians had fallen into disagreement, each claiming to have the truth. Indeed, the Quran chastises both Jews and Christians for their mutual rejection. "The Jews say the Christians have nothing to stand on, and the

Christians say the Jews have nothing to stand on, while they both recite the same Scripture” (Quran 2:113). It is God who will decide on all people’s fate, on the Day of Judgment, when all deeds will be weighed in the scale of justice. Those who have demonstrated their true belief through good deeds “have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve” (2:112).

The Quran advises that if Jews and Christians understood their scriptures properly, there would be no dispute and, what is more, they would recognize that the Quran truly confirms what had been revealed before. “This is a blessed Scripture We have revealed, confirming that which was before it . . . ” (6:92). “This Quran narrates to the children of Israel most of what they disagree about. It is a guide and a merciful gift for believers” (27:76–77).

Again, the continuity of the monotheistic tradition is asserted. The Quran also refers to prophets unknown to Jews and Christians. For example, there is a sura named for an Arab messenger, Hud (Sura 11), who warned his community to follow God, but they rejected him. The same community then rejected another messenger, Salih, and they were punished with tragedy. Similarly, the Quran relates the story of the Midianites, who were done away with when they rejected their messenger Shuaib. The point of these stories, like that of the people of Lot, is that people reject the message of God at their own peril. The Quran mentions more than twenty prophets or messengers between Adam and Muhammad and notes that “there is no distinction among prophets” (2:136; 3:84), referring to consistent truth of all their messages.

In fact, the Quran states that every nation has been sent a messenger from God. (“Every nation has its Messenger” [10:47]; see also 16:36: “We sent forth among every nation a Messenger,” and cf. 16:63 and 35:24.) The Quran does note that some prophets excel others (2:253), generally assumed to refer to those who left laws or texts, or whose historical impact was greater than that of others. But the message is always essentially the same: God rewards those who do His will and punishes those who do not. The Quran informs its audience that Muhammad’s revelation is an integral part of the same tradition:

He has laid down for you as religion  
what He charged Noah with, and what  
We have revealed to you, and what We  
charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus:  
Practice the religion, and do not separate  
over it.

(42:13)

The Quran calls on believers to recognize the religion of Abraham, clearly positioning itself as revelation in the same tradition:

And they say, "Be Jews or Christians and you shall be guided." Say: "No, rather the religion of Abraham, a true believer; he was no idolater."  
Say: "We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender."

(2:135–136; cf. 26:196–197)

The Quran then confirms that it is the final clarification of the message. Those who accept the message brought by Muhammad are called "the best community brought forth to people, enjoining good and forbidding evil, and believing in God" (3:110). The "People of the Book"—those who have received the previous scriptures—will suffer for rejecting true prophets. "Some of them are believers," the Quran claims, "but most of them are sinful" (3:110). The Quran is the perfect expression of the divine will; no other is necessary. As the Quran puts it in a verse delivered toward the end of Muhammad's career: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing upon you and approved submission [*al-islam*] as your religion. Whoever is forced by hunger to sin ... God is forgiving, merciful" (5:3). Therefore, the succession of prophets ends with Muhammad. The Quran calls him the "seal of the prophets" (33:40).

Thus, the Quran reiterates, confirms, and completes Jewish and Christian scriptures. It does not try to establish a new religion but rather to inspire people to new commitment to the one true religion of monotheism. The term *islam* is used only eight times in the Quran, and it is referred to as the true religion. But in the Quran the term means the act of submitting to the divine will, rather than an organized religious group separate from other monotheistic traditions. By contrast, the term *din*, meaning the true religion revealed by the one God at various times throughout human history, is used more than ninety times. Muslims believe that although the Quran corrects some misinterpretations of previous scriptures, overall it focuses

on inspiring Jews, Christians, and Muslims to work together toward their shared goal of justice and, in so doing, to achieve eternal reward: “People of the Book, come together in agreement on a word, that we worship only God” (3:64).

## Themes of the Quran

Because the Quran teaches that God has sent revelation to all communities, and that revelation includes specific rituals and laws, Muslims do not find it surprising that communities differ in their perceptions and practices. The Quran also says that if God had wanted all people to be the same, He would have made them that way. “For each of you We have established a law and a way. And if God had willed it, He would have made you one people. But [you were made as you are] to test you by what He has given you. . . .” The differences among religions are therefore believed to be part of the divine plan. The Quran invites all people to participate with Muslims in the struggle to do the will of God. In its words, “So compete with one another in good deeds” (5:48).

Solidarity among individuals and communities in doing the will of God is therefore among the themes of the Quran. And the Quran does provide specific regulations for its own community, the Muslims, including purity, prayer, charity, fasting and dietary regulations, and pilgrimage. But the majority of Quranic verses deal with overarching themes and moral guidance, rather than specific regulations. As noted previously, the Quran refers to itself, as well as to the Torah and the Gospels, as “guidance for humanity” (e.g., 3:4). That guidance is expressed through a number of interrelated themes.

The fundamental theme of the Quran is monotheism: *tawhid*. Derived from the Arabic term for “one,” *tawhid* does not appear as such in the Quran (although other forms of the term do), but it conveys the rich complexity of the Quran’s insistence on the oneness of God. It entails first of all that there is only one God, the god (*al-ilah*), Allah. None of the deities worshiped by the Meccans is actually divine, the Quran asserts. They can be of little help to human beings. God has no partners. Placing others in His stead or “associating” (*shirk*) partners with God is bound to lead to failure in the human quest for happiness. Further, God is unitary: without parts. The Quran insists, as noted previously, that God is not part of a Trinity, as the Christians believe (see 4:171, 5:73). The notion of *tawhid* goes beyond simple monotheism, however, particularly in the view of modern Islamic thinkers. Just as there is only

one God, there is only one creator of all human beings, one provider, protector, guide, and judge of all human beings. All human beings are equal in their utter dependence on God, and their well-being depends on their acknowledging that fact and living accordingly. This acknowledgment is both the will and the law of God. Modern Islamic commentators such as the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), and revolutionary Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) stress, therefore, that tawhid implies that we must order society in accordance with the will of God. A tawhid-based society is one in which people devote themselves to serving God by contributing to a society that reflects and safeguards the dignity and equality in which all were created. Submission (islam) to that will is the route to our happiness, both in this life and the hereafter.

