

The World's Religions

By

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VI. Islam

We can begin with an anomaly. Of all the non-Western religions, Islam stands closest to the West—closest geographically, and also closest ideologically; for religiously it stands in the Abrahamic family of religions, while philosophically it builds on the Greeks. Yet despite this mental and spatial proximity, Islam is the most difficult religion for the West to understand. “No part of the world,” an American columnist has written, “is more hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood by us than that complex of religion, culture and geography known as Islam.”¹

This is ironic, but the irony is easily explained. Proximity is no guarantee of concord—tragically, more homicides occur within families than anywhere else. Islam and the West are neighbors. Common borders have given rise to border disputes, which, beginning with raids and counterraid, have escalated into vendettas, blood feuds, and all-out war. There is a happier side; in times and places Christians, Muslims, and Jews have lived together harmoniously—one thinks of Moorish Spain. But for a good part of the last fourteen hundred years, Islam and Europe have been at war, and people seldom have a fair picture of their enemies.² Islam is going to be an interesting religion for this book to negotiate.

Mistakes begin with its very name. Until recently it was called Muhammadanism by the West, which is not only inaccurate but offensive. It is inaccurate, Muslims say, because Muhammad didn't create this religion; God did—Muhammad was merely God's mouthpiece. Beyond this, the title is offensive because it conveys the impression that Islam focuses on a man rather than on God. To name

Christianity after Christ is appropriate, they say, for Christians believe that Christ was God. But to call Islam Muhammadanism is like calling Christianity St. Paulism. The proper name of this religion is Islam. Derived from the root *s-l-m*, which means primarily "peace" but in a secondary sense "surrender," its full connotation is "the peace that comes when one's life is surrendered to God." This makes Islam — together with Buddhism, from *budh*, awakening — one of the two religions that is named after the attribute it seeks to cultivate; in Islam's case, life's total surrender to God. Those who adhere to Islam are known as Muslims.

Background

"Around the name of the Arabs," writes Philip Hitti, "gleams that halo which belongs to the world-conquerors. Within a century after their rise this people became the masters of an empire extending from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the confines of China, an empire greater than that of Rome at its zenith. In this period of unprecedented expansion, they assimilated to their creed, speech, and even physical type, more aliens than any stock before or since, not excepting the Hellenic, the Roman, the Anglo-Saxon, or the Russian."³

Central in this Arab rise to greatness was their religion, Islam. If we ask how it came into being, the outsider's answer points to socio-religious currents that were playing over Arabia in Muhammad's day and uses them to explain what happened. The Muslims' answer is different. Islam begins not with Muhammad in sixth-century Arabia, they say, but with God. "In the beginning God . . ." the book of Genesis tells us. The Koran agrees. It differs only in using the word *Allah*. Allah is formed by joining the definite article *al* (meaning "the") with *Ilah* (God). Literally, Allah means "the God." Not a god, for there is only one. *The* God. When the masculine plural ending *im* is dropped from the Hebrew word for God, *Elohim*, the two words sound much alike.

God created the world, and after it human beings. The name of the first man was Adam. The descendants of Adam led to Noah, who had a son named Shem. This is where the word Semite comes from; literally a Semite is a descendant of Shem. Like the Jews, the Arabs consider themselves a Semitic people. The descendants of Shem led to Abraham, and so far we are still in the tradition of Judaism and

Christianity. Indeed, it was the submission of Abraham in his supreme test — would he be willing to sacrifice his son? — that appears to have provided Islam with its name. Abraham married Sarah. Sarah had no son, so Abraham, wanting to continue his line, took Hagar for his second wife. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael, whereupon Sarah conceived and likewise had a son, named Isaac. Sarah then demanded that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. Here we come to the first divergence between the koranic and biblical accounts. According to the Koran, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise. His descendants, flourishing in Arabia, become Muslims; whereas those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, were Hebrews and became Jews.

The Seal of the Prophets

Following Ishmael's line in Arabia, we come in the latter half of the sixth century A.D. to Muhammad, the prophet through whom Islam reached its definitive form, Muslims believe. There had been authentic prophets of God before him, but he was their culmination; hence he is called "The Seal of the Prophets." No valid prophets will follow him.

The world into which Muhammad was born is described by subsequent Muslims in a single word: ignorant. Life under the conditions of the desert had never been serene. People felt almost no obligation to anyone outside their tribes. Scarcity of material goods made brigandage a regional institution and the proof of virility. In the sixth century political deadlock and the collapse of the magistrate in the leading city of Mecca aggravated this generally chaotic situation. Drunken orgies were commonplace, and the gaming impulse uncontrolled. The prevailing religion watched from the sidelines, providing no check. Best described as an animistic polytheism, it peopled the sandy wastes with beastly sprites called *jinn* or demons. Fantastic personifications of desert terrors, they inspired neither exalted sentiments nor moral restraint. Conditions could hardly have been better calculated to produce a smoldering undercurrent, which erupted in sudden affrays and blood feuds, some of which extended for half a century. The times called for a deliverer.

