### Chapter 2: Islam—The Way of Submission to Allah

## *Description*

This chapter is the third in a series presenting the religions that started in the Middle East. This chapter focuses on Islam, the youngest and one of the two fastest growing religions in the world today. According to Muslim teaching, the history of Islam began with creation. However, historians typically begin with the last of the prophets of God (*Allah*): the prophet Muhammad. Hence, this chapter traces the history of Islam from seventh century c.e. Arabia until modern times. This includes the stages of development and sacred texts of Islam; a discussion of Muhammad’s life and times; Muhammad’s hearing and recitation of what he understood to be the word of Allah and subsequently documented in the *Qur’an*; the spread of Islam beyond Arabia; the emergence of divisions within Islam—the Sunni and Shi’ite branches, as well as the mystical Sufi movement; and the various responses of Islam to the modern world.

The historical discussion ends with a discussion of the revival of Islam in the twentieth century and the various movements in response to developments in the modern world: conservative, secular, and modernist. Special attention is given to the extremist version of Islam advocated by Osama bin Laden and others. The distinctive teachings of Islam are then summarized. Although human beings were created by Allah for the purpose of submission to Allah’s will, humans have freedom to choose whether to submit or not to show the right path. The Qur’an describes the paradise that awaits those who submit willingly and the torment in store for those who do not. Guidelines (including the “five pillars”) teach Muslims how to lead lives of submission. Muslims are strict monotheists, as expressed in one of Islam’s fundamental prayers, “There is no god but Allah!”

The chapter ends with a discussion of challenges facing Islam in the twenty-first century and the reflections of Muslim students from various countries on their religion.

## *Goals*

Of all the world’s religions, Islam may have received the most distorted coverage in modern electronic and print media, especially in the United States and Europe. In particular, the current Islamic revival is portrayed in a quite sensationalist manner, with a mixture of fact, fantasy, and prejudice. A principal goal of this chapter is to correct these distortions with an objective portrayal of Islam: its history and modern situation, distinctive teachings, and responses to contemporary ethical issues.

A related goal is to contribute to the defusing of the tension and hostility many non-Muslims feel toward Islam. Greater understanding will hopefully lead to more tolerance and less fear.

## *Objectives*

1. Summarize the life of Muhammad, the final prophet of Allah.

2. Demonstrate the centrality of the Qur’an in the lives of Muslims.

3. Survey the rapid spread of Islam and how the question of succession to Muhammad was resolved.

4. Highlight the many contributions of Islamic civilization.

5. Clarify the basic characteristics of the two great branches of the Islamic family: Sunni and Shi’ite.

6. Describe the mystical movement within Islam: Sufi.

7. Characterize the various ways in which Muslims are reaffirming their heritage in modern times.

8. Outline the distinctive Muslim teachings, including those (such as *jihad*) often misunderstood by non-Muslims.

## *Key Topics*

1. According to Islam, Allah has spoken through a long line of prophets, but Allah’s final and definitive revelation was to a man named Muhammad, who lived in Arabia in the seventh century c.e.

2. Muslims believe that the words of God to Muhammad are recorded, as they were heard and recited, in the Qur’an. As with the other monotheistic religions, the revelation of God laid forth an ethical lifestyle for the faithful to follow.

3. The indigenous religion of pre-Muslim Arabia was animistic.

4. Muhammad was born in 570–571 c.e. and was 40 years old when he received the first of a number of revelations given over a period of twenty-three years. These revelations eventually were written down in what became the Qur’an.

5. In 622 c.e., Muhammad moved from Mecca to Yathrib (later called Medina, and known as the “city of the Prophet”). His migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Dates are listed A.H. (for “year of the *hijra*”).

6. When Muhammad died in 632 c.e., at age sixty-three, Abu Bakr emerged as the first *caliph* (“successor”), but the question of the rightful succession to Muhammad was to be the issue that led to the major division in Islam.

7. For Muslims the Qur’an is the final, definitive revelation of Allah to humanity. It is the single most important foundation of all aspects of Muslim life.

8. The rapid spread of Islam throughout the Middle East and into Africa, Europe, and Asia is accomplished mostly through military conquest.

9. The Islamic civilizations of the Middle East brought about great advances in medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, literature, and history that were to have a profound influence on Western culture.

10. The Ottomans, nomadic Turkish tribes who migrated from central Asia into Asia Minor (modern Turkey) seized Constantinople in 1453, and the Ottoman Empire became the most powerful empire in the world during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

11. The Ottoman was the last great classical Muslim empire to fall, lasting through World War I and officially ending with the creation of the Republic of Turkey in 1922.

12. The two major branches of Islam (Sunni and Shi’ite) divide principally over the issue of succession in the leadership of Islam after the Prophet Muhammad.

13. Sunni Muslims form the largest (85%) of the two main branches of the Islamic family, committed to following the faith and practice established by Muhammad and the four “righteous caliphs,” the first four successors of Muhammad.

14. *Sharia* refers to the entire body of authoritative Muslim teaching on how to live.

15. The smaller of the two major movements within Islam (15%) is known as the “Party (Shia) of ‘Ali.” Shi’ites place a particular importance on martyrdom for the true faith.

16. Another belief that distinguishes the Shi’ite movement is the expectation of the Mahdi (“the guided one”) who will restore the purity of the faith. When the Mahdi comes, he will lead the entire world into a new age of justice.