The Quran presents detailed discussions of the major characteristics of a tawhid-based society, and chief among them is mercy or compassion, another major theme. Although the Quran frequently warns of punishment for those who violate the will of God and describes vividly the scourges of hell, its overriding emphasis is on divine mercy. “The Merciful” (*al-rahman*) is one of the most frequently invoked names of God, equivalent to Allah. As mentioned, all but one sura of the Quran begins by invoking the name of God “the merciful and compassionate.” Divine mercy is often paired with divine forgiveness. “God is forgiving and merciful” is a common refrain. At times, especially in the early suras, the Quran sternly warns people that they ignore its message at their own risk: “Woe to the slanderer and backbiter, who collects wealth and counts it continually. He thinks his wealth will bring him eternal life, but no, he will certainly be thrown into hell” (104:1–6). “Have you seen the one who makes a mockery of faith? He is the one who mistreats orphans, and does not encourage feeding the poor. Woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer. They are seen [praying] but [then] do not give charity” (107:1–7).

The Quran balances these warnings with sympathy for the weaknesses of human nature: “Indeed, the human being is born impatient. When evil touches him he is anxiety-ridden, and when good things happen to him, grudging” (70:19–21). In this context it offers advice and encouragement: “As for the human being, when God tests him and honors him and blesses him, he says, ‘My Lord has favored me.’ But when God tests him and restricts his livelihood, he says, ‘My Lord has forsaken me.’ No; you do not honor orphans or work for the wellbeing of the poor, you take over [others’] inheritance and are overly attached to wealth” (89:15–20).

[W]hen you are aboard ships and they sail with a fair breeze and [those on board] are happy about it, then a violent wind overtakes them and the waves come from every side and they think they are drowning, then call upon God, practicing religion properly [and saying that] if you spare us from this we will be indeed grateful. But when He has rescued them, indeed they begin oppression on earth. O People, your oppression will only hurt yourselves! (10:22–23)

Given this understanding of human nature, the Quran repeatedly reassures people that God is merciful and compassionate. “My mercy encompasses everything” (7:156). “On the day when every soul is confronted with what it has done, good and evil, they will desire a great distance from [evil]. God asks you to beware; God is full of pity for servants. Say: If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is forgiving, merciful” (3:30–31).

Thus, the Quran sets an example for people to emulate in their efforts to establish a just society. Variations on the phrases “be compassionate” or “show mercy” (*rahma*) occur hundreds of times in the Quran. People are told to be kind and cherish their parents (19:14; 19:32), and even to ask forgiveness from God for them if they make mistakes (60:4). Even though the people of Mecca initially rejected Prophet Muhammad and his followers and persecuted and evicted them from their homes, the believers are told that they should show kindness and justice toward those Meccans who did not participate in the aggression. But the Quran places particular emphasis on compassion for the most vulnerable members of society. It mentions orphans often, calling for their care and protection. Their well-being is routinely mentioned as the measure of the piety of both individuals and society. For example, the Quran instructs Muhammad to tell people when they ask about orphans: “Improvement [of their welfare] is great goodness” (2:220).

Righteous is the one who  
believes in God and the Last Day,  
the angels, Scripture, and the prophets;  
gives wealth, however cherished,  
to relatives and orphans,  
the needy, travelers, beggars,  
and for freeing slaves;  
and prays and gives zakat.  
And those who fulfill their promises,  
... and are patient in  
misfortune, hardship and peril—

these are the ones who are sincere;  
these are the righteous ones.

(2:177)

Interestingly, the Quran's permission for polygyny (multiple wives) is made in the context of concern for orphans. In a sura titled "Women" (Sura 4), people are told to protect the rights of orphans for whom they are responsible—if necessary, by marrying them. In seventh-century Arabia, a society plagued by warfare and poverty, there were many orphans. Female orphans were particularly at risk because this was not a society in which women had economic independence. Unless they inherited wealth women were entirely dependent on men. Because of the brutality of that society toward women, female infanticide was common. People killed their baby girls, fearing they would not be able to provide for them and that they would be subjected to the whims of those who had no respect for women. Out of concern for the protection of women, the Quran forbids female infanticide. It also rebukes men who are ashamed when a daughter, rather than a son, is born. On a practical level, it requires that females be given inheritance shares (4:7) and that the traditional dowry required at weddings be given as a gift to the bride (4:4), rather than to the bride's parents as a "bride price." The Quran also insists that men and women both are entitled to whatever wages they earn. With regard to the orphans in Medinan society, the Quran tells men to treat them fairly, and if they are afraid that orphans are not being treated fairly, that they may protect them by marrying up to four, but only if they can treat them all impartially. If they do not feel they can avoid slighting one of their wives, then they should only marry one (4:3). Although the focus of this verse is compassion for the weak and equity for women, traditional interpreters conclude that it simply allows men to marry four wives at a time. Modern interpreters tend to return to the focus of justice and incorporate the Quran's high ideals for mutually satisfactory spousal relationships when discussing marriage. The Quran says that spouses were created by God to find comfort in one another and to be bound by "love and kindness" (30:21). As a result, many modern interpreters believe the Quran advocates monogamy except under extraordinary circumstances (for example, those in seventh-century Arabia). They believe that the Quran's emphasis on human equality implies that they should work to establish societies in which polygyny is not necessary to protect women.

Similarly, the Quran also acknowledges the institution of slavery but says that moral superiority lies in freeing slaves, as well as in feeding the hungry

and orphans (90:13–17). Freeing slaves and feeding the hungry are enjoined as ways of making up for sins (5:89).

Another group for whom the Quran shows special concern is debtors. Charity is to be used to help debtors, and people are supposed to pardon debts owed to them as an act of charity. The Quran is particularly concerned with abolishing usury, which was common in seventh-century Arabia. Pre-Islamic records indicate that interest rates were exorbitant. The Quran therefore forbids usury, stating that usurers “will dwell in fire for eternity” (2:275).