He was born into the leading tribe of Mecca, the Koreish, in approximately A.D. 570, and was named Muhammad, "highly

praised," which name has since been borne by more male children than any other in the world. His early life was cradled in tragedy, for his father died a few days before he was born, his mother when he was six, and his grandfather, who cared for him after his mother's death, when he was eight. Thereafter he was adopted into his uncle's home. Though the latter's declining fortunes forced the young orphan to work hard minding his uncle's flocks, he was warmly received by his new family. The angels of God, we are told, had opened Muhammad's heart and filled it with light.

The description epitomizes his early character as this comes down to us by tradition. Pure-hearted and beloved in his circle, he was, it is said, of sweet and gentle disposition. His bereavements having made him sensitive to human suffering in every form, he was always ready to help others, especially the poor and the weak. His sense of honor, duty, and fidelity won him, as he grew older, the high and enviable titles of "The True," "The Upright," "The Trustworthy One." Yet despite his concern for others, he remained removed from them in outlook and ways, isolated in a corrupt and degenerate society. As he grew from childhood to youth and from youth to manhood, the lawless strife of his contemporaries, the repeated outbursts of pointless quarrels among tribes frequenting the Meccan fairs, and the general immorality and cynicism of his day combined to produce in the prophet-to-be a reaction of horror and disgust. Silently, broodingly, his thoughts were turning inward.

Upon reaching maturity he took up the caravan business, and at the age of twenty-five entered the service of a wealthy widow named Khadija. His prudence and integrity impressed her greatly, and gradually their relation deepened into affection, then love. Though she was fifteen years his senior, they were married and the match proved happy in every respect. During a long, desolate period that lay ahead, in which no one would believe in him, not even himself, Khadija was to remain steadfastly by his side, consoling him and tending hope's thin flame. "God," tradition was to record, "comforted him through her, for she made his burden light."

Following his marriage were fifteen years of preparation before his ministry was to begin. A mountain on the outskirts of Mecca, known as Mount Hira, contained a cave, and Muhammad, needing solitude, began to frequent it. Peering into the mysteries

of good and evil, unable to accept the crudeness, superstition, and fratricide that were accepted as normal, "this great fiery heart, seething, simmering like a great furnace of thoughts," was reaching out for God.⁴

The desert *jinn* were irrelevant to this quest, but one deity was not. Named Allah,⁵ he was worshiped by the Meccans not as the only God but as an impressive one nonetheless. Creator, supreme provider, and determiner of human destiny, he was capable of inspiring authentic religious feeling and genuine devotion. Certain contemplatives of the time, called *hanifs*, worshiped Allah exclusively, and Muhammad was one of their number. Through vigils, often lasting the entire night, Allah's reality became for Muhammad increasingly evident and awesome. Fearful and wonderful, real as life, real as death, real as the universe he had ordained, Allah (Muhammad was convinced) was far greater than his countrymen supposed. This God, whose majesty overflowed a desert cave to fill all heaven and earth, was surely not a god or even the greatest of gods. He was what his name literally claimed: He was *the* God, One and only, One without rival. Soon from this mountain cave was to sound the greatest phrase of the Arabic language; the deep, electrifying cry that was to rally a people and explode their power to the limits of the known world: *La ilaha illa 'llah!* There is no god but God!

But first the prophet must receive, around 610, his commission. Gradually, as Muhammad's visits to the cave became more compelling, the command that he later saw as predestined took form. It was the same command that had fallen earlier on Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and Jesus. Wherever, whenever, this call comes, its form may differ but its essence is the same. A voice falls from heaven saying, "You are the appointed one." On the Night of Power, as a strange peace pervaded creation and all nature was turned toward its Lord, in the middle of that night, say the Muslims, the Book was opened to a ready soul. Some add that on the anniversary of that Night it is possible to hear the grass grow and the trees speak, and that those who do so become saints or sages, for on the annual return of that Night one can see through the fingers of God.⁶

On that first Night of Power, as Muhammad lay on the floor of the cave, his mind locked in deepest contemplation, there came to him an angel in the form of a man. The angel said to him: "Proclaim!"⁷

and he said: "I am not a proclaimer"; whereupon, as Muhammad was himself to report, "the Angel took me and whelmed me in his embrace until he had reached the limit of my endurance. Then he released me and said again, 'Proclaim!' Again I said: 'I am not a proclaimer,' and again he whelmed me in his embrace. When again he had reached the limit of my endurance he said 'Proclaim!', and when I again protested, he whelmed me for a third time, this time saying:

*Proclaim in the name of your Lord who created!
Created man from a clot of blood.
Proclaim: Your Lord is the Most Generous,
Who teaches by the pen;
Teaches man what he knew not.*" (Koran 96:1-3)

Arousing from his trance, Muhammad felt as if the words he had heard had been branded on his soul. Terrified, he rushed home and fell into paroxysms. Coming to himself, he told Khadija that he had become either a prophet or "one possessed—mad." At first she resisted this disjunction, but on hearing his full story she became his first convert—which, Muslims often remark, in itself speaks well for his authenticity, for if anyone understands a man's true character it is his wife. "Rejoice, O dear husband, and be of good cheer," she said. "You will be the Prophet of this people."

