



Islam

SESSION 3

Where did Islam originate? What do Muslims believe? What similarities and differences are there between Christianity and Islam? How can Christians and Muslims best relate to one another?

The Ancient World

When Muhammad died, the Arabs were gradually rallying to the call of Islam and forming a new unity under the inspiration of the Koran. Formerly a large number of disorganized independent tribes, they joined a community called the *umma*, or “people,” whose policies and ideals enabled them to promote a better life for all concerned. Thus the Islamic *umma* constituted a new factor in the political and economic life of the ancient Middle East. With the belligerent Persian and Byzantine powers on either side of them (refer to Session 1) and with an inhospitable desert as their homeland, it was perhaps inevitable that they should endeavor to expand. So, in less than two centuries, Arab Muslim armies under superb military leadership conquered a large part of the ancient world. They overran the Persian Empire and eventually pushed through to Central Asia, China, and India. They did not conquer Constantinople, the Byzantine capital (now Istanbul, Turkey) for several centuries, but they took over the rule of lands formerly controlled by the Christians, such as Syria, Egypt, and North Africa farther west. They even invaded Spain and began an occupation that lasted about seven hundred years.

Muslim expansion was religiously inspired in that the invading forces considered themselves to be representatives of the divine pattern for social justice, and they sought to replace existing governments with those organized according to Islamic law. However, the Arabs did not force subjugated people to accept Islam. The *sharia* provided a generous place for minority religions. Jews, Christians, and others in conquered lands joined with their Muslim rulers to produce a complex civilization covering all areas of human endeavor. This



civilizing force, using the Arabic language, found creative expression in science, medicine, literature, philosophy, engineering, art, and mathematics. Flourishing from the ninth to the thirteenth century, this Islamic civilization provided the intellectual foundation for the awakening of Europe in the centuries to follow. To cite just one example, Latin translations of Arabic-language medical books were used in European medical schools up to the seventeenth century. It was through such translations that the philosophical heritage from ancient Greece and the Far East reached Europe.

Ideally, Islamic principles and laws permeate all aspects of life, but in practice, the demands of an expanding empire sometimes produced results that compromised the Koranic model. Instead of a united *umma* under a single leader (caliph), or successor to the Prophet, the Islamic realms broke up into many kingdoms and dynasties, often at odds with one another. And during the seventh and eighth centuries, there occurred what is perhaps the most important division in the Muslim community, one that has persisted to the present.

A dispute arose over who should be the rightful head of the Islamic community. The majority claimed that since Muhammad had not named a successor, the leader should be chosen by consensus. A minority insisted that it was only right that the leadership should remain in the Prophet's family, beginning with Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. This minority view did not prevail, but those holding to it formed a dissident party called the Shia. The majority were called the people of the *sunna* (tradition). These two branches, the Shiites and the Sunnis, have continued to the present. The difference between them has always been political, whereas in matters of theology and religious practice, they are essentially the same.

Mystics, called *Sufis*, began to flourish early in the growth of Islam. They were individuals who sought by ascetical practices and by intense ritual observances to achieve a deeper spiritual experience, with the ultimate goal being union of the soul with God. They were organized in orders and influenced greatly the cultural, political, and religious life of Muslims in many lands. However, they always maintained their ties with either the Sunni or the Shiite branch of the *umma*.

The Modern World

During the first years of Islam's worldwide expansion, the number of Muslims in any given conquered territory was not large. It sufficed to maintain an armed force with dependents and enough functionaries to guide the local population in installing an administration conformed to Islamic norms. But as time passed, commercial and cultural interests caused more Muslims to settle in the conquered lands, and the influence of their faith attracted many from other religions to turn to Islam. Muslims were leaders in sea voyages of discovery and land exploration across the world. As new countries became known to them, they also spread their faith in such places as Indonesia, east and west Africa, east Asia, eastern Europe, and parts of central Asia. Then, as the world population of Muslims grew and their civilizing achievement reached its highest point in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, their political and economic power on the world scene began gradually to diminish. There were some outstanding exceptions to this decline, for example, the Ottoman Turkish Empire. During that period, the European powers were making their way slowly into the modern world through the growth of the sciences and, later, the Industrial Revolution.

