CHAPTER SEVEN
THE RELIGIOUS WORLD OF ISLAM

THE RESURGENCE OF ISLAM

Perhaps not since the days of the Crusades, when European popes and kings sent wave after wave of “Christian” armies to “rescue to holy places” of the Middle East from the followers of the prophet Muhammad, have Christendom and Islam been thrown together with such intensity as in our own time. After years of domination by colonialist powers, the Muslim world is rising up, passionately committed to its ancient faith. Middle Eastern oil, and Western dependence on it, have forcefully thrown the two cultures into confrontation. With vast oil income has come political and economic power. The resurgence of cultural and religious pride, accompanied by distaste for Western values, has resulted in revolution and turmoil not always understood in the West. Americans who had never given thought to the Islamic faith have been jolted into awareness, first by skyrocketing fuel prices and then by the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979 and the crises that followed. They have listened in bewilderment as American sports figures, such as boxer Mohammed Ali, declared their Muslim faith.

As a Turkish friend conducted me and some of my students into the great Blue Mosque in Istanbul the faces of the students betrayed this same bewilderment. We sat in a corner of the cold building (it was midwinter), shoeless and cross-legged on the richly colored carpets. In another area a
group of men were chanting their prayers and the sound bounces to and fro among the ornate domes of the mosque. How could it be—the question was on the students’ faces—that here, in what was once the splendid capital of a vast “Christian Empire,” Islam now flourished? Earlier, in Jerusalem, the same students had been awakened in confusion by the loud call to prayer, broadcast electronically from the minarets of the city. They had seen the faithful pour from middle-class stone houses in East Jerusalem into the mosques. Then they had sat among Bedouin desert tribespeople, drinking sweet tea in their cool tents, and heard their parting benediction: “May Allah be with you. We will see you again, if Allah wills.”

What is this far-flung religion that dominates the life of more than one fifth of the world’s people? Is it truly a world religion, stretching from its origins in Arabia throughout the Middle East, North Africa (and, increasingly, central Africa), Pakistan, and central Asia (where the communist Russian government must take note of millions of Muslim subjects), all the way into the islands of Indonesia. In past times it knocked on the doors of Europe, itself—first through Spain in the West and later through Austria in the East. Today it bids well to capture the religious commitment of additional millions, especially in the emerging Third World.

The Muslim faith is “Western” in the sense that its presuppositions correspond far more closely to those of Judaism and Christianity than to those of Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Culturally, however, Islam belongs neither to East nor West, but represents an all-encompassing world view of its own.

Islam’s claim to universality is very explicit. The Arabic word Islam means “submission,” “obedience,” and “surrender.” Thus, explains the famous Muslim teacher Abu Al’ala Maududi, “As the entire creation obeys the law of God, the whole universe, therefore, literally follows the religion of Islam—i.e.,Islam signifies nothing but obedience and submission to Allah, the Lord of the universe.”¹ People, he says, insofar as they are physical, and subject to the physical laws of the universe, are Muslim. However, since people possess reason and intellect, they can reject the laws of God in the moral and intellectual realm and thus become “unbelievers.” Should such a person decide instead to submit to God in these areas also, “He has, so to say, achieved completeness in his consciousness. He has, so to say, decided to obey God in the domain in which he was endowed with freedom and choice. . . . He is a perfect Muslim and his Islam is complete—for this submission of his entire self to the will of Allah is Islam and nothing but Islam.”²

¹Sayyid Abu Al’ala Maududi, Towards Understanding Islam, trans. and ed. Kharshid Ahmad (Takoma Park, Md.: International Graphics, 1977), p. 2. A revised and expanded edition of this influential work has appeared under the same title published by The Islamic Foundation, 223 London Road, Leicester, U.K.

²Ibid., p. 4.

But how can one come to a knowledge of the will of Allah? In the physical world, reason and research (science) can provide the answer. But only revelation can reveal the whole will of God, and, since this lies far beyond the individual’s capacity to reason, this revelation must be accepted by faith. Faith in the unseen, coupled with total submission and obedience to the revealed will of Allah is at the heart of Muslim religious life.