We can imagine the spiritual anguish, the mental doubts, the waves of misgivings that followed in the wake of the experience. Was the voice really God's? Would it come again? Above all, what would it require?

It returned repeatedly, and its command was always the same—to proclaim. "O thou, inwrapped in thy mantle, arise and warn, and glorify thy Lord." Muhammad's life was no more his own. From that time forth it was given to God and to humanity, preaching with unswerving purpose in the face of relentless persecution, insult, and outrage, the words that God was to transmit for twenty-three years.

The content of the revelation will be reserved for later sections. Here we need only speak of the response it drew and note that its appeal throughout was to human reason as vectored by religious discernment.

In an age charged with supernaturalism, when miracles were accepted as the stock-in-trade of the most ordinary saint, Muhammad refused to pander to human credulity. To miracle-hungry idolaters seeking signs and portents, he cut the issue clean: "God has not sent me to work wonders; He has sent me to preach to you. My Lord; be praised! Am I more than a man sent as an apostle?"⁸ From first to last he resisted every impulse to inflate his own image. "I never said that God's treasures are in my hand, that I knew the hidden things, or that I was an angel. I am only a preacher of God's words, the bringer of God's message to mankind."⁹ If signs be sought, let them be not of Muhammad's greatness but of God's, and for these one need only open one's eyes. The heavenly bodies holding their swift, silent course in the vault of heaven, the incredible order of the universe, the rain that falls to relieve the parched earth, palms bending with golden fruit, ships that glide across the seas laden with goodness—can these be the handiwork of gods of stone? What fools to cry for signs when creation tokens nothing else! In an age of credulity, Muhammad taught respect for the world's incontrovertible order, a respect that was to bring Muslims to science before it did Christians. Apart from his nocturnal ascent through the heavens, which will be mentioned, he claimed only one miracle, that of the Koran itself. That he with his own resources could have produced such truth—this was the one naturalistic hypothesis he could not accept.

As for the reaction to his message, it was (for all but a few) violently hostile. The reasons for the hostility can be reduced to three: (1) Its uncompromising monotheism threatened polytheistic beliefs and the considerable revenue that was coming to Mecca from pilgrimages to its 360 shrines (one for every day of the lunar year); (2) its moral teachings demanded an end to the licentiousness that citizens clung to; and (3) its social content challenged an unjust order. In a society riven with class distinctions, the new Prophet was preaching a message that was intensely democratic. He was insisting that in the sight of his Lord all people were equal.

As such a teaching suited neither their tastes nor their privileges, the Meccan leaders were determined to have none of it. They began their attack with ridicule: pinpricks of laughter, petty insults, and hoots of derision. When these proved ineffective, their words turned uglier—to abuse, calumny, vilification, and then overt threats. When

these too failed, they resorted to open persecution. They covered Muhammad and his followers with dirt and filth as they were praying. They pelted them with stones, beat them with sticks, threw them in prison, and tried to starve them out by refusing to sell to them. To no avail; persecution only steeled the will of Muhammad's followers. "Never since the days when primitive Christianity startled the world from its sleep," wrote a scholar whose words assume added weight because he was on the whole a severe critic of Islam, "had men seen the like arousing of spiritual life — of faith that suffers sacrifices."¹⁰ Muhammad himself set the pattern for their fidelity. Under the most perilous of circumstances, he continued to throw heart and soul into his preaching, adjuring listeners wherever he could find them to abandon their evil ways and prepare for the day of reckoning.

At first the odds were so heavily against him that he made few converts; three long years of heartbreaking effort yielded less than forty. But his enemies could do nothing to forever seal the hearts of the Meccans against his words. Slowly but steadily, people of energy, talent, and worth became convinced of the truth of his message until, by the end of a decade, several hundred families were acclaiming him as God's authentic spokesman.

The Migration That Led to Victory

By this time the Meccan nobility was alarmed. What had begun as a pretentious prophetic claim on the part of a half-crazed camel driver had turned into a serious revolutionary movement that was threatening their very existence. They were determined to rid themselves of the troublemaker for good.

As he faced this severest crisis of his career, Muhammad was suddenly waited on by a delegation of the leading citizens of Yathrib, a city 280 miles to Mecca's north. Through pilgrims and other visitors to Mecca, Muhammad's teachings had won a firm hold in Yathrib. The city was facing internal rivalries that put it in need of a strong leader from without, and Muhammad looked like the man. After receiving a delegation's pledge that they would worship Allah only, that they would observe the precepts of Islam, and that they would obey its prophet in all that was right and defend him and his adherents as they would their women and children, Muhammad received a sign from God to accept the charge. About seventy families

preceded him. When the Meccan leaders got wind of the exodus they did everything in their power to prevent his going; but, together with his close companion Abu Bakr, he eluded their watch and set out for Yathrib, taking refuge on the way in a crevice south of the city. Horsemen scouring the countryside came so close to discovering them that Muhammad's companion was moved to despair. "We are only two," he murmured. "No, we are three," Muhammad answered, "for God is with us." The Koran agrees. "He was with them," it observes, for they were not discovered. After three days, when the search had slackened, they managed to procure two camels and make their hazardous way by unfrequented paths to the city of their destination.

