ISLAMIC CIVILIZATIONS

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Summary

Islam emerged as part of the history of monotheism, and quickly formed the lasting basis of a global community. This community was united less by political systems than by common reference points and social networks. The reference points include the Qur'an and the Sunna, which have spawned vastly diverse arts of interpretation and traditions of learning. Within a short period of its inception Islam became the namesake of a world civilization, with diverse social but intercommunicating intellectual traditions. In modern times, Islam witnessed revival as a language of social integration and political participation.

1. Origins and Sources

As a faith system Islam is the most recent of the great world religions and forms an integral part of the history of monotheism. As a social system Islam supplies, or is said to supply, a vast body of rules regulating social relations of all kinds. These rules, along with the various reformulations of the basic religious ideas of Islam, have offered Islam up as a namesake of social integration. Thus over fourteen centuries and on a world scale, Islam has provided various societies, otherwise divided along the lines of class, ethnicity, tribe, clan, or race, with a common platform upon which to negotiate and stabilize patterns of mutual coexistence.

Etymologically the word "Islam" means simply "submission" (to God). In this general sense the appellation "Muslim" is freely applied in the Qur'an to pre-Islamic, Biblical prophets and pious monotheistic traditions, rather than only as a reference to Muhammad's followers. At one point, in fact, the Qur'an makes a distinction between "Islam" and "faith," suggesting that "Islam" signifies only a verbal attestation of

submission to God, and thus the first stage of acquiring faith, rather than its culmination. This point is sometimes revisited by Muslim thinkers when they consider ways of thinking about how Islam may be present in the world beyond the boundaries of a self-defined Muslim community.

Formally, the basic sources of Islamic doctrines consist primarily of the Qur'an, considered by Muslims to be the literal revelation of God, and the Sunna, or the traditions around the life of Muhammad, including sayings (*hadith*) attributed to him. The context of these sources is early seventh century A.D. west central Arabia, notably the cities of Mecca and Medina—the first being Muhammad's birthplace and site of his early community, whereas the latter is the site of his migration and subsequent formation of the first self-governing, trans-tribal Muslim community in history. Other sources of Islamic doctrine that emerged later with the worldwide expansion of Islam and the confrontation of new social issues include *ijma'*, or the consensus (of either companions of Muhammad or Muslim scholars), and *qiyas*, or analogical reasoning. The latter two concern the resolution of matters not explicitly addressed in the primary sources of Qur'an and Sunna. For most Shi'i Muslims, an additional important source is the anecdotes concerning the lives of the first twelve imams.

By Muhammad's death in 632 C.E., Islam was already the dominant religion in Arabia. It had displaced Arab polytheism, which was organized around the worship of tribally and locally specific deities. In their place, Islam highlighted the idea of an exclusive monotheistic God, who possessed an abstract character incomprehensible to humanity, and who was responsible for all being and creation. In terms of social appeal, the idea of a monotheistic God established Islam as the first genuinely trans-tribal community in Arabia, and the term *umma* was later expanded to describe the global fellowship of all Muslims regardless of what else may divide them.

2. Islam and Social Integration

The fact that Islam had served from its early days as the namesake of an effort to establish a universal community and thereby abolish conflict is evident in Muhammad's own *hijra,* or migration, to Medina, which signaled that one could sever seemingly inviolable ties—in this case to his home town of Mecca and tribal fellowship with Quraysh—when such ties served only to hide unjustified social inequality, divisions, and absence of real social solidarity. By contrast Medina became the site of a new Muslim community, forged together by a number of hitherto disparate and disconnected communities, and governed by its own trans-tribal constitution that was derived from the evolving doctrines of Islam. It is for this reason that Muslims highly venerate the *hijra* of Muhammad and his Meccan followers (*al-Muhajirun*), and the Islamic calendar in fact begins with that event rather than with Muhammad's birth or first revelations.

