

Introduction

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Introduction

This text provides an introduction to Islam that begins its inquiry with the social and political realities that inform 21st-century Islamic practice. It is consciously global in perspective, and seeks to capture the diversity of Islam as it manifests in different regions and countries. The book also examines the different interpretations and debates that characterize the tradition, both yesterday and today. Like other textbooks, it addresses what are traditionally seen as the historical contexts in which Islam emerged, and the core elements of the tradition. However, the book seeks to move beyond these basic topics, and address issues that are not typically covered, such as the ideas and practices of Islam in different regions and countries, the phenomenon of militancy, Islamophobia, and the teaching of Islam in the West, among other issues.

An Introduction to Islam in the 21st Century, First Edition. Edited by Aminah Beverly McCloud, Scott W. Hibbard, and Laith Saud.

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The central theme of this book is that the image of Islam (particularly in the West) is very different from the lived reality of over a billion adherents around the globe. While Islam is often imagined as a static and monolithic tradition, the reality is quite different. Like other world religions, it is fluid, dynamic, and characterized by enormous diversity. By examining trends in different countries and regions – Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, the United States and Europe – we hope to give a more accurate depiction of Islam as a living religion.

The authors undertook this project because they believed that there is a need for a more contemporary and holistic introduction to Islam, one that captures not simply the past but also the present. Particularly given the misinformed and often misleading characterization of the Islamic tradition that appears in the mass media (and by the ever increasing number of “experts” that have emerged since the events of 9/11), such a textbook will be an important contribution to public understanding and to university-level education. The text begins with an examination of Islamic history, the central elements of the tradition, and long-standing debates. It also highlights key patterns within Islamic history that shed light upon the origins and evolution of current movements and thought. We subsequently move on to more contemporary issues and examine a plethora of countries and thinkers in order to put those issues in context.

An Introduction to Islam in the 21st Century also addresses controversial issues directly. The text examines topics including political violence and “terrorism,” anti-Western sentiments, and Islamophobia. We examine these issues as realities in the contemporary world, and we inquire why they exist and look at the underlying causes that give rise to such phenomena. In doing so, we reject the common tendency to explain such issues as simply matters of culture or tradition. Rather, we look to history, patterns of political economy, and the evolution of particular ideologies to help us understand such trends. We also seek to explore contemporary forms of globalization (economic, cultural, and political), and the nature of trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific Muslim responses to such trends. The world is changing everywhere, not least the Muslim world. Finally, we are particularly interested in what is different, if anything, in both the understanding and the articulation of Islam in the post-9/11 environment for Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world.

Image and Reality

The image of Islam in the West is rooted in centuries of misperceptions. The vision that emerges from the early European experience with different Muslim powers is one defined by antagonism and conflict. This is a part of what fueled the Christian Crusades between the 11th and 15th centuries, but was also apparent in later periods of European development, which was similarly informed by the opposition to an external, Turkish, or Muslim “other.” Throughout this early history, the Islamic world was perceived as hostile to the Christian West, and that this political rivalry was rooted in religious differences. The characterization of

Islam by the so-called Orientalist writers of the Colonial period “essentialized” the tradition – that is, identified certain characteristics of the Islamic tradition as embodying the “essence” of the religion. This constructed essence included such things as unquestioned belief, an emphasis upon the community at the expense of the individual, and an innate inclination to oppress women. This essence was perceived to be not only definitive, but unchanging.

Such assumptions are fundamentally incorrect, but, nonetheless, continue to influence popular perceptions of Islam in the modern world. Much of the Islamophobia of the post-9/11 era has seized on these ideas, and portrays Islam (and Muslims) as hostile to Western values. This hostility is seen, moreover, as being rooted in the realm of religion and ideology. The inherent bias in this characterization of Islam is evident in any number of ways, and has frequently had the effect of subjecting Muslim citizens in the West to discrimination and abuse. The portrayal of young Arabs and Muslims in the popular media and the denigration of Islam by Western politicians and public figures all contribute to a public perception of Islam as monolithic, unchanging, and largely hostile to the Enlightenment norms which inform Western civilization.