The year was 622. The migration, known in Arabic as the *Hijra*, is regarded by Muslims as the turning point in world history and is the year from which they date their calendar. Yathrib soon came to be known as *Medinat al-Nabi*, the City of the Prophet, and then by contraction simply to Medina, "the city."

From the moment of his arrival at Medina, Muhammad assumed a different role. From prophecy he was pressed into administration. The despised preacher became a masterful politician; the prophet was transformed into statesman. We see him as the master not merely of the hearts of a handful of devotees but of the collective life of a city, its judge and general as well as its teacher.

Even his detractors concede that he played his new role brilliantly. Faced with problems of extraordinary complexity, he proved to be a remarkable statesman. As the supreme magistrate, he continued to lead as unpretentious a life as he had in the days of his obscurity. He lived in an ordinary clay house, milked his own goats, and was accessible day and night to the humblest in his community. Often seen mending his own clothes, "no emperor with his tiaras was obeyed as this man in a cloak of his own clouting."¹¹ God, say Muslim historians, put before him the key to the treasures of this world, but he refused it.

Tradition depicts his administration as an ideal blend of justice and mercy. As chief of state and trustee of the life and liberty of his people, he exercised the justice necessary for order, meting out punishment to those who were guilty. When the injury was toward himself, on the other hand, he was gentle and merciful even to his enemies. In all, the Medinese found him a master whom it was as

difficult not to love as not to obey. For he had, as one biographer has written, "the gift of influencing men, and he had the nobility only to influence for the good."¹²

For the remaining ten years of his life, his personal history merged with that of the Medinese commonwealth of which he was the center. Exercising superb statecraft, he welded the five heterogeneous and conflicting tribes of the city, three of which were Jewish, into an orderly confederation. The task was not an easy one, but in the end he succeeded in awakening in the citizens a spirit of cooperation unknown in the city's history. His reputation spread and people began to flock from every part of Arabia to see the man who had wrought this "miracle."

There followed the struggle with the Meccans for the mind of Arabia as a whole. In the second year of the *Hijra* the Medinese won a spectacular victory over a Meccan army many times larger, and they interpreted the victory as a clear sign that the angels of heaven were battling on their side. The following year, however, witnessed a reversal during which Muhammad himself was wounded. The Meccans did not follow up their victory until two years later, when they laid siege to Medina in a last desperate effort to force the Muslims to capitulate. The failure of this effort turned the tide permanently in Muhammad's favor; and within three years—eight years after his Migration from Mecca—he who had left as a fugitive returned as conqueror. The city that had treated him cruelly now lay at his feet, with his former persecutors at his mercy. Typically, however, he did not press his victory. In the hour of his triumph the past was forgiven. Making his way to the famous Ka'ba, a cubical temple (said to have been built by Abraham) that Muhammad rededicated to Allah and adopted as Islam's focus, he accepted the virtual mass conversion of the city. Himself, he returned to Medina.

Two years later, in A.D. 632 (10 A.H., After the *Hijra*), Muhammad died with virtually all of Arabia under his control. With all the power of armies and police, no other Arab had ever succeeded in uniting his countrymen as he had. Before the century closed his followers had conquered Armenia, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, North Africa, and Spain, and had crossed the Pyrenees into France. But for their defeat by Charles Martel in the Battle of Tours in 733, the entire Western world might today be Muslim. Within a brief span of mortal life, Muhammad had "called forth out of unpromising material a nation

never united before, in a country that was hitherto but a geographical expression; established a religion which in vast areas superseded Christianity and Judaism and still claims the adherence of a goodly portion of the human race; and laid the basis of an empire that was soon to embrace within its far-flung boundaries the fairest provinces of the then civilized world."¹³

In *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, Michael Hart places Muhammad first. His "unparalleled combination of secular and religious influence entitles Muhammad to be considered the most influential single figure in human history," Hart writes.¹⁴ The explanation that Muslims give for that verdict is simple. The entire work, they say, was the work of God.

The Standing Miracle

The blend of admiration, respect, and affection that the Muslim feels for Muhammad is an impressive fact of history. They see him as a man who experienced life in exceptional range. Not only was he a shepherd, merchant, hermit, exile, soldier, lawmaker, prophet-priest-king, and mystic; he was also an orphan, for many years the husband of one wife much older than himself, a many times bereaved father, a widower, and finally the husband of many wives, some much younger than himself. In all of these roles he was exemplary. All this is in the minds of Muslims as they add to the mention of his name the benediction, "Blessings and peace be upon him." Even so, they never mistake him for the earthly center of their faith. That place is reserved for the bible of Islam, the Koran.