The centrality of the notion of a universal community based on collective submission to a monotheistic God and open to all is also evident in that Islam did not shy away from incorporating any previously existing practice that promoted such a community. Thus pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, which had been a pre-Islamic pagan practice, was incorporated as an Islamic ritual—the main alteration being the removal of the objects of polytheist worship from the *haram* (or sanctuary) of Mecca. With Islam pilgrims

visited Mecca from all directions to express their unity in venerating the one God, rather than as in polytheist times to visit their own, tribally-specific gods that had been housed in Mecca's *haram*. Similarly, beliefs that had guaranteed a certain degree of trans-tribal peace in pagan Arabia, such as the "forbidden months" (*al-Ashhur al-haram*), in which fighting was prohibited, were likewise incorporated into Islam.

By Muhammad's time many Arabs were already familiar with the Abrahamic variety of monotheism, and many had adopted Christianity and Judaism. Islam was formulated essentially as a continuation of the Biblical tradition, so that divine revelation to humanity is understood as historically evolving. That scheme allowed for the incorporation of the Biblical traditions into Islam, but also posited Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," through whom divine revelation to humanity reached its conclusion. Thus all Biblical prophets are acknowledged in Islam, and in the Qur'an their stories are mentioned as parables for the faithful—even though usually without much detail, since the assumption is that the audience must be familiar with the story. Along with Jesus and Moses, Abraham is given an Islamic character, and is credited with building the *haram* of Mecca. While recognized as embodying earlier revelations by the same God, both Judaism and Christianity seem lacking from an Islamic point of view, and in both cases largely due to their failure to translate the idea of a monotheistic God into the social base of a meaningfully united, egalitarian, and harmonious community. The fact that Jews remained an exclusive community and that Christians became divided along deeply sectarian lines seemed to indicate that the monotheistic ideal embodied in them lacked a socially open and integrative capacity. In this case the fault was identified not in God but in humanity, whose errors in comprehending the meaning of monotheism were corrected in the Islamic revelation.

The basis for this community in Islam consisted of a simple, egalitarian creed, and an active campaign against representation of divine ideas in persons or objects, so as to discourage a resurgence of polytheism and to prevent the dilution or the making profane of what was a highly abstract conception of God. Ritually, conversion to Islam is perhaps the easiest and most straightforward process to be found in any religion. It merely consists of the recitation of the *shahadah*—the verbal attestation that there is no God but the one God and that Muhammad is his messenger. (Other Sunna-based rituals may follow if needed, notably circumcision for males.) The *shahadah* is thus considered the first "pillar" of Islam, and for most Muslims a proper following of Islam entails adhering to four other pillars: praying five times a day, fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan, giving alms to the needy, and, if possible, pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

The evolution of Islam as a social system parallels its growth as a global religion shortly after the death of Muhammad. In fact, the very genesis of something that might be called "social system" out of early Islam can be dated precisely to the period immediately following Muhammad's death when, in the absence of a prophetic guiding authority, the community had to forge a human consensus on its rules lest it degenerate back into its tribal and pagan past. Shortly following Muhammad's death in 632 C.E., many elders of the *Ansar* (Muslims of Medina) and *Muhajirun* (Meccan Muslims who had migrated with Muhammad to Medina) held an ad hoc meeting at a location called "Saqifat Bani Sa'ida" in Medina and, after debating whether the *Muhajirun* and *Ansar*

should have separate or common leadership, the gathering opted for a unified leadership and elected Abu Bakr, Muhammad's close companion and one of the earliest believers, as the first caliph (literally, "successor") in Islam.

The problem of unity was paramount for Muslims from their early days, since only a trans-tribal, and eventually universal, community expressed the oneness of God or, more precisely, expressed the idea that a single God spoke to all humanity. The Qur'an itself acknowledges possible divisions and conflicts within the *umma*, but urges reconciliation of such internal problems when they arise. With Muhammad's death, and having just averted a potential split at Saqifat Bani Sai'da, the early Muslims immediately faced another major test to their unity. Abu Bakr's two-year reign was preoccupied with fighting the first rebellion in Islamic history, the so-called *ridda* wars, against nominally Muslim tribes that not only refused to pay alms after Muhammad, but in some cases even announced men of their own to be new prophets after Muhammad. The suppression of the revolt finally secured the basis of a unified Islamic polity in Arabia, out of which followed a stunning series of conquests in which Muslims almost simultaneously defeated the two great powers of the time; to the east they destroyed the Sassanid empire in Persia and Mesopotamia, and to the north and west they deprived Byzantium of its former hold on Egypt and Syria.