The lived reality of Islam is quite different from this stereotype, and is as varied as humanity itself. Significant Muslim populations can be found in countries across the planet. 1.54 billion Muslims in the world live on every continent as majorities and minorities. While historically centered in the Middle East and North Africa, today the largest populations are found in Asia (see Map 1.1).

This geographical diversity reflects cultural and theological differentiation as well. The practices and beliefs that are prevalent in Indonesia or Western Africa differ in significant ways from the distinctive practices of Saudi Arabia, for example. Similarly, the internal theological debates of today reflect

Sidebar 1.1 Sources for population information

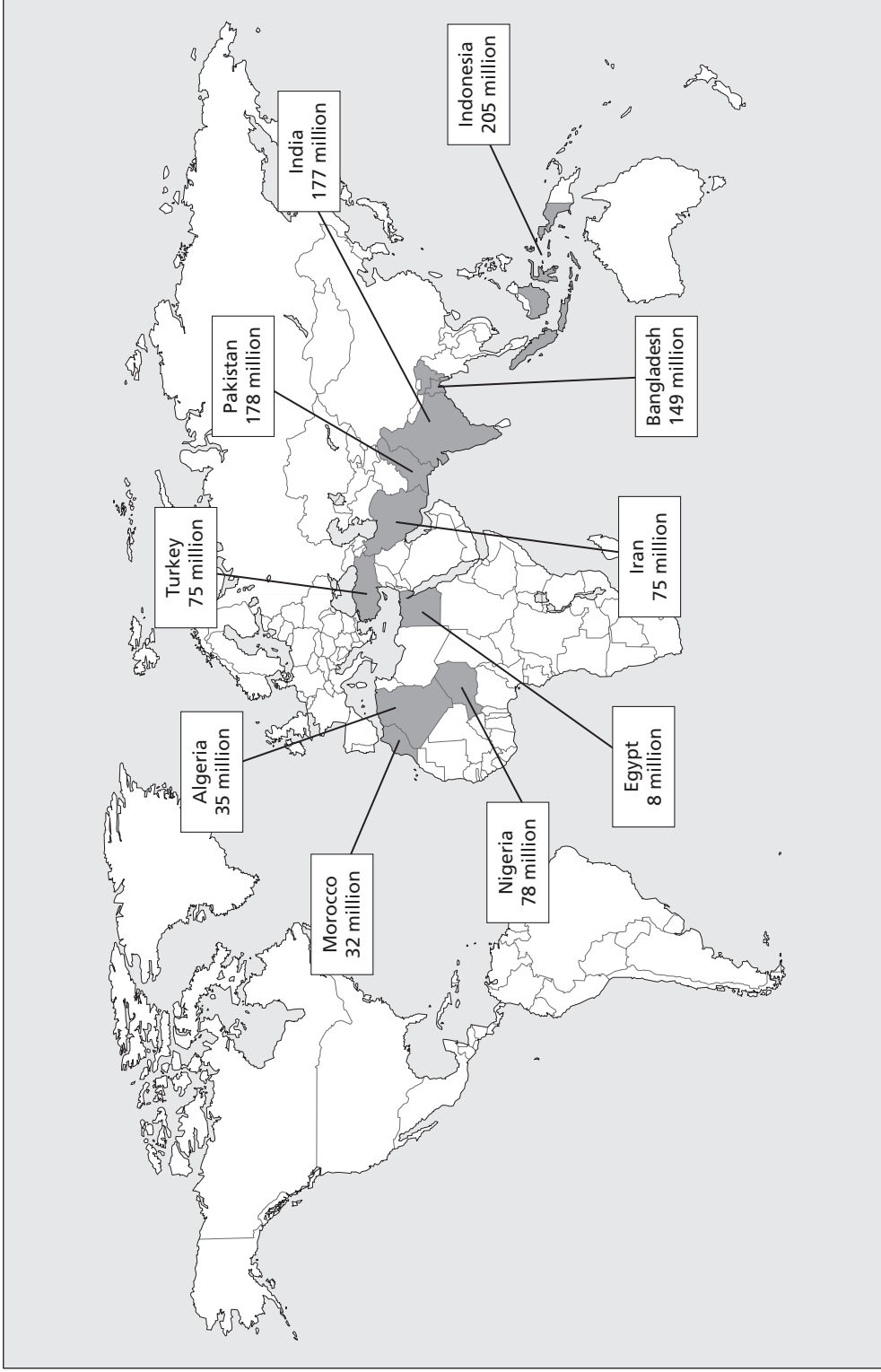
Reliable sources for population information are:

- US Census Bureau, International Data Base (December 2008);
- CIA Online World Factbook (April 2009);
- Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (October 2009).

Sidebar 1.2 Countries with the largest Muslim populations

According to statistics produced by the Pew Research Center, the list of countries with the largest Muslim populations is as follows (*Mapping The Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 2009; at <http://www.pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>, accessed September 22, 2012):

Indonesia: 203 million
 Pakistan: 174 million
 India: 161 million
 Bangladesh: 145 million
 Egypt: 79 million
 Nigeria: 78 million
 Iran: 74 million
 Turkey: 74 million
 Algeria: 34 million
 Morocco: 32 million
 Iraq: 30 million
 Sudan: 30 million
 Afghanistan: 28 million
 Ethiopia: 28 million
 Uzbekistan: 26 million
 Saudi Arabia: 25 million
 Yemen: 23 million
 China: 22 million
 Syria: 20 million
 Russia: 16 million.



Map 1.1 2010 population estimates from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Source: *Mapping The Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 2009: 3 (at <http://www.pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>, accessed September 22, 2012).

long-standing differences within the Islamic tradition over interpretation. These debates have multiplied in the postcolonial period as different communities negotiate modernity and come to grips with a rapidly changing world. These trends have become even more relevant in the post-Cold War era, which has been characterized by a high degree of economic and political globalization. Even if there are certain principles to which all Muslims adhere – such as recognition of the underlying unity of God (in Arabic, *tawhīd*) – interpreting the meaning and implications of these principles, and applying them in a lived reality, remains a source of ongoing discussion and debate. Rather than representing a monolithic unity, then, these different approaches to understanding God’s Will represent a spectrum of thought, one that is characterized by diversity, not homogeneity.

From the Muslim intellectual perspective, there are several key philosophical issues – particularly the relationship between knowledge and authority, and the related matter of defining legitimate authority – that continue to provide the structure of 21st-century conversations. In this text, clarifying these debates and discussions takes precedence over any reiteration of Islamic history which readers can find elsewhere. The following chapters expand upon these ideas.

Organization of the Text

Part I provides an overview of the basic structures and debates within Islam. It begins with a historical chapter (Chapter 2), which provides an introduction to the context in which Islam first emerged, and how the early political structures developed. This includes a brief overview of the historical eras which formed the early Islamic period; the history of the Prophet Muhammad, the rise of the early caliphates, the expansion of Islam, and subsequent dynasties. This chapter will also examine the “Gunpowder Empires,” and the rise of European colonialism and its legacies.

The three chapters that follow discuss the structures, tenets, debates, and sects of the Islamic tradition with the concept of a “spectrum of belief” organized around a central belief in God. Chapter 3 will introduce the reader to fundamental elements of the Islamic worldview that have structured the discourses within the religious tradition both in the past and in the present. A key organizing belief in the Islamic tradition is *tawhīd*, the underlying unity of God and all creation. Chapter 3 examines this concept, and how it has informed all aspects of Islamic civilization. This chapter also examines the influence of the life of the Prophet Muhammad upon the evolution of the faith, and provides an overview of the basic beliefs and texts of the Islamic tradition, as well as a discussion of the five Pillars of Islam.