THE PROPHET AND ISLAM

For the Muslim, Allah has chosen as His vehicle for revelation the prophet. The prophet has been given a special gift by God to reveal His will, and the prophet’s message is self-authenticating: “the duty of the common men and women is to recognize a prophet and, after ascertaining that one is the true prophet of God, to have faith in him and his teachings and to scrupulously obey him and follow in his footsteps. This is the road to salvation.”³

The line of prophets began with Adam, who was not only the first man but the first prophet. As time went by, and humanity fell farther and farther into error and darkness, “God’s true prophets were raised in all countries; in every land and people. They all possessed one and the same religion—the religion of Islam.”⁴ Their differences were only cultural and methodological. Moses, David, and Jesus of Nazareth were all true prophets, according to Muslim teaching. Their teachings were distorted by their later followers, it adds; but these teachings should nevertheless be highly respected.

But the climax of the line of prophethood came, says the Muslim, with the call of an illiterate Arab tribesman named Muhammad. Around the year 570 AD, at the age of about forty, Muhammad underwent a series of deep spiritual experiences that came during solitary vigils. First he thought himself demon possessed, but then became convinced that he was instead a prophet. He described and defended the initial experience in these words:⁵

By the Star when it goes down,—
Your Companion is neither astray nor misled,
Nor does he say [taught] of [his own] Desire.
It is no less than inspiration sent down to him:
He was taught by one Mighty in Power,
Imbued with Wisdom: For he appeared [in stately form]
while he was in the highest part of the horizon:

³Ibid., p. 25.

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

then he approached and came closer,
And was at a distance of but two bow-lengths
or [even] nearer:
So did [God] convey the inspiration to His Servant—
[Conveyed] what He [meant] to convey.
The [Prophet’s] [mind and] heart in no wise falsified
that which he saw.  (LIII:1–10)

At the time when Muhammad’s heavenly visitor, the angel Gabriel
began to speak to him, society in the prophet’s home city of Mecca was in a
period of turmoil and transition, as was Arabia in general. The religion was
tribal and primitive and centered around gods worshipped in a cubed
shaped building called the Ka’ba. The prophet spoke out against this
polytheism and urged unity among the warring tribes, based on submission
to the will of the one god—Allah. He was opposed, however, and made
only a few converts for the first thirteen years. Finally, he had to flee the
city in 622. (The date of this flight, called the hejra, is the year 1 on the
Islamic calendar.)

Muhammad met with much greater success in the city of Medina,
where his prophetic status was accepted. As leader of the city he set out to
unite the outlying tribes and in 630 conquered Mecca itself and cleansed
the Ka’ba of its idols. At the time of his unexpected death in 632 Muhammad
was the most powerful man in Arabia and had presented his people
with a new world view and sense of community. His successors continued a
march of conquest through Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa,
Spain, and central Asia. The peoples of almost all these lands remain
Muslim today, along with millions more in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh,
Indonesia, and Turkey.

The career of Muhammad, according to Muslim teaching, was the
“finality of prophethood.” The message of earlier prophets has been
adulterated, they believe, but his has been perfectly preserved. Furthermore,
his message is complete (and thus needs no expansion) and universal
(so that no more need exists for separate prophets to each culture, as had
been the case earlier).

“Now, therefore,” says Abul A’La Maududi, “the only source for the
Knowledge of God and His Way is Muhammad (peace be upon him). We
can know of Islam only through his teachings which are so complete and so
comprehensive that they can guide men for all times to come. Now the
world does not need any new prophet; it needs only such people as have
full faith in Muhammad (peace be upon him), who become the standard
bearers of his message, propagate it to the world at large, and endeavor to
establish the culture which Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave to
man.”

The last sentence in this statement is significant because it points to
the fact that Islam is a term that covers not just religious life, but every
aspect of culture: art, economics, politics, and so on. It allows no concept of
a separate “secular” life for the believer. Thus, as one Muslim scholar has
said, “one cannot be a Muslim and have a western culture. Islam cannot be
an ingredient in culture—it is a culture.”