Literally, the word *al-qur'an* in Arabic (and hence "koran,") means a recitation. Fulfilling that purpose, the Koran is perhaps the most recited (as well as read) book in the world. Certainly, it is the world's most memorized book, and possibly the one that exerts the most influence on those who read it. So great was Muhammad's regard for its contents that (as we have seen) he considered it the only major miracle God worked through him—God's "standing miracle," as he called it. That he himself, unschooled to the extent that he was unlettered (*ummi*) and could barely write his name, could have produced a book that provides the ground plan of all knowledge and at the same time is grammatically perfect and without poetic peer—this, Muhammad, and with him all Muslims, are convinced defies

belief. He put the point in a rhetorical question: "Do you ask for a greater miracle than this, O unbelieving people, than to have your language chosen as the language of that incomparable Book, one piece of which puts all your golden poetry to shame?"

Four-fifths the length of the New Testament, the Koran is divided into 114 chapters or *surahs*, which (with the exception of the short first chapter that figures in the Muslim's daily prayers) are arranged in order of decreasing length. Thus Surah Two has 286 verses, Surah Three has 200, down to Surah One Hundred Fourteen, which has only six.

Muslims tend to read the Koran literally. They consider it the earthly facsimile of an Uncreated Koran in almost exactly the way that Christians consider Jesus to have been the human incarnation of God. The comparison that reads, "If Christ is God incarnate, the Koran is God inlibriate" (from *liber*, Latin for book) is inelegant but not inaccurate. The created Koran is the instantiation, in letters and sounds, of the Koran's limitless essence in its Uncreated Form. Not that there are two Korans, of course. Rather, the created Koran is the formal crystallization of the infinite reality of the Uncreated Koran. Two levels of reality are operative here. There is the Divine Reality of the Uncreated Koran, and there is the earthly reality of the created Koran. When the created Koran is said to be a miracle, the miracle referred to is the presence of the Uncreated Koran within the letters and sounds of its created (and therefore necessarily in certain ways circumscribed) manifestation.

The words of the Koran came to Muhammad in manageable segments over twenty-three years through voices that seemed at first to vary and sometimes sounded like "the reverberating of bells," but which gradually condensed into a single voice that identified itself as Gabriel's. Muhammad had no control over the flow of the revelation; it descended on him independent of his will. When it arrived he was changed into a special state that was externally discernible. Both his appearance and the sound of his voice would change. He reported that the words assaulted him as if they were solid and heavy: "For We shall charge thee with a word of weight" (73:5; all such references in this chapter are to *surah* and verse[s] in the Koran). Once they descended while he was riding a camel. The animal sought vainly to support the added weight by adjusting its legs. By the time the revelation ceased, its belly was pressed against the earth and its legs

splayed out. The words that Muhammad exclaimed in these often trance-like states were memorized by his followers and recorded on bones, bark, leaves, and scraps of parchment, with God preserving their accuracy throughout.

The Koran continues the Old and New Testaments, God's earlier revelations, and presents itself as their culmination: "We made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel [and] you have nothing of guidance until you observe the Torah and the Gospel" (5:70, 68). This entitles Jews and Christians to be included with Muslims as "People of the Book." (Because the context of the koranic revelation is the Middle East, religions of other lands are not mentioned, but their existence is implied and in principle validated, as in the following verses: "To every people we have sent a messenger. . . . [Some] We have mentioned to you, and [some] we have not mentioned to you" [10:47, 4:164]). Nevertheless, Muslims regard the Old and New Testaments as sharing two defects from which the Koran is free. For circumstantial reasons they record only portions of Truth. Second, the Jewish and Christian Bibles were partially corrupted in transmission, a fact that explains the occasional discrepancies that occur between their accounts and parallel ones in the Koran. Exemption from these two limitations makes the Koran the final and infallible revelation of God's will. Its second chapter says explicitly: "This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt."

From the outside things look otherwise, for from without the Koran is all but impenetrable. No one has ever curled up on a rainy weekend to read the Koran. Carlyle confessed that it was "as toilsome reading as I ever undertook; a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite. Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran." Sir Edward Gibbon said much the same: "The European will peruse with impatience its endless incoherent rhapsody of fable and precept, and declamation, which seldom excites a sentiment or an idea, which sometimes crawls in the dust, and is sometimes lost in the clouds."¹⁵ How are we to understand the discrepancy of the Koran as read from within and from without?