So important is concern for the poor that the Quran warns those who pray but then “are heedless of their prayers,” and those who pray but then “mistreat orphans and do not encourage feeding the poor.” These people, says the Quran, make a mockery of their faith (107:1–7). Praying and performing other rituals, according to the Quran, are obligatory not because they please God in themselves; they are meant to keep people focused on their reason for existing in the first place and motivated to work toward the fulfillment of God’s will in all spheres of life. The Quran says, for example, that the meat that people sacrifice does not reach God; it is for the benefit of believers that rituals are performed: “Their flesh does not reach God nor their blood, but your righteousness reaches God” (22:37). Similarly, sin does not hurt God; it hurts the sinners and their communities: “Muhammad is only a messenger, like those who have passed away before him. When he dies or is killed, will you reject [his message]? Those who do so do not hurt God; God will reward the grateful” (3:144). What is important is not the ritual of prayer or sacrifice itself, but the virtuous life and good deeds it encourages:

A kind word with forgiveness is better than almsgiving followed by injury. God is absolute and forgiving. O believers, do not make your charity worthless through insult and injury, like the person who gives of his wealth only for show but does not believe in God and the Last Day. (2:263–264)

In the same context, charity is also extremely important in the Quranic perspective. “Surely God rewards the charitable,” we are told when the story of Joseph is being recounted (12:88). Charity is often described as a means of making up for offenses. The Quran maintains the biblical ethic of retaliation, a standard means of maintaining order in societies lacking legal enforcement institutions, but it says that forgoing retaliation as an act of charity will help make up for sins (5:45). Charity is also

prescribed as a means of self-purification (9:103). All Muslims are required to give charity according to Islamic law. The term used for this kind of charity (*zakah* or *zakat*) actually means “purification.” The idea is that wealth is a good thing, as long as it is used for good purposes like helping the needy and “those whose hearts are to be reconciled,” and freeing slaves and debtors (9:60).

Overall, the society envisioned by the Quran is characterized by justice: “O Believers, be steadfast [for] God, giving testimony in justice, and do not let a people’s hatred cause you to act without justice. Be just, that is nearer to righteousness” (5:8). “Believers, establish justice, being witnesses for God, even if it [works] against yourselves or against your parents or relatives; regardless of whether [those involved are] rich or poor, God has priority for you” (4:135). Thus, the profile of a *muslim* (or *muslima*, the feminine form), “one who submits to the will of God,” is integrally linked to the theme of justice. Indeed, the Quran says repeatedly that God has not only called for justice (e.g., 7:29) but that “God loves the just” (5:42, 49:9, 60:8).

A society characterized by justice, wherein the well-being of the entire group is measured in terms of the well-being of its most vulnerable members, is the external manifestation of *islam*. The internal manifestation may be found in a set of virtues that form the Islamic conscience. Muslims are expected to be guided by the will of God in every encounter, every decision, and every action. They are called to live their lives guided by *taqwa*, a term whose common English translation as “fear of God” or “righteousness” does not do it justice. It is a more comprehensive term, indicating the characteristics of a well-formed conscience, an internalized morality, or simply “God-consciousness.” The Quran gives guidance on some specific matters, often describing a particular choice as “closer to *taqwa*” or “approximating *taqwa*.” For example, in response to questions about divorce before consummation of a marriage, men are told that they should provide support for the divorced bride fairly, in accordance with their means, even if it is not required by the marriage agreement. That is called “closer to *taqwa*” (2:237). Likewise, believers are told that they must never let hatred for a people lead to unjust behavior. “Act justly, that is nearer to *taqwa*” (5:8). In general, people are told to help one another in the effort to achieve *taqwa* (5:2) and to “conspire for virtue and *taqwa*” (58:9; see Chapter 2, “Spirituality,” for further discussion of *taqwa*). Thus, along with *iman* (belief in God) and *islam* (submission to the will of God), *taqwa* is one of Islam’s quintessential virtues. Belief in God is considered essential for human beings to be

able to overcome their innate insecurities and selfishness. It is also considered natural, an inborn instinct to recognize the existence and supremacy of God. Submission to the will of God is believed to be the proper response to recognition of God, indeed the only possible response. True recognition of God inevitably results in *taqwa*, a conscience guided by God and the best interests of humanity.

Similarly, Muslims are called on to be a “median” or “moderate community” (*ummat al-wasit*), a balance between extremes, “so that you may be witnesses to the people” (2:143). In yet another refrain of the Quran, believers are told that they are the best of communities in that they “enjoin honorable actions and forbid the objectionable” (*amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahiy 'an al-munkar*, 3:110; see also 3:104, 3:114, 7:157, 9:67, 9:71, 9:112, 22:41, 31:17).

Through these themes and some specific legislation, the Quran guides humanity. But it does not regulate all human activity. In many cases, it takes the realities of its historic context into consideration, establishes goals, and challenges humanity to achieve them. For example, as indicated previously, the Quran provides a significant amount of legislation concerning the treatment of slaves. It allows the common practice of concubinage, but demands that slave women not be forced into sexual relations (24:33). The Quran acknowledges that slaves do not have the same legal standing as free people; instead, they are treated as minors for whom the owners are responsible. But it recommends that unmarried Muslims marry their slaves (24:32), indicating that it considers slaves and free people morally equal. It also instructs Muslims to allow their slaves to buy their freedom, and even to help them pay for it if possible (24:33). The Quran clearly recognizes that slavery is a source of inequity in society because it frequently recommends freeing slaves, along with feeding and clothing the poor, as part of living a moral life (90:12–18) and a way to make up for offenses (5:89, 58:3). Yet despite its overall emphasis on human dignity and equality, the Quran does not abolish the institution of slavery. As in the days of the Hebrew Bible, slavery was an integral part of the economic system at the time the Quran was revealed; abolition of slavery would have required an overhaul of the entire socioeconomic system. Therefore, instead of abolishing slavery outright, virtually all interpreters agree that the Quran established an ideal toward which society should work: a society in which no one person would be enslaved to another. Therefore, although slavery is permitted in the Quran, it is now banned in Muslim countries.