COUNTRIES WITH LARGE MUSLIM POPULATIONS

Approximate population figures for the seven countries with the largest number of Muslims:

Indonesia	171,600,000
Pakistan	154,600,000
India	134,100,000
Bangladesh	132,900,000
Turkey	71,300,000
Iran	67,700,000
Egypt	63,500,000

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The long period of gradual modernization enabled Europe to build up military, industrial, and scientific power, which ushered in a movement of expansion at the expense of countries less developed. This brought on the colonial period, beginning in the seventeenth century, in which many Muslim lands were subjugated by France, England, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, and Portugal.

Islam is today truly a world religion. This means that in addition to the areas traditionally known as Islamic (the Arab countries, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and others), many millions of Muslims make their homes in Europe, Africa, North and South America, and the Far East.

Modern Expressions of Islam Worldwide

The fact that Islam is truly a world religion should make us cautious in making general statements about the image of that faith in the present day. Then, too, the nature of authority in the universal *umma* gives us a hint at how varied and complex are the actions and reactions of Muslims across the world. There is no central authority to dictate policy to the followers of Islam. Of course, they have leaders in every land, but ultimately the believers are responsible to God alone. A notable exception to this rule is the case of the Shiites, who, following the leadership of Ali, his family, and representatives of that family, have worked out a centralized structure of authority. Shiites, however, are

only ten percent of the world's population of Muslims. The most inclusive thing that can be said about the majority, and the Shiites, too, for that matter, is that they are engaged in a common effort to come to terms with the modern world of universal technology, but to do that in continuity with the revelation granted to Muhammad the Prophet. This common enterprise of building a faithful Islamic community in the modern world has attracted the attention of the world. Some outside observers call it a revival of religious fervor. Others use the term *fundamentalism*, whatever that may mean in the Islamic context. However, it is not these. Fervor, zeal, passionate faith, attachment to the fundamentals of doctrine and practice—these have always characterized large segments of Islam. Today, we are witnessing a revival of intellectual, economic, and social forces that are inspired by the faith of Islam.

Immediately after achieving independence from the imperialists, some nations tried to imitate their former masters by installing secular governments. These soon became oppressively authoritarian or bogged down in slow economic growth and corrupting influences from outside. Other countries maintained repressive monarchies that were a heritage of the past. Alert Muslims began to organize outside the government ranks and to call for a complete social revolution. They deplored the way some of their governments slavishly imitated the ways of Europe and America, experimenting with secular policies and trying out capitalism, socialism, or humanism. These would-be reformers held up Islam as the middle way, neither capitalistic nor socialistic, but furnishing the divinely revealed pattern for a good society, the one best suited to human nature and covering the whole range of human relationships, from business and finance to social welfare to agriculture, foreign affairs, the use and conservation of natural resources, family life, and, of course, the worship of God.

To see how successful these resurgent Muslims have been in carrying out their reforms, we should study each nation in turn. We should find only partial success in most cases. The Islamic Revolution in Iran has been the most spectacular achievement so far, and it came about only after a violent struggle. Muslim reformists are slowed by the urgent demands of the multitudes for food and housing, by corrupt power holders, by a shortage of intellectual leadership, and by foreign interference.

Perhaps the greatest hindrance to constructive Islamic reform right now is the international stir created by a small group of activists sold out to an ideology of political terrorism. This movement calls itself Islamic, but it seems to have no concern for the ethics and values of the faith.

Turning to other Muslim populations, those living as minorities in multicultural societies, it would seem that their role as reformers is somewhat different. For them, there is little question of installing Islamic regimes, but their challenge is to proclaim and live the faith they profess alongside people of other persuasions and in some way make a positive contribution to life in a pluralistic setting. India is a good example of this process. Muslims have long been a huge minority there (over one hundred million people). As participants in the national life, they influence policies and practices at all levels.

Islam in the U.S.