THE FAITH OF ISLAM

Westerners, often critical and skeptical of their own religious heritage, are
amazed and sometimes bewildered by the intensity of Muslim faith. A
person who would willingly die for his or her religious convictions, while
such an action is common to all world religions, is nevertheless something
of a rarity in the modern West.

On April 20, 1979, an Islamic holy Friday, a column of tanks and
armored personnel carriers entered Khera, a small town in eastern
Afghanistan. The men of the devoutly Muslim community were herded
unarmed into a field and were upbraided violently for helping Muslim
rebels in the hills, who were fighting the Russian-dominated and secular
central government. The women gathered in the nearby mosque, in sight of
the field. “Why had the people of the town refused to fight for the
government? Why had they instead given supplies to the rebels?” the
soldiers demanded.

One more chance would be given to them. The soldiers surrounded
the men and pointed their AK-47 automatic rifles at them. Then came the
command: the men were to shout pro-communist slogans and cry “Hooray
for the regime!” Instead, and in spite of the obvious consequences, the men
shouted, “Allah o Akbar” (God is the Greatest).

At the order of a young Russian officer, the soldiers opened fire.
During the next five minutes an estimated 1,170 men and boys died. The
women rushed from the mosque, screaming and raising copies of the
Qur’an (the collection of the revelations to Muhammad), pleading for
mercy. But they were driven back while the soldiers bulldozed the bodies of
the victims into trench graves.

All religions have had their martyrs, of course. But such a story
illustrates the intensity of Muslim faith in at least some parts of the
temporary world.

*Maududi, Towards Understanding Islam, p. 63.
Religion: A Preface

Five articles of faith form the foundation for the religion of Islam: Faith in the oneness of God, in the angels of God, in the books of God, in the prophets of God, and in the reality of life after death.

The oneness of God. The primary statement of Islamic faith is La ilaha illallah (There is no deity but Allah). "It is the expression of this belief," says Abul 'A'la Maududi, "which differentiates a true Muslim from a Kafir [unbeliever], a Mushrik [one who associates others with God in His divinity], or a Dahriya [atheist]." Allah is for the Muslim an absolute, infinite, conscious power, not in any way divisible, and having no father, mother, or offspring. He created everything and everything is subjected to His will. As one modern Muslim put it, "The innate power within atoms is the order of Allah."

God! There is no god
But He—the Living,
The Self-sustaining, Eternal.
No slumber can seize Him
Nor sleep. His are all things
In the heavens and on earth. (II:255)

It should be stressed that this belief is not simply theoretic for the believer. Its implications dominate every facet of the believer's life. A shady business deal or a shabby bit of carpenter work may bring the exclamation, "But that is not la ilaha illallah!"

The angels. Those beings often worshipped as gods are, instead, taught the Prophet, the angels of Allah who administer His Kingdom, but do not share in His divinity. They watch each person and keep a complete record in preparation for the Day of Judgment. Since their precise nature cannot be known by man the Muslim accepts their reality as an act of faith. The prophets, however, experienced them directly:

He doth send down His angels
with inspiration of His command,
To such of His servants
As he pleaseth, [saying]:
"Warn [Man] that there is
No god but I: so do
Your duty unto Me. (XVI:2)

The Books of God. As we have seen, Muslims accept the legitimacy of many prophets. Some of these left "books" inspired by God as a revelation

to humanity. The books of Abraham, they say, have been lost. The Torah of Moses, the Zaboor (Psalms) of David, and the Injeel (Gospel) of Jesus Christ have survived, but not in their original texts. Rather, they have all suffered serious corruption and pollution. Nevertheless they should be respected for the truth that has survived in them, and their adherents, called "people of the book," are likewise to be given special respect not afforded pagans or followers of the Eastern religions.