The principle demonstrated in this example is that there is a distinction between the reality of legal slavery in the Quran, and the moral

recommendations concerning slavery. The former is considered a contingent circumstance, able to be changed. The latter reflects the eternal model of human dignity. At the time of the early Muslim community, the immediate emancipation of all slaves would have caused economic chaos, which obviously would not have been conducive to Islamic goals of well-being for all people. But the ideals toward which the community should strive were clearly set forth in this case. Applying the ideals in the modern world requires the abolition of slavery, a goal that has largely been achieved in the Muslim world.

But there is disagreement among Muslims about some other issues in the Quran. For example, in the context of concern for debtors, the Quran allows people to lend money but not to charge usurious interest rates, and when they lend money they must record the amount so that no disagreements will arise. The Quran says that the parties involved in the transaction should get someone to write it down fairly. It specifies that the debtor (or the debtor's guardian, in case the debtor is incapable) is to dictate to the scribe and that he must disclose the full amount of the debt. The Quran then specifies that the transaction must also be witnessed by two men, or by one man and two women in case two men are not available (2:282). All this care is taken to avoid inequity in lending practices. But another question arises concerning the specification that two women's evidence is required to substitute for one man's testimony. Does this verse imply that women will always be unfamiliar with the details of finance and that therefore their testimony on financial issues is always in need of verification? Or does it mean that women's testimony on any issue in general would always need verification? Or does it mean that the testimony of anyone who is uneducated needs corroboration, and that the verse is simply using women as an example, so that the testimony of educated women should actually be considered reliable? Traditional interpreters derive from this verse that women's testimony in court is worth only half that of men. Modern thinkers believe the requirement for two women in place of one man pertains only to circumstances, like those of seventh-century Arabia, in which most women were uneducated and unfamiliar with business transactions. They believe the Quran's essential egalitarianism indicates that the economic skill of women in the Quran's discussion of lending practices is simply an example, not an eternal ideal.

As these examples demonstrate, there is no single formula for achieving justice, but the Quran establishes the standard of human dignity and provides guidance in the struggle to uphold that dignity in ever-changing

circumstances. And it informs human beings that the effort to establish justice is the basis on which they will be judged. Those who “believe and do good works,” the Quran states repeatedly, will have nothing to fear in the afterlife; they will be richly rewarded. “Believers, bow down and prostrate yourselves in prayer and worship your Lord and do good deeds, and you will prosper. And struggle for God as you should struggle” (22:77–78). This struggle “on the path of God” (*fi sabil Allah*), as the Quran often puts it, is the root meaning of the term *jihad*. Indeed, the Quran presents a challenge to humanity. Using Prophet Muhammad as the model and remembering the forgiveness and mercy of God, people must strive to create a just society. As in the case of previous societies described by the Quran, communities as a whole will be judged in history; God does not allow oppressive societies to flourish indefinitely. But individuals will be judged in the afterlife, based on whether or not they have attempted to contribute to this effort:

To God belongs whatever is in the heavens and earth. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will. God is forgiving, merciful.  
 Believers, do not consume usury, doubling and redoubling [the amount].  
 Do your duty to God and you will be successful.  
 Protect yourselves from the fire prepared for disbelievers.  
 And obey God and the messenger, and you will find mercy.  
 And compete with one another for forgiveness from your Lord, and for paradise as great as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous.  
 Those who [are generous] in [times of] prosperity and adversity, and those who control their anger and who pardon others; God loves those who do good;  
 and those who, when they commit an offense or wrong themselves, remember God and beg forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except God?—and who do not repeat knowingly what they have done; these are the ones whose reward from their Lord is forgiveness and gardens with rivers flowing beneath, where they will abide, a great reward for those who work.  
 There have been ages before you, so travel the earth and see what was the end of those who disbelieve.  
 This is a clear sign for people and guidance and a warning to the righteous.  
 Do not give up or grieve, and you will certainly prosper if you are believers ...  
 And God will make clear those who believe and blot out the disbelievers.  
 Do you think that you will enter heaven without God recognizing those of you who struggle and those who are steadfast?

(3:129–142)

## **The Exemplary Life of Muhammad, Prophet of Islam: The Sunna**

The Quran thus presents human beings with a formidable challenge. It requires not simply following laws concerning prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, proper diet, and cleanliness. Those rules have been clearly established in revelation and are not subject to change. But the struggle to put the Quran's comprehensive guidance into practice—to be steadfast in faith, honest, sincere, just, merciful, and charitable—requires ongoing effort in diverse and dynamic circumstances. Muslims look to the life of Prophet Muhammad as an inspiring example of how to follow Quranic guidance in all circumstances, no matter how conditions change.

Muhammad was born in poverty in sixth-century Mecca, Arabia, modern-day Saudi Arabia. Most people, including Muhammad's father, worked in the caravan trade for the ruling family of Mecca, the Quraysh. Muhammad's father died before Muhammad was born, and his mother died when he was around six years old. He was taken in by family members, first his grandfather and then his uncle, and entered the caravan trade business as a young man. Even before his call to prophecy, at around age forty, Muhammad achieved success in business and a widespread reputation for honesty and fairness. On accepting the call to prophecy, he devoted himself entirely to the service of God.

At the beginning of his career as a prophet Muhammad had only a small group of followers. They were persecuted by the wealthy rulers of Mecca, who felt threatened by his call for worship of the only God and an end to social injustice. Muhammad and his small community were driven from their homes, forced to live in separate quarters on the outskirts of town, and boycotted. Yet they persevered in their commitment to follow the guidance of God. They were instructed to suffer injustice with dignity. "Call them to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good arguments and reason with them [offering] a better way ... If you punish them, do so in the same measure as you were punished. But if you endure patiently, it is better for [you]" (16:125–126).

Despite persecution, Muhammad continued to warn people of the dire consequences of ignoring God's will. He reminded people that God's will is for a just society, one that reflects the equality all people share in the eyes of their Creator. His message was extremely attractive, and he quickly gained a significant following in Mecca and beyond. Muhammad's reputation as a wise and just arbitrator reached Yathrib (some two hundred miles north of

Mecca), a town that had been suffering under intertribal warfare for years. Delegates from Yathrib invited Muhammad to move to their town, promising to abide by his guidance in return for his settling their disputes.

