

Pilgrims move round the Ka'ba in prayer at the Grand Mosque in Mecca

ISLAM
MUHAMMAD AND
THE QURAN

Recite in the name of your Lord who created -
created man from a drop. Recite!
And your Lord is most generous.

The Quran

The history of Islam as a distinct religion would seem to begin with the life of Muhammad (AD 570–632), the Prophet through whom the Quran, the revelation from God, was transmitted into the world. But, in Muslim understanding, that history began with the creation of the world, because from the start it was the purpose of God that all people should follow the life-way that he intended.

That 'life-way' is known in Arabic as *din*, a word often translated as 'religion', but it is a word that embraces – as does the practice of Islam – the whole of life. According to this belief, there cannot be any separation between religious and other aspects of life: all come from God, and all life, therefore, must be lived as God intends.

How is that intention known? Much can be inferred from observing the way in which God has created all things to exist or live in mutual balance and support. As a philosopher, alJahiz (third/ninth century) put it, "We are created to comprehend creation, with all the signs and evidence that it has been created with design, purpose and harmony."

This belief led Muslims of the early centuries to change our understanding of the universe through the advances they made in many sciences – for example, in astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, physics, geography, agriculture and medicine. They were reading God's book of nature.

Even more important, however, was the reading of God's book of revelation, the Quran, where the details of God's intended *din* (life-way) are made clear. What is that revelation and how is it related to the life of Muhammad?

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MUSLIM LIFE

Muhammad was born in Mecca, in Arabia. His father died before he was born, so that he was brought up by his grandfather, Abd alMuttalib. When he was young he had an experience of two figures later identified as angels who "opened his chest and stirred their hands inside". It was the first of several experiences which led Muhammad into a quest for the truth and the reality of God.

He pursued that quest when he was employed by a widow, Khadijah, whom he later married, to take trading caravans to Syria. In Syria he met Jews and Christians, and especially the monk

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Bahira who recognized in him the signs of a promised messenger. He was also helped by an uncle, Zayid ibn Amr, who was one of a number of people in Mecca called Hanifs. They were people who, influenced by the Jews in Arabia, followed 'the religion of Abraham'. Zayid condemned the worship of idols in Mecca, and such practices as female infanticide. He used to pray, "O God, I do not know how you desire to be worshipped: if I knew, I would worship as you desire." At least he knew enough to condemn Muhammad for worshipping idols, and Muhammad said later, "After that, I never willingly touched [to receive power

from] idols, nor did I offer sacrifices to them." Later, when Muhammad threatened unbelievers with the fires of hell, he said that God would have mercy on Zayid, non-Muslim though he was, because he had lived as God intended.

Like his uncle, Muhammad began to go alone to a cave on Mount Hira in order to search for God behind the bewildering varieties of religion and idolatry. On one occasion, he had the strong sense of a presence, later identified as the archangel Gabriel, pressing on him and insisting three times, 'Read!' or 'Recite!' – in Arabic, *Iqra*, the word, or letters, underlying Quran. He then felt the first of the many words that make up the Quran being spoken through him (the words on p.71).

THE QURAN

Those words were recognized by Muhammad himself and others as being entirely different from his ordinary speech. They are a kind of rhythmic and rhymed utterance, which Muslims believe are completely unique and cannot be imitated. The utterances are gathered in sections known as Suras, with each Sura having its own name. They are arranged in the Quran in order of length, with the longest – from the latter part of his life when he was in Medina, hence known as the Medinan suras – at the beginning, and the shortest, known as the Meccan, at the end.

The Quran is the absolute foundation of Muslim life. It cannot be altered or negotiated because, in Muslim belief, it comes directly from God without the intervention of Muhammad. For that reason, the Quran cannot be translated: it can only be *interpreted* in other languages, since Arabic is the language chosen by God – a reason also why it is an act of merit to learn the Quran by heart even if it is not understood: one who does so is known as Hafiz. Explanation by those who are qualified is allowed because the Arabic is not always self-evidently clear, and there are recognized and legitimate differences of interpretation.

The Quran is not the only revelation from God. In Muslim belief, God has revealed his word and his will through earlier Prophets, such as Moses and Jesus. But the people who received those revelations (i.e. Jews and Christians) corrupted them by allowing stories about their Prophets as well as other material to be mixed up with God's word. Despite this failure, Jews and Christians are respected in the Quran as 'the People of the Book', who have a protected status in Islam as *dhimmis*.