An issue that is central to the pedagogy (i.e. educational philosophy) of this text is that the Islamic worldview must be rendered in its full diversity and complexity. This idea is very much reflected in Chapter 4, which focuses on the evolution of Islamic doctrines, beliefs, and practices. This includes the development of Islamic

law, *kalam* (dialectical theology), philosophy, ethics, and social theory. A central feature of this chapter is its elaboration on the spectrum of thought that has defined the tradition, and the tension between those who rely on tradition to guide their interpretation of the religion and those who rely on human reason to interpret Islam. It is important to remember that these aspects of the religion developed through a process of dialogue and debate; this is a community discourse and not a product of one particular religious hierarchy. These dialogues and debates, moreover, continue to this day.

In Chapter 5 we explore the fundamental features of what are commonly referred to as “Islamic sects.” A number of particular “spiritual types,” to use the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, have emerged within the tradition, which include Sunnism, Shi’ism, and the diversity therein. This chapter will examine these types via their theological and philosophical contributions to the Islamic discourse. One of the important contributions of this chapter is that it allows readers to better understand the modern implications of these debates, which are more fully discussed in subsequent chapters.

Part II examines Islam in a modern political context. This includes a discussion of the ongoing debate about the proper relationship between Islam and political authority. Although it is commonly argued that there is no distinction between religion and state in the Islamic tradition, the reality has always been otherwise. While the Prophet Muhammad embodied both religious and political authority, the relationship between the two remained unclear during the reign of the immediate successors to the Prophet. Subsequent trends in Islamic history, moreover, saw the emergence of a separation of function – and even competition – between religious authorities and their political counterparts. At issue in this ongoing competition is, on the one hand, the role of religious authorities in regulating the affairs of state, and, on the other, the danger to Islamic tradition of its overt manipulation by political leaders. An additional issue involves the reassertions of the demands for a caliphate (the single embodiment of both religious and political authority). These debates are not unique to the Islamic tradition, nor are there settled answers within Islam regarding the proper role of religion in government. Rather, in the contemporary period, the reality is defined by ongoing debates about the role of religion in the modern state.

Chapter 6 examines these issues in the context of societies that established secular political structures in the early and mid-20th century. The most influential – and extreme – example of the secular trend is Turkey, whose modern founder, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, sought to orient a newly recreated Turkey toward Europe, not the Arab Middle East. The secular political structure in Turkey marked a sharp break from the Ottoman past. Turkey was not the only case, however. Pre-revolutionary Iran (1906–1979), Nasser’s Egypt, the Arab nationalist states of Syria and Iraq, among others, were all consciously secular. At the heart of this movement was a twofold belief. On the one hand, the effort to modernize entailed a demphasis (or elimination) of religion, or at least its relegation to the margins of public life. These debates also have their origins in the philosophical debates of

Chapter 3, as religious structures were profoundly changed by choices made with regard to the role of religion in government. There was, however, a second feature as well: the diversity within various societies – particularly in Asia – required a greater degree of official neutrality in matters of religion. Hence, Arab Christians, South Asian Hindus, and Chinese Christians living as minorities in places such as Indonesia or India demanded a more religiously neutral political authority. This sets the stage for our later examinations.

Chapter 7 looks at states that took very different approaches to these issues, and linked religious authority to state authority in various ways. Here we review the underlying rationale – the assumption that Islam is both a religion and a state (*din wa dawla*) – and how this relationship has manifested in practice. The most well-known examples of this close affiliation of religion and state power are in Iran (which has a self-consciously theocratic political structure) and Saudi Arabia (a *sharia*-inclined state where religious officials do not actually rule). However, there are numerous other examples (and precedents), such as those found in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan (both during the 19th century Mahdist regime and under the current government). We also examine religious opposition groups that have argued for a more central role for religion in government. Sometimes religion is an opposition discourse, and sometimes it is invoked in support of the modern state. Regardless of whether religion is tied to a particular regime or to the political opposition, the arguments for a more overt role of religion in governance are similar: God is the ultimate source of sovereignty, and the Qur'an ought to provide the basis for legislation, law, and public order.