The language in which it was proclaimed, Arabic, provides an initial clue. "No people in the world," writes Philip Hitti, "are so moved by the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs. Hardly any language seems capable of exercising over the minds of its users such irresistible influence as Arabic." Crowds in Cairo, Damascus, or

Baghdad can be stirred to the highest emotional pitch by statements that, when translated, seem banal. The rhythm, melodic cadence, the rhyme produce a powerful hypnotic effect. Thus the power of the koranic revelation lies not only in the literal meaning of its words but also in the language in which this meaning incorporated, including its sound. The Koran was from the first a vocal phenomenon; we remember that we are to "recite" in the name of the Lord! Because content and container are here inseparably fused, translations cannot possibly convey the emotion, the fervor, and the mystery that the Koran holds in the original. This is why, in sharp contrast to Christians, who have translated their Bible into every known script, Muslims have preferred to teach others the language in which they believe God spoke finally with incomparable force and directness.¹⁶

Language, however, is not the only barrier the Koran presents to outsiders, for in content too it is like no other religious text. Unlike the Upanishads, it is not explicitly metaphysical. It does not ground its theology in dramatic narratives as the Indian epics do, nor in historical ones as do the Hebrew scriptures; nor is God revealed in human form as in the Gospels and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Confining ourselves to the Semitic scriptures, we can say that whereas the Old and New Testaments are directly historical and indirectly doctrinal, the Koran is directly doctrinal and indirectly historical. Because the overwhelming thrust of the Koran is to proclaim the unity, omnipotence, omniscience, and mercy of God—and correlatively the total dependence of human life upon him—historical facts are in its case merely reference points that have scarcely any interest in themselves. This explains why the prophets are cited without any chronological order; why historical occurrences are sometimes recounted so elliptically as to be unintelligible without commentaries; and why the biblical stories that the Koran refers to are presented in an unexpected, abbreviated, and dry manner. They are stripped of their epic character and inserted as didactic examples of the infinitely various things that declare God's praise. When the Lord-servant relationship is the essential point to get across, all else is but commentary and allusion.

Perhaps we shall be less inclined to fault the Koran for the strange face it presents to foreigners if we note that foreign scriptures present their own problems to Muslims. To speak only of the Old and

New Testaments, Muslims express disappointment in finding that those texts do not take the form of Divine speech and merely report things that happened. In the Koran God speaks in the first person. Allah describes himself and makes known his laws. The Muslim is therefore inclined to consider each individual sentence of the Holy Book as a separate revelation and to experience the words themselves, even their sounds, as a means of grace. "The Qur'an does not document what is other than itself. It is not about the truth: it is the truth."¹⁷ By contrast the Jewish and Christian Bibles seem more distant from God for placing religious meaning in reports of events instead of God's direct pronouncements.

The Koran's direct delivery creates, for the reader, a final problem that in other scriptures is eased by greater use of narrative and myth. One discerning commentator on the Koran puts this point as follows: "The seeming incoherence of the text has its cause in the incommensurable disproportion between the Spirit [Uncreated Koran] and the limited resources of human language. It is as though the poverty-stricken coagulation which is the language of mortal man were under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word broken into a thousand fragments, or as if God in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his command and so was compelled to make use of allusions heavy with meaning, of ellipses, abridgements and symbolical syntheses."¹⁸

Putting comparisons behind us, it is impossible to overemphasize the central position of the Koran in the elaboration of any Islamic doctrine. With large portions memorized in childhood, it regulates the interpretation and evaluation of every event. It is a memorandum for the faithful, a reminder for daily doings, and a repository of revealed truth. It is a manual of definitions and guarantees, and at the same time a road map for the will. Finally, it is a collection of maxims to meditate on in private, deepening endlessly one's sense of the divine glory. "Perfect is the Word of your Lord in truth and justice" (6:115).

Basic Theological Concepts

With a few striking exceptions, which will be noted, the basic theological concepts of Islam are virtually identical with those of Judaism

and Christianity, its forerunners. We shall confine our attention in this section to four that are the most important: God, Creation, the Human Self, and the Day of Judgment.

As in the other historical religions, everything in Islam centers on its religious Ultimate, God. God is immaterial and therefore invisible. For the Arabs this cast no doubt on his reality, for they never succumbed to the temptation—sorely reinforced by modern materialistic attitudes—to regard only the visible as the real; one of the tributes the Koran pays to Muhammad is that “he did not begrudge the Unseen.” As desert dwellers, the notion of invisible hands that drove the blasts that swept the desert and formed the deceptive mirages that lured the traveler to his destruction was always with them.

Thus the Koran did not introduce the Arab to the unseen world of spirit, nor even to monotheism, since certain sensitive souls known as *hanifs* had already moved to that position before Muhammad. Its innovation was to remove idols from the religious scene and focus the divine in a single invisible God for everyone. It is in this sense that the indelible contribution of Islam to Arabic religion was monotheism.

We must immediately add that Muslims see monotheism as Islam's contribution not simply to the Arabs but to religion in its entirety. Hinduism's prolific images are taken as proof that it never arrived at the worship of the single God. Judaism was correctly instructed through its *Shema*—“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One”—but its teachings were confined to the people of Israel. Christians, for their part, compromised their monotheism by deifying Christ. Islam honors Jesus as a prophet and accepts his virgin birth; Adam's and Jesus' souls are the only two that God created directly.¹⁹ The Koran draws the line at the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Trinity, however, seeing these as inventions that blur the Divine/human distinction. In the words of the Koran: “They say the God of mercy has begotten a son. Now have you uttered a grievous thing. . . . It is not proper for God to have children” (3:78, 19:93). Muslims are not fond of parental images for God, even when employed metaphorically. To speak of human beings as “God's children” casts God in too human a mode. It is anthropomorphic.