In contrast, the Quran is believed to have been received and preserved without corruption, so that the Quran, according to Muslim belief, is the final revelation, and Muhammad is the last of the Prophets, known as 'the Seal of the Prophets'. It is this belief that has made Muslims so antagonistic to those, such as Babis, Bahais and the Ahmadiyya (13th/19th century), who claim to have received an extension of that revelation.

Although the Quran comes directly from God – in Muslim belief, the so-called 'Mother of the Book' is with God in heaven – and is exactly the same in content whenever it has been revealed, it is nevertheless related to the time and circumstances of each Prophet. Thus the Quran mentions people and incidents of Muhammad's time. This also means that the Quran does not deal explicitly with every conceivable issue in belief or behaviour, although it does supply the fundamental principles which apply in all circumstances. The history of Islam shows how the Quran has been interpreted. For example, the Quran requires women to be modestly covered in public, but it does not specify the veil (*niqab*) or all-encompassing *burqah*.

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HADITH AND THE SCHOOLS OF LAW

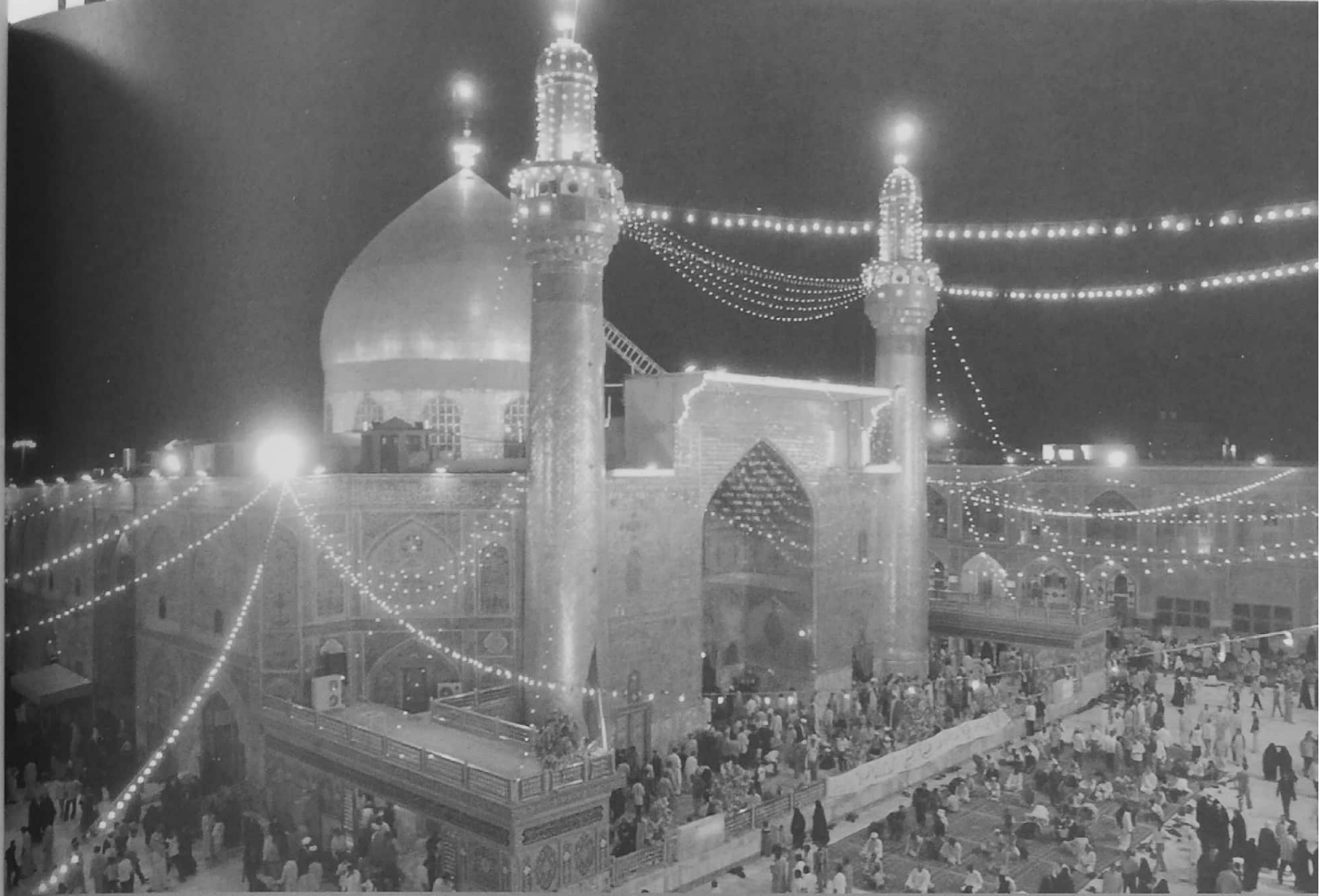
The earliest interpreters were Muhammad himself and his Companions, because they were a living commentary on the meaning of the Quran as it was revealed. Traditions (*ahadith*, known collectively as Hadith) were gathered of their acts and sayings and silences, and these were formed eventually – by the end of the third/ninth century – into six great collections known as *as-Sahih*, ‘the sound’ collections. The Traditions give to Muslims a very detailed account of how they should live their lives. For example:

“God’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) commanded us to do seven things and forbade us to do seven things. He commanded us to visit the sick, to follow funeral processions, to bless those who sneeze, to fulfil our vows, to help the poor, to accept invitations, and to greet all people; and he forbade us to wear rings or gold rings, to drink from silver vessels, to use saddle cloths made of red silk, to wear garments made of Egyptian silk or of brocade or of velvet.”

The Traditions are the second foundation of Muslim life. Together with the Quran, they make up ‘the path by which one should walk’, or, in Arabic, *Sharia*. The word goes back to the Quran: “We gave you a *sharia* in the Word, so follow it, and do not follow the passions of those who do not know.” Muslims therefore believe that they should live under *Sharia*. They also believe that since *Sharia* is clear, penalties for bad offences must be severe – for example, execution for those who leave Islam (apostasize) and the cutting off the hand of a thief. On the Day of Judgement, the acts of each person will be weighed on an exact balance, tempered by the mercy of God: those in deficit will burn in Fire.

Quran and Hadith make up the *Sunna*, the custom or way for Muslims to follow. But because of the legitimate differences of interpretation, four major Schools of *Sharia* were developed by the end of the third/ninth century, with a different emphasis in each: should life be ordered as closely as possible to Quran and Hadith, or can interpretation be made by way of analogy or consensus or informed opinion? Each of the Schools controls the practice of Islam in any area where it is dominant, with a major effect on the history of Islam in those areas. The Schools, named after their founders, are:

- the **Hanafites** (from Abu Hanifa, d. 150/767), allowing interpretation to meet changing circumstances, and strong in Turkey, parts of Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and nearby states, Pakistan, India and China;
- the **Hanbalites** (from Ahmad ibn Hanbal, d.241/855), seeking to stay as close to Quran and Hadith as possible, and strong in Arabia as well as in some of the Gulf States and increasingly in Africa;
- the **Malikites** (from Malik b.Anas, d.179/795), conservative but allowing consensus, and strong in the Maghrib (i.e. the northern coastline of Africa from Egypt to Morocco);
- the **Shafiites** (from asShafii d.205/820), relying on Quran and Hadith with strict rules of exegesis, and strong in Southeast Asia.



Holy Shrine of Imam Ali, Najaf, Iraq

ISLAM
SHIA ISLAM AND THE
SUNNI DYNASTIES

Obey God and obey the Messenger,
and those given authority among you,
and if you have a dispute about any matter,
refer it to God and the Messenger.

The Quran

When the Umayyads set out on their conquest of the known world, they were obeying a basic command in the Quran that people should make an effort on behalf of God. The underlying word in Arabic is *jahada*, 'he made an effort', the word that appears as Jihad.

JIHAD

Jihad is often translated as War, or Holy War, but in the Quran there are two kinds of Jihad: the greater and the lesser. When Muhammad and his troops were returning to Medina from a battle, he told them that they were returning from the lesser Jihad to the greater Jihad: they were returning to the effort that all must make to live as God commands, and that is the greater Jihad.

Nevertheless, the lesser Jihad may include fighting and killing, and is an obligation on able-bodied Muslims whenever their fellow-Muslims are attacked (as in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Lebanon). There are extremely clear rules governing Jihad in the Quran, in instructions from Muhammad, and in rules of the second Caliph, Umar. For example, it is forbidden "to touch the old, those close to death, women, children, and infants". Umar added that neither trees nor flocks should be damaged, unless in providing food for the army. This belief means that some things done in recent years to defend Islam (especially indiscriminate bombing) are actually forbidden.