It is important to recognize that the distinction between “Islamic states” (or what we will refer to as “traditionalist states”) and “secular states” is not always sharp or clearly defined. Secular governments regularly invoke religion as a basis of popular support even if they remain largely neutral in theological matters. More to the point, however, is that the debates over the proper interpretation of religion in public life, and the proper relationship between religious and state authority, are never resolved in a permanent manner, in much the same way as the underlying philosophical debates endure. These issues remain a source of continuing debate and periodically recur in the context of modern politics. Our discussion of religious and political authority and their often contentious dynamics leads us to a discussion of political violence as one means of promoting a narrow religious vision by a vocal minority. To these conversations are added the reactions, both within the Islamic community and from outside.

Chapter 8 examines the question of Muslim minorities living in the West. At issue are the various challenges associated with integrating into Western society while retaining one's cultural and religious heritage. On the one hand, there is an understandable resistance among Muslim minorities to assimilate into a largely secular culture, while on the other, there is an often visceral opposition within majority communities to tolerate in a non-discriminatory manner minority populations in their midst. This is not a new challenge, but is an enduring feature of human history. What makes the issue of Muslim minorities living in the West

so unique in the 21st century is the high level of emigration that has transpired since the end of World War II. The resulting diversity within Western societies has created numerous issues for both the host populations and the migrant communities. This chapter examines these challenges in four countries with the largest Muslim communities – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – and the different ways in which each have sought to deal with the minorities in their midst.

Part III focuses on regional examinations. The next four chapters offer a survey of Muslims in different regions and continents. These regions were selected, in large measure, by their significant history and size of Muslim populations. They were also selected to provide a glimpse into the diversity of Islam culture and traditions. Chapter 9 begins this exploration in Africa. It looks at the penetration, expansion, and assimilation of Islam on the African continent, with a particular focus on the regions south of the Sahara desert. This review sheds light on the diversity of the religious experience, the historical context and, ultimately, the emergence of powerful Muslim states. The chapter also looks at the development of important movements of Islamic reform during the colonial and postcolonial eras. This helps to shed light on both the past and present traits of Islam in Africa, often neglected in the study of Islam as a global phenomenon.

Chapter 10 looks at Islam within the countries of South Asia: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Out of the roughly 1.6 billion who live on the subcontinent, nearly a third are Muslim. This gives the subcontinent one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Like the other regions in Asia, Islam first arrived via commercial traders in the 8th century, though its influence became most pronounced in later centuries, particularly with the rise of the Mughal Empire in the 16th century. While the Mughals were eclipsed by British colonial rule in the mid-19th century, Islam has nonetheless remained a powerful cultural and political force in the region. It has given rise to a variety of political movements, and various South Asian thinkers have greatly influenced popular understandings of Islam throughout the world. The South Asian experience of Islam has also been characterized by a great deal of diversity. This is due, in part, to the historical circumstances, and the fact that India's Muslims are a minority population, while across the border, Islam is the official state religion in Pakistan. In short, Islamic thought and practice shape the lives of millions of people throughout the region, though this occurs in a variety of diverse ways.

In Chapter 11 we explore Islam in the much understudied regions of the former Soviet Republics. This area is home to more than 50 million Muslims. Scholars have previously only focused on the non-Muslim peoples, presuming that Islam had been relegated to extinction by decades of policies of eradication. This chapter provides a look at the Islamic revival present in the region.

The focus of Chapter 12 turns our attention to the experience of Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia is, of course, the nation with the largest Muslim population on the planet, and would be of interest for that reason alone. But it is also of interest because of its democratic governing structures, its pluralist vision

of Islam, and its model of economic development. While Indonesia is not immune to the economic, political, and social pressures endemic in the region, the country has, nonetheless, navigated these challenges in an innovative manner. Similarly, in Malaysia, the diversity of the population – with numerous Hindus, ethnic Chinese Christians, and other populations – has limited the appeal (and viability) of an exclusive religious politics. The chapter subsequently looks at the politics, culture, and development of these societies and how they were shaped by – and helped to shape – Islam in the region.