Turning to the koranic depiction of God's nature, the first thing that strikes us is its awesomeness, its fear-inspiring power. Verse 7:143 contains the koranic account of Moses' request to see God.

When God showed himself instead to a neighboring mountain, thereby “sending it crashing down, Moses fell down senseless.”²⁰

Power of this order—it is infinite, for God is omnipotent—inspires fear, and it is fair to say that Muslims fear Allah. This, however, is not cringing fear in the face of a capricious tyrant. Rather, Muslims argue, it is the only appropriate emotion—any other involves denial in the technical, psychological sense of the word—when human beings face up to the magnitude of the consequences that follow from being on the right or wrong side of an uncompromisingly moral universe; one, moreover, in which beliefs and convictions are decisive because they generate actions. If nihilism is the dissipation of difference, a kind of moral leveling-out through entropy, Allah's universe is its exact opposite. Good and evil matter. Choices have consequences, and to disregard them would be as disastrous as climbing a mountain blindfolded. Belief in the Koran occupies the decisive place it does because it is the analogue to a mountaineer's assessment of Mount Everest: Its majesty is evident, but so are the dangers it presents. Mistakes could be disastrous. Koranic images of heaven and hell are pressed into full service here; but once we come to terms with the fear that life's inbuilt precariousness inspires, other lesser fears subside. The second, supporting root of the word *islam* is peace.

It is important to remember this last point, because the holy dread that Allah inspires led early Western students of the Koran to think that it outstrips God's mercy. Allah was seen to be a stern and wrathful judge, domineering and ruthless. This is a clear misreading; God's compassion and mercy are cited 192 times in the Koran, as against 17 references to his wrath and vengeance. He who is Lord of the worlds is also

*the Holy, the Peaceful, the Faithful, the Guardian over His servants, the Shelterer of the orphan, the Guide of the erring, the Deliverer from every affliction, the Friend of the bereaved, the Consoler of the afflicted; in His hand is good, and He is the generous Lord, the gracious, the Hearer, the Near-at-Hand, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Very-forgiving, whose love for man is more tender than that of the mother-bird for her young.*²¹

Thanks to Allah's mercy, the world of the Koran is finally a world of joy. There is air, and sun, and confidence—not only in ultimate justice but also in help along the way and pardon for the contrite.

By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkens, your Lord has not forsaken you, neither has He been displeased. Surely the Hereafter shall be better for you than the past; and in the end He will be bounteous to you, and you will be satisfied. Did He not find you an orphan, and give you a home; erring, and guided you; needy, and enriched you? (93:1-8)

Standing beneath God's gracious skies, the Muslim can at any moment lift heart and soul directly into the divine presence, there to receive both strength and guidance for life's troubled course. The access is open because, though the human and the divine are infinitely different, no barrier separates them.

Is He not closer than the vein of your neck? You need not raise your voice, for he knows the secret whisper, and what is yet more hidden. . . . He knows what is in the land and in the sea; no leaf falls but He knows it; nor is there a grain in the darkness under the earth, nor a thing, green or sere, but it is recorded. (6:12, 59)

From God we can turn to Creation as our second theological concept. The Koran abounds in lyrical descriptions of the natural world. Here, though, the point is that that world is not presented as emerging from the divine by some process of inbuilt emanation, as Hindu texts suggest. It was created by a deliberate act of Allah's will: "He has created the heavens and the earth" (16:3). This fact carries two important consequences. First, the world of matter is both real and important. Herein lies one of the sources of Islamic science, which during Europe's Dark Ages flourished as nowhere else on earth. Second, being the handiwork of Allah, who is perfect in both goodness and power, the material world must likewise be good. "You do not see in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection. Return your gaze. . . . It comes back to you dazzled" (67:4). Here we meet a confidence in the material aspects of life and existence that we will find shared by the other two Semitically originated religions, Judaism and Christianity.

Foremost among God's creations is the human self, whose nature, koranically defined, is our third doctrinal subject. "He has created man," we read in Surah 16:3, and the first thing that we note about this creation is its sound constitution. This could have been inferred, given its Maker, but the Koran states it explicitly: "Surely

We have created humanity of the best stature" (95:4). The koranic word for human nature in its God-established original is *fitra*, and it has been stained by no catastrophic fall. The closest Islam comes to the Christian doctrine of original sin is in its concept of *ghaflah*, or forgetting. People do forget their divine origin, and this mistake needs repeatedly to be corrected. But their fundamental nature is unalterably good, so they are entitled to self-respect and a healthy self-image.