17. Sufism is the name given to the mystical movement in Islam. The Sufi contention that true religion consists of inward experience of holiness rather than external forms has served as a balance to the more legalistic and ritualistic aspects of Muslim life.

18. Since World War I, and especially after World War II, Islam has undergone an exciting period of reform and revitalization.

19. Muslims have sought ways to express the uniqueness of their heritage in response to the incursions of European (Western) ideas and values. Three types of responses may be identified: (1) Conservative (Islamist) movements have sought to purify Muslim life from what are perceived to be the corrosive influences of secular, Western culture; (2) secular movements are committed to revitalizing Muslim life through critical incorporation of the modern Western ideal of separation of the religious and secular spheres; and (3) modernist movements have attempted to reform Muslim societies through reaffirming basic Muslim values and applying them to the challenges of a changing world, letting go of what are viewed as unnecessary social customs.

20. The conservative (Islamist) movements in the Islamic revival include the *Wahhabi* movement that began in Arabia; the Muslim Brotherhood that originated in Egypt; Hamas, a movement dedicated to the liberation of Palestine from the occupation by the State of Israel; the Taliban, a *Wahhabi-*influenced movement in Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Shi’ite revolution in Iran and movements inspired by it, such as the *Hezballah* in Lebanon.

21. *Al-Qaeda*, led by the late Osama Bin Laden, is a network of terrorist groups committed to a worldwide Islamic revolution.

22. In the first decades of the twenty-first century Islamist (conservative) movements continue to gain strength throughout the Islamic world.

23. Secular movements in Islam that follow the Western example of separating religion from civil wars have been influential in Turkey and other Islamic countries such as Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Albania, and Libya.

24. Modernist (progressive) movements in Islam that try to steer a middle course between extreme Islamist conservatism and secularism are particularly strong in Western countries. Leaders of these movements have spoken out aggressively against what they view as the distortion of Islam by Islamist extremists, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

25. Among the leaders of progressive Islam are a number of women scholar-activists. The movement is particularly strong today in Muslim communities in Western countries, and in Muslim nations that have dealt directly with the social and economic problems in which extremism is bred.

26. Islam is a religion of submitting all life, personal and corporate, to the will of Allah.

27. Islam teaches that by the application of reason, humans should be led to an awareness that they must submit themselves to Allah.

28. According to Islam, life is a testing ground; humans are being given the opportunity to submit willingly to Allah.

29. Muslims believe that Jewish and Christian scriptures contain authentic revelations from Allah, but only the Qur’an is the pure and undefiled Word of Allah.

30. Despite the use of violence against noncombatants by some Islamic groups, the vast majority of Muslims vigorously reject the idea that Islam endorses either violence against civilians or wars of aggression.

31. Key elements of the Christian worldview can be summarized using the framework developed in Chapter 1:

a. HUMAN NATURE: Humans are created from the earth, with Allah breathing his spirit into humanity

b. EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM: Rejecting Allah’s guidance

c. ROOT CAUSE OF PROBLEM: Distraction (by *jinn*) from the path Allah has revealed

d. GOAL OF TRANSFORMATION: Paradise and the “House of Islam”

e. MEANS OF TRANSFORMATION: A life of submission through following the Five Pillars

f. NATURE OF REALITY: Signs of Allah in Creation

g. NATURE OF THE SACRED: “There is no God but Allah”

## *Key Terms and Phrases*

Abu Bakr, ‘Ali, Allah, *allahu akbar*, *al-Qaeda*, *ayatollah*, *caliph*, *dar al-Harb*, *dar al-Islam*, dervishes, *fatwa*, five pillars, *hadith*, *hajj*, *hijra*,Hamas, Husain, Iblis, *ijma’*, *imam*, *im’shallah*, *jihad* (greater and lesser), *jinn*, *Kaaba*, Khadija, *Mahdi*, *masjid* (mosque), Mecca, Medina, *muezzin*, Muhammad, Muslim Brotherhood, Osama bin Laden, People of the Book, *qiyas*, *Qur’an*, Ramadan, Salah-al-Din, seal of the prophets, *shahadah*, Sharia, Shi’ite, *shirk*, Sufi, Sunni, *surah*, Taliban, *ulama*, *umma*, Wahhabi

## *Assignments and Activities*

1. As you begin the chapter, ask students to write down what comes to mind when they hear the words “Islam” and “Muslims.” Ask them to reflect on how they developed these impressions. Ask them also to write down the questions they want answered in their study of Islam.

2. Have students bring to class copies of articles from recent newspapers, magazines, and online news sources in which Islam and Muslims are mentioned. In small groups, have students discuss the portrayal of Islam in these articles. Do these articles confirm or refute the contention in this chapter that media coverage of Islam is often distorted?

3. In most communities in the United States, American Muslims live and work. Many are willing to come to classes to share their personal stories and their understanding of Islam and the challenges Muslims face in the twenty-first century.

4. Debate–discuss one or more of the following assertions:

a. The portrayal of Islam in the Western media gives people a very distorted impression of Islam.

b. Islam poses a great threat to world peace and stability.

c. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity share much in common.

d. Women in traditional Muslim countries need to be liberated; they are victims of a very hierarchical, patriarchal system.

e. There is an inevitable clash between Christian and Islamic civilizations.