After some hesitation Muhammad accepted the invitation and, with his followers, moved to Yathrib in the year 622 CE. This event begins the Islamic calendar (called the *Hijra* calendar, to commemorate the “emigration” from Mecca to Yathrib) because it marks a profound shift in the fate of the Muslim community. In Medina, the new name of Yathrib (its full name became “City of the Prophet,” *madinat al-nabi*, anglicized as Medina), the Muslims became an autonomous community, able to establish the religious practice and social vision revealed by God through Prophet Muhammad. They were able to create a community guided by the Quran’s view of human dignity and compassion for the weak.

As the new community of the Prophet grew and its strength increased, so did the Meccans’ hostility toward it. When the Meccans tried to destroy the Muslims in Medina by confiscating their properties and attacking their families back in Mecca, the Quran guided the Muslims to fight back rather than suffer patiently:

And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but do not be aggressors; God does not love the aggressors. And slay them wherever you find them, and expel them from where they expelled you; persecution is more grievous than slaying ... But if they [cease hostilities], surely God is all forgiving, all compassionate. Fight them until there is no affliction and religion is God’s. Then if they [cease hostilities], there shall be no aggression except for the oppressors. (2: 190–193)

This is an example of the kind of guidance given by the Quran that is geared toward specific circumstances. In the first instance of oppression, the community is advised to endure with patience; in the second, it is given permission to fight in self-defense. Scholars of Quranic interpretation (*tafsir*) study the circumstances of revelation to determine the applicability of verses such as these. There are several approaches to determining appropriate applications of Quranic verses. The majority of traditional *mufasssiran* (scholars of *tafsir*) believe that later verses abrogate earlier verses, so that the verses revealed in Medina, after the Hijra, become the standard guidance. (This is called the theory of abrogation, *naskh*.) According to this approach, then, Muslims must fight when they are attacked or have been evicted from their homes, rather than suffer in patience as they were

told to do in Mecca. Other scholars, however, believe that the advice given in Quranic verses is geared toward the circumstances in which it was revealed. According to this approach, if Muslims are weak and outnumbered, as they were in Mecca, they should not attempt to fight, but if they are strong and able, as they were in Medina, retaliation against attacks is required. In either case, it is necessary to know the “circumstances of revelation” (*asbab al-nuzul*), as they are known in Quranic studies. For those who believe that later verses abrogate earlier verses, the circumstances of revelation provide the data necessary to determine the historic order of revelation of the verses because, as noted previously, Quranic verses are not arranged in chronological order. For those who believe that Quranic guidance is geared to specific circumstances, the *asbab al-nuzul* provide data that allow believers to identify the historic conditions that were being addressed in various verses.

Not all Quranic guidance is dependent on circumstances, of course. The verses that give specific legislation such as the requirement for prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, and dietary laws, as well as prohibitions on murder, theft, usury, prostitution, gambling, and the like, are considered eternal; there are no foreseeable circumstances in which requirements for worship will be abrogated or violations of human dignity be sanctioned. However, as we have seen, the majority of Quranic verses are more general, presenting a consistent and coherent vision for a just society, based on divine providence and mercy, and encouraging people to struggle to establish such a society.

The task of fully submitting to the will of God is thus all-consuming. It requires constant effort, but not because any single individual is expected to take more responsibility than she or he can manage. The Quran often counsels that God does not require from people anything beyond their strength (2:286, 6:152, 7:42, 23:62). People will be judged on their intentions: “God ... will hold you responsible for what your hearts have earned” (2:225). Nor is any one group expected to be successful in the struggle to establish a just society in a given time or place. But believers are expected to work toward that goal, by following the guidance given in the Quran and the model established by Prophet Muhammad in Medina as a guide. Thus, Muhammad’s role extends beyond the task of delivering revelation. His life is also a model for humanity of how to live every moment and make every choice in accordance with God’s will. The way he lived his life is described by the Quran as the best example of Islam: “Indeed in the messenger of God is a good example for those who look to God and the Last Day and remember

God often” (33:21). Together, the Quran and the example (called the *Sunna*) set by Prophet Muhammad comprise the guidance Muslims need in their collective responsibility to establish justice.

### **The Early Muslim Community and the Pillars of Islam**

The community established by Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century was resoundingly successful in its effort to create a society characterized by justice, peace, and harmony. The decades of internal strife that had plagued Medina ceased. On his arrival in Medina, the Prophet struck an agreement between the various tribes there and his community of Meccans. This agreement is recorded in history as the Constitution of Medina. According to the provisions of the agreement, all religious communities in Medina form a single community, “separate from other people.”<sup>1</sup> They are to be mutually supportive, particularly in case of attack. Reflecting the Quran’s teaching, Jews and Muslims are expected to maintain their own religious practices; disputes are to be referred to Prophet Muhammad and God. There were no Christian tribes in Medina (although there were some individual converts), but later on Christians and other religious groups were accorded religious freedom, based on the Quran’s prohibition of compulsion in matters of religion (2:256) and on the precedent established in the Constitution of Medina. Before the establishment of the Islamic community in Medina, tribes had been the dominant form of social organization. Tribes were extended families, under the leadership of dominant males, and each was an autonomous unit. Although occasionally alliances would be formed through marriage, there was no effective precedent in the region for a social organization that included peoples of varying families and religious traditions cooperating in the pursuit of shared ideals.

The peace and prosperity of this community comprising various tribes with differing religions living in harmony quickly attracted the attention of its neighbors. There had been some internal dissent. On three occasions local tribes were believed to have violated the constitution by fighting with Muslims or conspiring with outsiders against the Medinan community. They were therefore expelled (in the first two cases), or executed (in the third case). Because all three of these tribes were Jewish, some people think that the community in Medina turned against Jews. In fact, some verses from the Quran referring to incidents such as these caution the Muslims against trusting Jews and Christians.