The obligation of Jihad is reinforced by the reward offered to anyone who "dies in the cause of God", i.e. who becomes a martyr (*shahid*). Martyrdom, in Muslim belief, is extremely important, but it does not necessarily involve death. Just as the Greek word *marturos* ('martyr') means 'one who bears witness', so the Arabic *shahid* means 'a witness'. Anyone who bears costly witness to God in the greater Jihad – for example, by moral effort or gifts to the community – is a *shahid*, as much as those who die fighting for God in the lesser Jihad. Martyrs have a privileged place in Paradise, and those who die in battle are buried in the clothes they were wearing when they died so that they will be recognized at once as martyrs.

Among Shiite Muslims, Jihad and martyrdom have an even higher value, because they believe that Husayn died as a martyr – some believe this also of Ali and Hasan. To join Husayn in a similar act of witness brings one straight into his company in Paradise. Shiites annually commemorate Husayn and other martyrs at Kerbala in Iraq where he was slain, in dramatic acts of *taziyah* ('condolence') involving the re-enactment of his death and willingness to accept painful self-infliction of punishment. In Shiite belief, where no other weapons are available, one's own body and life must become a weapon, as with the so-called 'suicide bombers'.

SHIA IMAMS

Shiites are a small minority of Muslims – about ten percent of the whole religion – and they have divided into many smaller groups. All believe that the leaders of Islam should come from 'the House of Muhammad' (*ahl al-Bayt*, 'people of the House'), i.e. they should be the descendants of Ali. These leaders are believed to be divinely inspired and able to reveal to their followers inner or secret truth (*batini*, hence the name Batinite given to some Shiite groups): they are called Imams.

Among Sunnis, imams are simply the leaders of a congregation – especially in Salat, the formal prayers on the weekly day of assembly – in a local congregation or mosque. Shiites believe that the Imam has much higher status and authority. It came to be believed that he exists in a state of sinlessness, and that his teaching is divinely inspired.

SEVENERS AND TWELVERS

Some Shiites believe that the line of succession ended when Ismail, the eldest son of the sixth Imam, Jafar asSadiq (80/699–148/765), died before his father. Those Shiites believe that when Jafar died, Ismail nevertheless became the seventh Imam. They are therefore known as the Seveners (asSabiyya) or more commonly as Ismailis. They have divided into many groups among which are:

- the Nizaris whose Imam has been called the Aga Khan since 1818;
- the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo from 358/969 to 567/1171 – founders of the renowned alAzhar University;
- the followers of one of the Fatimid caliphs, alHakim (d. 411/1021), who declared him to be a manifestation of God on earth: from this comes the secretive Druze religion, mainly in Lebanon and Syria, believing in successive manifestations of God and therefore highly suspect among Muslims;
- the followers of alHasan b.asSabbah, known as Shaikh alJabal, the Old Man of the Mountains, who in the late 11th century sent out warriors to kill his opponents: since they were given hashish to encourage them, they were known as *hashshashin*, hence the English word ‘assassins’.

In contrast to the Ismailis or Seveners, other Shiites believe that the succession passed from Jafar to his eldest *surviving* son, Musa. From him, the succession passed to the 11th Imam, alHasan alAskari. When he died in 260/874, his son Muhammad succeeded, although in fact he had disappeared when he was four years old, in the year 260/873. Despite his disappearance or ‘hiddenness’, he is, for these Shiites, the 12th Imam, so they are known as the Twelvers or, from the Arabic for 12, Ithnaashariyya. They are strong in Iran, and are found in Syria, Lebanon, some of the Gulf states and Pakistan.

THE HIDDEN IMAM

This Muhammad, having disappeared before his father’s death, is believed to be the Hidden Imam, in what is known as *alghayba alkuhbra*, ‘the greater occultation’. Shiites believe that the Hidden Imam is ‘the Awaited Guide’ (alMahdi alMuntazar) who will return at the end of time to establish a dominion of perfect order and justice, and to take vengeance on the enemies of God.