The story of Islam in this country is a story of immigration. First, there were the forced immigrants, that is, enslaved Africans who were brought to these shores by early Americans. An undetermined number of the Africans so brought here were Muslims by faith. During the sad years of their bondage, most traces of Islamic practice were suppressed, but a few hints indicate that even though the Africans were forced to accept Christianity, their attachment to Islam was not entirely erased. Then after untold degradation and eventual emancipation, they began to raise their heads in search of a new identity. It took a long time, and the course was checkered, but in the 1920s, movements of protest by African Americans began to make themselves heard. Freedom from slavery had not meant true liberty for them. Led by charismatic spokesmen, they practiced an ideology of black power, and they used Islam as the religious framework for their movement. Unfortunately, the first leaders of American Islam were not well trained in the practice and faith of their newly recovered religion, so Muslims worldwide did not recognize it as authentic. However, this movement, called the Nation of Islam, rallied thousands of black citizens, helping them to achieve a sense of dignity and giving them purpose in life. Many will recognize the names of leaders of the Nation of Islam, such as Elijah Muhammad, Wallace Muhammad (later Warith Deen Mohammed), and Malcolm X. Eventually, after

Malcolm X and Wallace Muhammad made pilgrimages to Mecca, the American Muslim ideology changed to conform to mainstream Islam. Intense education and careful leadership helped the community to embrace the full range of Islamic beliefs, ethics, and practices of worship. Many African Americans adopted the traditional dress of their coreligionists from overseas. They changed the name of their movement several times, from Bilalians (named for an early celebrated Ethiopian convert to Islam) to the World Community of Al-Islam in the West to the American Muslim Mission to the American Muslim Society. For a number of years, Warith Deen Mohammed was their leader, but he retired in 2003. In 1990, W. D. Mohammed became the first Muslim ever to deliver the opening prayer at the U. S. Senate.

One group has remained apart from the majority movement of African American Muslims. Led by Louis Farrakhan, it retains the name, Nation of Islam, and elements of the old separatist ideology of the early days.

And then there was more immigration. Beginning in the last part of the nineteenth century, people from Muslim countries began to arrive in the United States. At present, it is estimated that about sixty nations are represented in the Muslim American population. It is not possible to know exactly how many Muslims there are, but estimates range from three to six million, including the African Americans.

Following the pattern of other groups newly arrived in our land, some Muslims group together according to national origin, such as, for example, many from India in Chicago; Turks in Paterson, New Jersey; Arabs from several countries in the Detroit, Michigan, area; and Afghans in Southern California. All large cities have good-sized communities of Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites. Hundreds of Islamic centers have been built, providing space for worship and for social and cultural activities. Often, the Muslims keep their national customs of speech, dress, and culture, although everywhere the patterns of cultural life are mixed and changing. More and more Muslim professional men and women are seen in such fields as higher education, medicine, architecture, law, and engineering. Many national Islamic organizations exist, bringing together people of diverse origins. Some of these are the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle

AMERICAN MUSLIM LEADERS ISSUE STATEMENT ON TERRORISM

On July 28, 2005, the *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) Council of North America declared in Washington, D.C., "Islam strictly condemns religious extremism and the use of violence against innocent lives. There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism. Targeting civilians' lives and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is *haram*—or forbidden—and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not 'martyrs.'"

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of North America, the North American Council for Muslim Women, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations. These groups and others serve a broad range of interests and especially seek to promote a good relationship between the Muslim community and the wider American reality.

One of the main problems for Muslims in this country is how to interpret and apply the *sharia*, or religious law, in this pluralistic society. A special organization with advisory powers, the *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) Council of North America, seeks to give guidance in this area of concern.

Muslim Americans are making remarkable contributions to the national life. They often express their gratitude for the opportunities they have in this country to work, to learn, to speak freely, and to worship according to their conscience. They feel that in the open society of the U.S., they are particularly well placed to demonstrate to the world how Islam can be both fully modern and at the same time faithful to the ancient dynamic ideals of the faith.

For More Information

Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

One of the best Web sites for the study of various aspects of Islam is <http://www.uga.edu/islam/>.

About the Writer

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