It is the Qur'an, however, that crowns the Books of God. It is not, like the other books, a mixture of error and truth, God's word and humanity's.
It is not, like them directed to a particular culture but to all humankind, and in a living language rather than a dead one. Its message, unlike the partial one in the other books, is absolutely complete. Unlike them, it is perfectly preserved and “exists exactly as it had been revealed to the Prophet; not a word—nay, not a dot of it—has been changed. It is available in its original text and the Word of God has now been preserved for all times to come.”

The Qur'an, of course, the collection of the revelations of the Prophet, set in writing. This book, comparable in length to the New Testament, presents the oracles without regard to chronological or theological system. The systematizing of the Faith came later, and for a long time Muslim theology was developed primarily as a means to distinguish Islam from the religions around and before it.

One is struck by the great amount of material in the Qur'an that seems to originate in the Hebrew Scriptures, although with a definitely different perspective. Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, Solomon, and others appear regularly on its pages. So does Jesus of Nazareth and his mother Mary. Muhammad is known to have come in contact with Jews and Christians. He suffered great disappointment when they did not accept his own message and superseding that of their own prophets. Muslims would explain the Hebrew materials in the Qur'an as due to their common origin, Allah speaking to his various prophets independently of each other. Non-Muslims might suspect that Muhammad was indeed influenced theologically by both of the older faiths—especially Judaism. His contact with Christianity and Christian literature seems to have been limited to those Christians who lived or traded in Arabia. Jesus’ virginal birth is accepted in the Qur'an, but the story is not the same as that in the Christian Gospels, and it ends with a denial of Jesus’ divinity: “It is not befitting (the majesty of) God that he should beget a son” (XIX:35).

Questions not dealt with specifically in the Qur'an are often answered by recourse to the Hadith—the traditions about what the Prophet did and said and approved of as true and right. The material available here is massive, and Muslim scholars admit that it is a mixture of truth and legend and must be subjected to literary criticism. Hadith studies permit Muslims to react with some flexibility to new historical situations.

The prophets of God. We have already outlined the important characteristics of this item of Faith: the multiplicity of prophets who have partially revealed the will of God, and the final, climax and perfect revelation to Muhammad.

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Life after death. Muslim “eschatology,” a religious teaching about the “last things” (i.e., the end and completion of history), includes belief in a Day of Judgment when the dead shall be raised and given rewards or punishments according to the dictates of justice. Then comes life after death, lived either in paradise or hell. This belief is considered so important that “denial of life after death makes all other beliefs meaningless.”

It is the major incentive for doing good and refraining from evils since one’s actions always have meaning and result in consequences beyond the present moment. Decisions must always be made, then, with an eye toward the Day of Judgment:

The trumpet shall be
Sounded, when behold!
From the sepulchres [men]
will rush forth
To their Lord!

They will say: “Aha!
Woe unto Us! Who
Hath raised us up
From our beds of repose?”

[A voice will say:]
“this is what [God]
Most Gracious had promised . . .” (XXXVI:51–52)

The reward for those who have submitted to Allah and accumulated good deeds is poetically pictured as in a beautiful Eden-like place,

Among Gardens and Springs;
Dressed in fine silk
And in rich brocade,
They will face each other;
Go; and We shall
Join them to Companions
With beautiful, big,
And lustrous eyes.

There can they call
For every kind of fruit
In Peace and security.

Nor will they there
taste death, except the first

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Maududi, Towards Understanding Islam, p. 82.

11 Ibid., p. 88.
Death; and He will preserve them from the Penalty of the Blazing Fire ... (XLIV:52–56)

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

As there are five bedrock articles of faith for the Muslim, there are also five acts of worship that are required as the primary duties of the believer, the "five pillars of Islam": testimony, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Each of these responsibilities is to be carried out in a carefully prescribed way.

Testimony: The true Muslim must declare with sincere conviction the Shahadat:

There is no God but Allah, And Muhammad is his messenger.

In this brief creed the believer asserts both the absolute oneness of God and the climax and completion of revelation in the message of the Prophet.