In Chapter 13, we examine the Muslim histories in Latin America and the Caribbean. Though not traditionally considered a Muslim region, the history of Muslims in this area goes back over 500 years. Individuals of Moorish descent from both the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa arrived along with Spanish colonization. Though many came as slaves, they nonetheless brought with them their religion, tradition, and culture. Subsequent migrations came in later centuries, and have contributed to a distinct sensibility of the region. This chapter helps to reveal the global breadth of Islam and its indelible but often overlooked role in shaping the culture, architecture, and life in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Part IV, the final part of the textbook, examines Islam in a globalized world. Chapter 14 takes up this topic by viewing the challenges of teaching Islam in the post-9/11 West. Given the politicization of Islam and the involvement of Western governments in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and other Muslim countries, providing unbiased information on the diversity of the Islamic experience has proved contentious and difficult. A central part of the issue is the lack of qualified instructors, as well as the unevenness of knowledge. A second feature is the atmosphere in which instructors are teaching. The politicized nature of the course content and the classroom make frank and open conversations difficult at best. Chapter 14 seeks to offer a positive alternative for teaching about Islam in the 21st century. It begins by examining the “ecosystem” of the classroom – the relationship between the environment, the students, and the teachers – and how this can be reconstructed in a more open manner. Within the Islamic tradition, knowledge is produced through dialogue. Hence, a truly open educational environment encourages not just teaching, but discourse. It also demands a nuanced appreciation of Islam – by recognizing the spectrum of thought – as well as a civic (and civil) approach to the subject.

What makes the teaching of Islam particularly difficult in the contemporary context is the question of violence, terrorism, and extremism. Chapter 15 addresses these issues directly. It begins with a recognition that the connections between religion and violence can be found in all traditions. This is what Scott Appleby has referred to as the “ambivalence of the sacred,” where religion serves as both a warrant for violent action and a call for peace and tolerance. While the core ethical teachings of Islam concern justice and peace, Islamist organizations such as al-Qaeda have nonetheless resorted to violence as a means of pursuing their political ends. This has contributed to a perception in the West that Islam (as a

world religion) has a unique predisposition toward violence. Ironically, the moral judgment of the West with regard to the question of violence by Islamic activists is itself highly ambivalent. When the US supported the *mujahidin* (holy warriors) fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the Cold War, they were seen as heroic and led Ronald Reagan to deem them to be the “moral equivalent of America’s Founding Fathers.” Nonetheless, it is the memories of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and, later, the first Gulf War, that shaped a view of Islam as hostile to the West.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 reinforced this perception. Although it is obvious that over 1 billion people did not participate in these attacks, Western commentators commonly blame the entirety of Islam for the violence. Moreover, Western governmental actions are a central part of the conflicts that plague the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. The United States has fought two wars with Iraq, imposed sanctions on Iran and Iraq, supported autocratic regimes throughout these regions, and otherwise promoted policies that antagonize populations throughout the Muslim world. These policies – and the politics behind them – are the real source of anti-American sentiment, and have their roots in America’s post-World War II foreign policies. The media depiction of 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of a new trend is, thus, misleading. Rather, it is simply another chapter in a long history of Western interaction in the region. The media coverage of recent events and its anti-Islam biases, however, is somewhat new. The conscious effort of certain commentators and analysts to stigmatize Islam and Muslims has greatly influence popular media, and has contributed to the Islamophobia that has emerged in recent years. Not only is this trend troubling for minority populations, but it should be of concern to all Americans. The denigration of Muslim Americans (and of Islam) undermines such key American values as the freedom of religion, equal treatment of peoples, and the belief that we, as a people, judge others by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

Discussion Questions

- 1 How and why did Islam spread to so many different areas and regions?
- 2 Are other religious traditions characterized by the same kind of diversity of peoples and practices? How does this shape the experience of religion by people in different regions with different cultural practices?
- 3 How does the discussion above fit with your presuppositions about Islam?