(For example, “O you who believe, do not take Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends of one another,” 5:51.) However, other Jewish tribes continued to live in peace in Medina. Furthermore, the majority of verses of the Quran, as noted previously, endorse pluralism. The following verse is typical of the Quran’s acceptance of Jews and Christians (among others): “Surely, those who have believed, and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, whoever believes in God and the last day and does good deeds need have no fear nor shall they grieve” (5:69). Most commentators therefore agree that the verses criticizing other religions are directed at specific beliefs or actions, not against the groups as a whole.

Indeed, the model of intertribal harmony established at Medina seems to have been attractive to the surrounding communities. During the lifetime of the Prophet, most tribes of the Arabian peninsula accepted Islam and pledged their allegiance to the Prophet, making Muhammad the most powerful leader in the region. Within eight years of the Hijra, and after several battles, the Meccans also recognized the authority of the Prophet. The event was dramatic. In 628 it was revealed to Muhammad that he would pray in Mecca (48:27). He therefore set out with about one thousand unarmed pilgrims who also wanted to pray in Mecca. They were stopped outside the city at Hudaibiyyah by the Meccans. To preserve peace, the Prophet negotiated a ten-year truce, agreeing to postpone the pilgrimage for a year. But two years later the truce was violated and Muhammad marched on Mecca. He was met by the leader of Mecca’s leading tribe, the Quraysh, who accepted Islam and negotiated peace. Granting amnesty to the city that had persecuted his community, Muhammad entered the city peacefully, and rededicated the Kaaba, the ancient shrine at the center of Mecca. According to the Quran, the Kaaba was originally built by Abraham and his son Ishmael to honor the one God, but it had since been taken over by local tribes, who had filled it with symbols and relics of their polytheistic religions. Local tribes made annual pilgrimages to Mecca, in combination with the city’s annual trade fair and cultural events. When Prophet Muhammad returned to the Kaaba, he cleared the idols from it and made it the focus of pilgrimage for Muslims.

The pilgrimage (*hajj*) is known as the fifth pillar or basic practice of Islam. The first pillar is the *shahadah*, the pledging of commitment to God and the teachings of His prophet, Muhammad. “I bear witness that there is no god (*ilah*) but the God (*al-ilah/Allah*) and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Anyone who sincerely commits to live according to this pledge is considered a Muslim.

The second pillar is prayer (*salat*). Muslims pray five times daily (at sunrise, midday, afternoon, sunset, and nighttime). The prayers consist of recitations of verses of the Quran performed in a series of submissive postures (including bowing low from a kneeling position, so that the forehead touches the ground), and are meant to keep Muslims focused on the will of God in all aspects of life. Many people perform their prayers in mosques (*masajid*, “places of prostration”), although prayers may be performed anywhere that has been swept clean (symbolizing entering a state of purity). The prayer rug, a small carpet usually with a directional indicator to be pointed toward Mecca (the proper direction of prayer), is often used for this purpose. Some people substitute a piece of cloth or cardboard if they have no rug. Believers are instructed simply to precede prayer by washing (or symbolically washing, if no water is available), to prepare themselves spiritually to focus entirely on God. On Fridays the midday prayer should be performed communally in the mosque. At that time, the prayer leader (*imam*) often offers a sermon (*khutbah*).

The third pillar is *zakat* (also spelled *zakah*), or charity. As noted, all Muslims are required to be charitable; *zakat* requires all adult Muslims to give a share of their wealth annually for the support of the poor and to further the cause of Islam.

The fourth pillar is fasting (*sawm* or *siyyam*). All healthy Muslims (i.e., neither the very young nor the very old, nor those who are sick, pregnant, or nursing) are expected to fast from sunrise until sunset during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (Ramadan). This is a spiritual time, during which Muslims pray regularly and read the Quran, and focus on the equality of all people in their utter dependence on God. At the end of the month of fasting comes one of Islam’s two major holidays, the one that celebrates the breaking of the fast (*Eid al-Fitr*). Families and communities celebrate this feast for three days, sharing joyous meals and giving gifts to the children.

As noted, the hajj is the fifth pillar. Muslims are obligated to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able, during the month designated as “the month of pilgrimage” (*dhu al-hijja*). During that time pilgrims dress in simple clothes, removing any indicators of social rank, and together perform ceremonies designed to remind them of the founding of the Kaaba and their reliance on (submission to) God. The pilgrimage culminates in the feast of the sacrifice (*Eid al-Adha*), the other major holiday. Sheep are slaughtered, symbolizing Abraham’s sacrifice; the meat is then consumed and any excess is given to the poor.

The five pillars (*arkan*) are the basic practices of Islam. They structured Islamic life in Medina, as they continue to do today. The pillars are simple practices designed to remind believers constantly of their commitment to the divine will. They also focus attention on the core values of Islam: the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God and the responsibility of all believers to contribute to the well-being of society. Around these practices and core values, the early Muslim community was built and prospered. Following the rededication of the Kaaba in 630, Prophet Muhammad received overtures from tribes throughout the Arabian peninsula, accepting Islam and becoming part of the community, or pledging alliance with the Prophet. The Christian tribes among the bedouin (desert-dwelling nomadic herders) and Jewish tribes, many from the desert oases, generally kept their religious identities, as in Medina, while the polytheistic tribes generally became Muslim. By the time of the Prophet's death, the Islamic community based in Medina was the most vibrant moral, social, and political force in the Arabian peninsula.

### **The Successors (“Caliphs”)**

When Prophet Muhammad died after a brief illness in 632, his followers were distraught. Abu Bakr, one of his closest companions, declared to them, “If anyone worships Muhammad, [know that] Muhammad is dead. But if anyone worships God, [know that] God is alive and does not die.” His goal was to refocus attention on the message, rather than on the Messenger. Muslims maintain the deepest respect for Muhammad and continue to be inspired by his example. But he was a man, a servant of God, as Abu Bakr reminded the community on this sad occasion when he repeated the Quranic verse, “Muhammad is only a messenger; messengers have died before him. When he dies will you turn your back on him? Whoever turns back does no harm to God but God will reward the grateful” (3:144). The believers were comforted and inspired by this; they were to maintain their commitment to the will of God, taking individual responsibility for their actions. But what about the community as a whole? Who would lead them?