Prayer: Salat is the prescribed prayers that the faithful must repeat five times each day, either alone, or with the community gathered at the mosque (the Muslim house of worship), especially on Friday (the Muslim holy day). From the tower (or minaret) of the mosque the call to prayer rings out across the neighborhood before sunrise (this is the call that jolted my students from sleep in Jerusalem), at midday, before sunset, at sunset, and after sunset. Long lines of Muslim men on their knees, heads touching the ground, chanting together, have become a common sight on American television. Often in the front row can be seen a king, or prince, or prime minister, humbling himself before Allah.

Alms-giving: Zakat, or the giving of alms, is an obligation of the Muslim. Believing that Allah owns everything, the believer must contribute a portion of his own goods (sometimes figured at the minimum rate of 2.5 percent of his wealth) so that the poor of Islam have at least a minimum standard of living. In some cases this "gift" (or tax) is collected by the government in Muslim countries and applied to social welfare projects.

Fasting: Fasting has the effect, in the Muslim view, of freeing man from slavery to his own desires. During one lunar month—Ramadan—no food or drink whatsoever may be taken during daylight hours. "Each and every moment during our fast we suppress our passions and desires and,"

Muhammad riding Borakh (a mare with human head) on his journey to the Seventh Heaven, and his meeting with Adam. From a fifteenth century Turkish manuscript. (New York Public Library)
says Abul A'La Maududi, “proclaim, by our doing so, the supremacy of the Law of God.”

**Pilgrimage.** Muslims who can afford it are obligated, at least once in their life, to make the hajj, or the pilgrimage, to the city of Mecca. Nowadays the pilgrims often arrive in sleek jetliners, pouring into the sacred city by the hundreds of thousands. In ancient times the journey was much harder and more dangerous and represented great faith and courage. Every Muslim, king and pauper alike, dresses exactly the same and carries out the rituals in the same way. The central ritual is the circling seven times of the Ka'ba, the cube-shaped building cleansed of idols by Muhammad himself. The circling begins and ends at the mysterious “black stone” (probably a meteorite). Animal sacrifices are made during this time, in commemoration of the sacrifice of Abraham, which Muslims believe took place at this site. Non-Muslims are forbidden to enter the sacred places (although they are welcome at all other mosques in the world).

**Other duties.** In addition to faithful observance of the “five pillars,” the Muslim submits himself to the shari'ah, the detailed code of ethical and social conduct. The shari'ah has been formulated with differing details by several different schools or fiqhs, but each school recognizes the validity of the others. Also, the believer is called on to “jealously guard and uphold the prestige of Islam.” It is in this context that Muslims speak of jihad or “holy war.” Jihad refers to “the war that is waged solely in the name of Allah and against those who perpetrate oppression as enemies of Islam.” When an Islamic state is attacked by a non-Muslim power, every citizen must fight. If necessary, neighboring Muslim countries must help, and if this is not enough, “then the Muslims of the whole world must fight the common enemy.” The powerful effect of such a belief can be seen in the Qur'anic injunction that, in Abul A'La Maududi’s words, “Jihad is as much a primary duty of the Muslims concerned as are the daily prayers or Fasting. One who shirks it is a sinner. His very claim to being a Muslim is doubtful.”

As is the case in all the other supracultural “world” religions, Islam is not a monolith but is divided into various sects. The major division is between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Sunnah means “the way” and refers to the Muslim’s commitment to live the way Muhammad lived, that is, in obedience to the revelation given to him. Shi'ah means “pertaining to” and arises from the dispute over who should succeed Muhammad. Those who followed his cousin Ali, in particular the Persians, were called the Shi'ah of Ali. At first there was little doctrinal difference between the two branches, but later the Shi'ites developed some distinctive beliefs. In particular, they hold that the first twelve imams, or leaders, were chosen divinely and guided directly by Allah and thus may even be considered infallible. The very great respect given to modern imams is partially responsible for the popular support given to the Ayatola Khomeini by the faithful in Iran during the confrontation with the United States over the taking of American hostages in 1979.