AlMahdi means ‘the guided one’, and Sunnis also believe in the Mahdi, but they do not identify him with the Shiite Imam. This belief has led to many figures claiming to be the Mahdi and leading campaigns against the enemies of God. Notable among them was Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdullah (1259/1843–1303/1885) of the Sudan whose campaign as the Mahdi led to the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885.

Among the Shiites, one who claimed in 1501 to be the Hidden Imam was Ismail (1487–1524), a ruler in the Safavid dynasty in Persia/Iran. The Safavids had begun as a Sunni reform movement in the 14th century, but became Shiite. Ismail was called Shah (King), and Twelver Shiism became the official religion of Persia. The flourishing dynasty of the Safavids was defeated by the Afghans in 1736, who were in turn driven out by the Qajar dynasty in 1799. The Qajars ruled until 1924, when Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41) became the Shah of Persia. He was succeeded by his son Muhammad Reza (1941–79) until deposed by Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–89) who rebuilt Iran on the basis of the beliefs of Twelver Shiism.

SUNNI DYNASTIES AND THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

Shiites and Sunnis hold most beliefs in common, but remain deeply divided in their understanding of authority and of its relationship to descent from the House of Muhammad. The Sunnis continued the original principle of finding the man most able to be leader, but they then combined this with succession, so that a large number of dynasties emerged.

The major dynasties with the dates are listed on p.70. In addition, there were many other dynasties, some of which were of importance in the history and development of Muslim beliefs.

Among these, the dynasties of the Maghrib – countries on the northwest African coast – and Spain were notable. When the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads, the Umayyad dynasty continued in Spain. They in turn were overthrown by the Almoravids (448/1056–541/1147). In Arabic they are known as *alMurabitun*, ‘those who make a stand for the defence of religion’. That name comes from the word *ribat* (pl. *ribatat*), ‘a fort’ or ‘garrison’. These were garrisons on the frontiers of the Muslim territories of Dar al-Islam, the House of Islam. In the Maghrib, the best-known of these was Ribat al-Fath, the garrison of victory, from which the present-day capital of Morocco, Rabat, takes its name.

From Ribat al-Fath the Almoravids set out on their conquest of North Africa and southern Spain, defeating the Spanish king Alfonso VI in 479/1086. They restored a strict observance of Islam which was embraced by ibn Tumart (470/1077–524/1130) in North Africa. He began to enforce a fervent and, at times, violent religious orthodoxy, which was taken up by the Almohads. In Arabic, that name is *alMuvahhidun*, those who uphold the unity of God – as in the later name of the Wahhabis who also enforce strict orthodoxy as vigorously as they can.

The Almohads became the rulers of Muslim Spain in 566/1170 and won a major victory over the Spanish at the battle of Alcaros in 592/1195. Forty years later, they were defeated by a much strengthened Spanish army, and the end of Muslim rule in Spain began. Under the Almohads there was a dramatic exploration of Muslim belief: in philosophy – this was the time of ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, and of ibn Arabi – and also in architecture, with the development of the Almohad arch as a deliberate expression of faith in God. The consequence can still be seen in the Giralda – now Cathedral – of Seville. In Muslim belief, Paradise is, in contrast to the dry desert, an oasis with clear, running water. That belief has been translated into Muslim gardens all over the world, from the Taj Mahal in India to the superb gardens of Granada in Spain.

After the Muslim invasion of India, the kings of Bengal (737/1336–984/1576) created a Muslim presence that led after Indian independence to East Pakistan and then to the independent republic of Bangladesh. The kings or Sultans of Delhi (from 602/1206) culminated in the Mughal emperors. The word Mughal is derived from Mongol. The Mongols came from the steppes of Mongolia and, under Jenghiz (Genghis) Khan, spread with ferocious power into China and into Muslim territories. Hulagu captured Damascus, sacked Baghdad and set up Il-Khanid dynasty in 654/1256. The Mongols became Muslim, and the dynasty lasted until 736/1336.

A descendant of Jenghiz Khan, Babur (888/1483–937/1530), seized power in Afghanistan and defeated the Sultan of Delhi at the battle of Panipat in 932/1526. His grandson, Akbar (949/1542–1014/1605) extended the Mughal empire from Afghanistan to most of northern India, annexing the kingdom of Bengal in 984/1576. His descendant, Shah Jehan (977/1569–1037/1627), built the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort at Delhi, on which is inscribed, “If there is Paradise on earth, it is here, it is here.”