A number of possibilities were suggested. Some of the nomadic tribes around Medina felt that their allegiance had been to Prophet Muhammad. For them his death meant the end of their affiliation; they indicated their withdrawal from the alliance by ending their zakat payments to Medina. Some believed that in the absence of Muhammad's central leadership, the

tribes and communities—including Mecca—should revert to local leadership. Others believed that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his political heir and that leadership of the community should remain within the Prophet's family. These would be called the “partisans of Ali, *shi'at* Ali, or simply Shia or Shii. (The development of Shii thought will be discussed further in Chapter 3.) But the majority believed that the Prophet had not discussed political systems or specified a successor to take over after his death. Abu Bakr was among these. He and other close companions of the Prophet were convinced that leadership should be chosen by tribal representatives, as was common in Arabia. They would be called the Sunnis. They believed, further, that Muslims had to remain a single community—not just morally unified through commitment to monotheism and the message of Prophet Muhammad, but politically unified as well. Their opinion prevailed. The companions of the Prophet pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr as leader of the community, referring to him as the Prophet's representative (*khalifah* or “caliph”). (He preferred the title “leader of the believers,” *amir al-mu'minin*.) He was first among equals, leading through consultation (*shura*) with other elders in the community, just as the Prophet had done, and in accordance with the Quranic directive: “So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult with them on the conduct of affairs” (3:159).

Abu Bakr then led the community in a momentous decision: to bring the tribes that had seceded back into the community by force, if necessary. The Quran stipulates that “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). It reinforces that position elsewhere. For example, when discussing preaching to the People of the Book, Muhammad is instructed:

If they argue with you, say: My followers and I have surrendered ourselves to God. And say to those who have received Scripture and to the illiterate: “Have you surrendered [to God]?” If they surrender [to God], then they are rightly guided, and if they turn away, then it is your duty only to preach. (3:20)

This verse, in fact, guides Muslim attitudes toward proselytizing. Nevertheless, the decision was made to enforce the political unity of the believers militarily. The seceders were declared apostates, and the campaigns against them are still known as the wars of apostasy (*riddah*). The decision to enforce unity among believers had a significant effect on the development of Islam. It established a policy that resulted in one of the most extraordinary political expansions in history. By the time Abu Bakr died in 634, almost all

the tribes of the Arabian peninsula had been brought into the Islamic political orbit. Under Abu Bakr's successors, Umar and Uthman, the Islamic army set out to rid Syria and Mesopotamia (Iraq) of the hated Byzantine and Sasanian empires. (Further implications of the decision to enforce political unity will be discussed in Chapter 4.)

At that time the Middle East was in the final throes of devastating competition between the eastern Roman Empire (the Christian Byzantines) and the Sasanian Persian Empire (Zoroastrian). The Byzantines had occupied coastal Syria, which at that time included parts of the present states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Egypt. The Sasanians of Persia (called Iran since the 1930s) controlled most of present-day Iraq. After decades of debilitating wars, both empires were weakened internally. Arab tribes on the frontiers of the empires readily accepted the leadership of the Muslims. The formerly great Roman and Persian armies were defeated with little trouble.

The Byzantines had long persecuted their Jewish subjects, as well as those Christians who rejected Orthodoxy. For these groups Muslim rule was especially welcome. Those who accepted Islam were taught the basics of the religion by Quran reciters. But Christians and Jews were free to retain their religious identity. In addition, the taxes imposed by the Muslims were generally lighter than those of the older empires, and unlike many conquering armies, the Arab Muslims were not allowed to take control of the conquered lands for personal use. Thus, Jerusalem was liberated from Roman rule in 636, Mosul was taken from the Persians in 641, and the Romans were defeated in Alexandria by 646. The last Sasanian ruler was killed in 651, the Roman fleet was destroyed by Muslim sea power in 655, and the Muslim state headquartered in Medina became the most powerful in the region.

## **Early Communal Disputes**

The phenomenal expansion of Islamic sovereignty was a result of the early decision by the Prophet's successors that Islamic unity must be assured through political unity. But political unity proved virtually impossible to maintain as Islamic sovereignty continued to spread. Efforts to enforce that unity engendered conflicts that called into question the very nature of the Islamic community. A recurring theme in the early conflicts was the tribal nature of Arab culture. In pre-Islamic times, tribes were the basic unit of

social organization, and each tribe had its own values, sources of authority, organization, rituals, and beliefs—all of which would later be identified as aspects of religion. This is the context for understanding the gravity with which the question of apostasy was treated in early Islam. To change one's religion was not simply a matter of spiritual persuasion as we see it today. Because religious loyalty and political loyalty were often linked, to change one's religion was tantamount to changing one's political loyalty, a potentially treasonous act. Christianity had attempted to supersede this religio-political identity. Jesus' command "to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21) could allow people to follow their religious conscience without it calling into question their political loyalty. People could be Christian in the Roman Empire without being considered subversives. But the equation of religious and political loyalty was reimposed when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Quran's teaching of religious freedom was a return to the ideal espoused by Jesus. It was a reassertion of the independence of religious and ethnic identity. This ethic was institutionalized in the Constitution of Medina, when Prophet Muhammad included Jews and Muslims in the same political community. Again stressing the struggle against tribalism, the Prophet said in his final speech that Arabs have no superiority over non-Arabs.

Nevertheless, the tribal tendency to equate religious and ethnic national identity was so well entrenched that it reemerged soon after the Prophet's death. Umar, the second caliph, determined that only Islam would be allowed in the Arabian peninsula, the Quran's teaching and the Prophet's example of religious tolerance notwithstanding. Under his administration, Jews and Christians were expelled, so that all Arabs (meaning those who lived in the Arabian peninsula; later on, the term *Arab* would apply to all Arabic speakers) were Muslim; thus, religious and ethnic identity were rejoined. Umar's successor, Uthman, reasserted a tribal tendency that challenged even other Arab Muslims. He headed an administration staffed almost exclusively by members of his own Meccan clan, the Umayyads, resulting in numerous protests. Umar's policy concerning land taxation also resulted in protests. It stipulated that revenues from conquered land would be sent to Medina for the benefit of the central administration, the conquering Arab soldiers and their families. Non-Muslim Arabs felt that their land taxes should be used locally. Policies such as these seemed to violate Islamic norms of justice and equality, and resentment mounted. Umar was murdered by a Christian Persian slave in 644. Uthman continued

Umar's policies, resulting in more discontent. Minor rebellions broke out in towns established solely for Arab Muslim conquerors in Egypt (al-Fustat) and Iraq (Kufah). In 656, rebellious Muslims from Egypt marched to Medina and assassinated Uthman.