3. Islam as Basis of a Universal Community

The conquests allowed for a great deal of population movement. Muslim armies of conquest did not return to Arabia, and after an early period of segregation Muslim soldiers began to mix with the local populations in the conquered territories, many of whom, including especially members of Christian sects persecuted under Byzantium, welcomed the Muslim conquests as heralding a new and more tolerant era. For many non-Muslims that was indeed the outcome. Not only could they now practice their religion more freely, but they could also maintain their property and social status. Subsequently many local Jews and Christians entered the service of the bureaucracy of the new Islamic state and held high positions without being required to convert to Islam.

For a few centuries after the conquests Islam seemed to have succeeded in approaching an ideal of a universal community. From Iberia and West Africa to India and Central Asia Islam became the dominant faith. It also provided basis for a great similarity of manners and habits; the spread of common systems of learning concerning such areas as law, philosophy, natural sciences, mathematics, medicine, and theology; and Arabic emerged as a lingua franca of learning and rule across vast distances. This civilization also included many of its non-Muslim inhabitants, so much so that Marshall Hodgson, a distinguished historian of Islam, proposed the term "Islamicate" rather than "Islamic" civilization, as a way of alluding to the fact that the world system we normally attribute to Islam included many elements that had little to do with religion as such.

Muslims themselves referred to a *Dar al-Islam*, or "abode of Islam," to designate any territory where social life has been imprinted with substantial and continuing Islamic influences. For a place to be so designated it mattered little whether life there was guided by a specific set of orthodoxies. More importantly, it sufficed that a majority, or at least a significant part of the local population, professed Islam, which was a sufficient

basis to begin a conversation on what the faith actually implied in terms of social manners and customs. This is evident from tales provided by travelers throughout Muslim history. For example Ibn Battuta (1307-1377 C.E.) of Tangier (in today's Morocco), the most famous of such travelers, showed little hesitation in arguing with Muslims in as far away places as Upper Egypt or the Maldives on what constituted proper Islamic behavior, since he clearly saw himself as an equal citizen in all of *Dar al-Islam*, rather than merely as a citizen of Tangier or Morocco. That sense of global citizenship readily made him feel that he belonged anywhere across vast regions, including Southern Iberia, West, North, and East Africa, the entire Middle East, India, and Central Asia.

That conception of global citizenship was typical of especially the cosmopolitan learned communities of *Dar al-Islam*. However, the conception of a common Islamic civilization underwent some changes after the first three centuries of the faith. Until the middle of the tenth century C.E. the Muslim World was by and large kept together as a single political unit, at whose pinnacle there stood a caliph. Political unity continued to be the rule throughout the Rashidun (632-661 C.E.), Umayyad (661-750 C. E.), and the first two centuries of Abbasid caliphates (750-1258 C.E.), even as the capital city, and along with it the center of gravity of empire, moved from Medina to Damascus with the ascendance of the Umayyads, and then to Baghdad with their fall. While the remnants of the Umayyads did establish a rival caliphate in Iberia, the bulk of *Dar al-Islam* remained united otherwise under the single authority of the new Baghdad caliphate.

By the middle of the tenth century, however, central caliphal authority lost much practical power to bureaucratic and military groups that had themselves been brought in or developed out of the global expansion of Islam. In addition, another rival caliphate was declared in Egypt by the Ismaili Fatimids, and much of the rest of the *Dar al-Islam* became parceled as petty and unstable dynastic states, which only symbolically paid allegiance to Baghdad. The ensuing political disunity of *Dar al-Islam* since circa 950 C.E. owes a great deal, ironically, to the actual success of Islam as a namesake of a genuine global civilization. The Muslim world had become in effect too large and diverse to govern centrally, and even modern governments with modern means of communication at their disposal would be hard pressed to effectively run the immense expanses which comprised *Dar al-Islam*. Yet, Muslims continued to entertain a certain notion of a global *Dar al-Islam*. With no overarching political center, more of the patterns of Islamic civilization were beginning to be set by all kinds of non-political actors. These included the *'ulama*, or the scholars of religion, as well as communities that criss-crossed *Dar al-Islam* in various pursuits, such as merchants, pilgrims, migrants and adventurers.

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Biographical Sketch

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