With life acknowledged as a gift from its Creator, we can turn to its obligations, which are two. The first of these is gratitude for the life that has been received. The Arabic word "infidel" is actually shaded more toward "one who lacks thankfulness" than one who disbelieves. The more gratitude one feels, the more natural it feels to let the bounty that has entered flow through one's life and on to others, for to hoard it would be as unnatural as trying to dam a waterfall. The ingrate, the Koran tells us, "covers" or "hides" God's blessings and thereby fails to enjoy the link with the Creator that every moment provides.

The second standing human obligation recalls us to the name of this religion. The opening paragraphs of this chapter informed us that *islam* means surrender, but we now need to probe this attribute more deeply.

Thoughts of surrender are so freighted with military connotations that it requires conscious effort to notice that surrender can mean a wholehearted giving of oneself—to a cause, or in friendship and love. William James shows how central surrender is to all religion.

When all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose. Now in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary.²²

To this account of surrender's virtues we can add in Islamic parlance that to be a slave to Allah is to be freed from other forms of slavery—ones that are degrading, such as slavery to greed, or to anxiety, or to the desire for personal status. It also helps here if we alternate the word "surrender" with "commitment"; for in addition to being exempt from military associations, commitment suggests moving toward rather than giving up. In this reading Islam emerges as a religion that aims at total commitment; commitment in which nothing is withheld from the Divine. This explains why Abraham is by far the most important figure in the Koran, for he passed the ultimate test of willingness to sacrifice his own son if that was required.

Two final features of the human self provide a fitting transition to our final theological doctrine, the Day of Judgment, for it is there that they come into sharpest relief. The two are the soul's individuality and its freedom.

To begin with the first of these: Coming to Islam (as we do in this book) from the "no self" of Buddhism and the social self of Confucianism, we are struck by the stress the Koran places on the self's individuality: its uniqueness and the responsibility that devolves on it alone. In India the all-pervading cosmic spirit comes close to swallowing the individual self, and in China the self is so ecological that where it begins and ends is hard to determine. Islam and its Semitic allies reverse this drift, regarding individuality as not only real but good in principle. Value, virtue, and spiritual fulfillment come through realizing the potentialities that are uniquely one's own; in ways that are not inconsequential, those possibilities differ from those of every other soul that ever has lived, or ever will live in the future. As an important Muslim philosopher has written, "This inexplicable finite centre of experience is the fundamental fact of the universe. All life is individual; there is no such thing as universal life. God Himself is an individual; He is the most unique individual."²³

The individuality of the human soul is everlasting, for once it is created it never dies. Never, though, is its distinctness more acutely sensed than on the Day of Judgment. "O son of Adam, you will die alone, and enter the tomb alone, and be resurrected alone, and it is with you alone that the reckoning will be made" (Hasan al-Basri).

This reckoning and its correlate, responsibility, lead directly to the issue of the soul's freedom, and it must be admitted that in Islam human freedom stands in tension with God's omnipotence, which

points toward predestination. Islamic theology has wrestled interminably with this tension without rationally resolving it. It concludes that the workings of the Divine Decree remain a mystery to humans, who nevertheless are granted sufficient freedom and responsibility to make genuine moral and spiritual decisions. "Whoever gets to himself a sin, gets it solely on his own responsibility. . . . Whoever goes astray, he himself bears the whole responsibility of wandering" (4:111, 10:103).

As for the issue of judgment itself, Muslims consider it to be one of the illusions of modernity that we can, as it were, slip quietly away and not be noticed so long as we live (according to our own opinion) decent and harmless lives and do not draw attention to ourselves. It is the tearing away of all such illusions of security that characterizes the doctrine of the Last Judgment and its anticipation in the Koran. "When the sun shall be folded up, and the stars shall fall, and when the mountains shall be set in motion . . . and the seas shall boil. . . . Then shall every soul know what it has done" (81, *passim*). It is against this background that the Koran presents life as a brief but immensely precious opportunity, offering a once-and-for-all choice. Herein lies the urgency that informs the entire book. The chance to return to life for even a single day to make good use of their opportunities is something "the losers," facing their Reckoning, would treasure beyond anything they desired while they were still alive (14:14).

Depending on how it fares in its Reckoning, the soul will repair to either the heavens or the hells, which in the Koran are described in vivid, concrete, and sensual imagery. The masses of the faithful consider them to be actual places, which is perhaps the inevitable consequence of such depiction. In the heavens we are treated to fountains, cool shades, and chaste *houris* in gardens beneath which rivers flow; to carpets, cushions, goblets of gold, and sumptuous food and drink. In the hells there are burning garments, molten drinks, maces of iron, and fire that splits rocks into fragments. To say that these are nothing but symbols of the posthumous worlds—more rightly regarded as posthumous conditions of experience—is not to explain them away; but the object of the book is to present the hereafter in images of such vividness "that the hearts of those who do not believe in the Hereafter may incline to it" (6:113). The sharpness of the contrast between heaven and hell is intended to pull the hearer/reader of the Koran out of the spiritual lethargy that *ghaflah*, forgetfulness, induces.