Those participating in the growing discontent found a champion in Ali, the Prophet's companion, cousin, and son-in-law. Following Uthman's death, Ali was chosen by majority opinion within the community to be the next "leader of the believers." He was well respected and, as noted previously, had been a contender for the office since the death of Prophet Muhammad, but he was not as senior as Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman. His Shii supporters believed that he should have succeeded Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community, and that the first three successors (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman) were actually usurpers. But not all Ali's supporters believed that his legitimacy rested on the Prophet's designation. Many supported him because of his piety, wisdom, and courage, particularly in this time of civil strife. These included a group later identified as the Kharijis (or Kharijites, "the Seceders"), who believed that Uthman's nepotism (staffing his administration with members of his own family) was such a serious violation of Islamic principles that he was no longer eligible even to be called a Muslim, let alone a caliph. But Ali also had enemies. Chief among them were Aishah, widow of the Prophet and daughter of the first caliph Abu Bakr; and Muawiyah, the governor of Damascus appointed by Uthman. Aishah, who held personal grudges against Ali, led a rebellion against him near Basra (in Iraq, near Kufah, where Ali had established his headquarters) in 656. Ali's troops easily defeated her troops (which she personally led). Muawiyah challenged Ali to find and punish the assassins of his kinsman Caliph Uthman. When he did not, Muawiyah led an army against him (657). On the verge of defeat, Muawiyah's troops asked for arbitration, which Ali granted. The arbitration allowed Muawiyah to maintain his post in Damascus. Unfortunately, this effort at reconciliation cost Ali the support of the Kharijis. In 661 Ali was assassinated by one of them, leaving the caliphate to the Umayyad family in Damascus. (For further discussion of the Kharijis, see Chapter 4.)

## **Conclusion**

The violent end of three of the first four caliphs reflects the turmoil that gripped the Muslim community after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The community had the Quran and his example (the Sunna) to guide

them, but still they were left with an enormous challenge. As noted previously, the Quran is not a law book but a guide and source of moral inspiration. It reaffirms the covenant accepted by Abraham, the “trust” that human beings accepted at creation, the agreement that God offers eternal reward to those who take up the struggle to recreate in society the equality all human beings share in the eyes of God. But there are no formulae for ensuring that justice is always done. That is the part human beings have to figure out, each community and every generation, in an endless variety of circumstances. They must evaluate the circumstances in light of moral guidance, and then determine what actions and institutions are most conducive to justice in those specific circumstances. And they must do it in cooperation with others because no one can create justice alone. The Quran describes its guidance as clear, and it is; there is no doubt about what the goals of a just society are. But it is difficult to figure out how to achieve those goals “on the ground”—as anyone who is engaged in social activism knows.

Early Muslims were faced with the enormous challenge not only of institutionalizing justice in their own communities but also sharing those ideals and institutions with others who had suffered injustice just as they had. It is certainly to their credit that they relieved the region of the heavy burden of Roman and Persian imperialism. That conflicts would arise over the practical matters of governance is not surprising. It is natural that, among tribal people, some would believe leadership should stay within their own community, whereas people outside that community would reject that model of leadership. It is just as natural that, among moralizing people, many would believe that leadership should be based on piety, and many would rebel against rulers deemed unjust. In reality, the early years of Islam reflect both the benefits and the difficulties encountered in the transition from a community whose security is based on tribal bonds of mutual and unquestioned loyalty to a community committed to justice on a global scale. This is a struggle that continues to this day. Like people of many other faiths, Muslims continue to explore the implications of working for justice in a pluralist society. Is salvation reserved only for Baptists, or Catholics, or Jews, or Muslims? Must we separate religious beliefs from political convictions to be able to live peacefully with people of other faiths? Indeed, can we separate the two? Does accepting the legitimacy of other faiths require abandoning one’s own, or a “willing suspension of disbelief”? These are questions that confront all religions today. They are the same kinds of questions that the early Muslims struggled with.

The fact that there was conflict reflects the complexity of the problems faced and the depth of commitment on the part of the participants. In the context of Islamic history, it does not detract from the valiance of their efforts. Although Shii Muslims continue to believe Ali was the first legitimate successor to the Prophet, the majority of Muslims, the Sunnis, believe the first four caliphs were “rightly guided” (*al-rashidun*). They look to this period as one in which the Quran’s moral challenge dominated Islamic life. The Muslim community, with all its conflicts and failings, extended every effort “in the way of God” (*fi sabil Allah*). Even today, traditionalist Muslims look to this community as an example of truly Islamic life and accept some of the precedents established during this period (such as the death penalty for apostasy). Reform-minded Muslims, on the other hand, respect the efforts of this early community, while rejecting some of its precedents, and look to the Quran and Sunna for guidance in facing the challenges of modern life.

Whether Sunni or Shii, traditionalist or reformist, all Muslims consider this period the time during which Islamic ideals were established. Although the Shiis do not accept Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman as legitimate leaders of the community, and modern-day reformers reject some of their specific judgments, all Muslims believe this community took up the challenge of the *khalifah*. This term, appropriated in the political sphere to mean “successor” of the Prophet, actually has a much broader meaning in the Quran, where it is used twice. In a famous passage that encapsulates much of Islamic teaching, the Quran says that God created humanity to be His *khalifah* (2:30). Clearly the meaning here is “steward” or “deputy.” Human beings were put here to be responsible for maintaining the equality in which all were created. Elsewhere, the Quran describes God addressing King David as his *khalifah* who, as such, must judge in all things with honor and justice (38:26). Despite its weaknesses and conflicts, the early Muslim community accepted the challenge of stewardship and struggled to enjoin good and prevent evil. It is that legacy that has continued to inspire Muslims throughout the ages.

### Note

1. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 221–225.