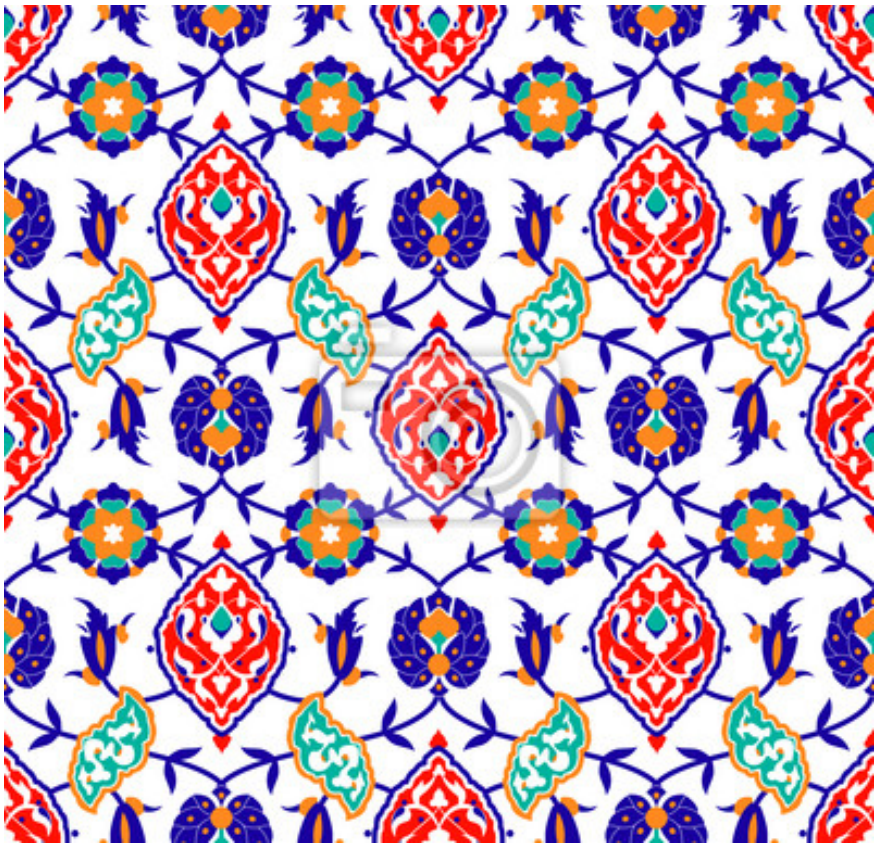

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

An overview of its history and major divisions

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UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

Islam is a major monotheistic religion which today embraces about 20% of the world's population. Tradition says was founded in Arabia by Muhammad (570-632), whose name means Praiseworthy. Islam is believed by its followers to be the last and final revelation of God's teachings which began with the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is seen as one of these prophets, although Muslims do not believe in his deity. Muslims believe that God chose Muhammad to be his last messenger to the world. In essence, Muhammad sought to emphasise the belief that there was only one God, Allah, an utterly mysterious being, all powerful and all merciful but absolutely free to do as he wills. The duty of an individual was to submit to the will of God, through organised religion.

Islam is divided into a number of sections. By far the largest is the Sunni ('well trodden path'), but around 15% of followers, principally in Iran and Iraq, are Shi'a ('party [of Ali]') who regard Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, as the legitimate leader (or caliph) in the disputes over leadership following Muhammad's death in 632. The Shi'a are about one third of the population of the Middle East. The Holy Book of Islam is the Qur'an but books of tradition *(hadith)* related to the prophet Muhammad are also important. Properly understood it is believed that they enable a Muslim to live in every area of life according to God's will. Within both main streams are to found Sufi - mystical orders of Islam. There are also smaller syncretistic groups with Shi'a influences, such as the Ismailis, Druze, Alawites and Alevis whose theology is far different.

Founder

The word 'Islam' is Arabic for 'submission' and, in the religious context, submission to God's will and obedience to his laws. Islam is the correct name of the religion of the Muslims ('those who submit'). Muslims reject the name 'Muhammadan' because they do not worship Muhammad although he is regarded as the great example *(sunna)* for Muslims of how to live. The Qur'an contains little in the way of material to construct a life of Muhammad; his name appears only four times, and reliance must be had on various traditions *(hadith)* recorded apart from the Qur'an. All Muslims regard Muhammad as God's Prophet, but estimates of him do vary somewhat. In popular folk-Islam (but not in the Qur'an) he is a miracle worker invested with supernatural powers, and might as

well be divine such is the adulation given him. Others have varying degrees of scepticism about the value of the hadiths, which were collected up to a century after Muhammad's death, but all Muslims regard Muhammad as an example for living in one way or another.

The traditional account is along the following lines. Muhammad was born in Mecca in Arabia about AD 570. His father was Abdullah ('Servant of Allah', Allah being the pre-Islamic Arabic name for God akin to Hebrew 'Elohim'), but Muhammad was orphaned soon after his birth and raised by relatives. He accompanied an uncle on trading missions to Syria, then a Christian country, and in 595 married a wealthy widow, a merchant of Mecca named Khadija. It appears that the only one of their children who survived infancy was Fatima. Beginning about 609 and continuing for the rest of his life, Muhammad claimed to receive intermittent revelations from the angel Jibril (Gabriel). He began preaching in Mecca in 613. About 620 his wife died and he quickly remarried first Saudah, then A'isha, a six year old daughter of Abu Bakr, although the marriage was not consummated until she was nine, according to al-Bukhari, a leading authority [his volume 5, book 58, no. 234]. She was the favourite of the ten or more wives he was to take after Khadija's death and there is no suggestion the marriage was other than happy.

Muhammad had to flee 250 kms to Medina in 622, the year from which Muslims date their calendar, because of opposition to his monotheistic message. For the next few years he was in constant warfare with the people of Mecca, but also was involved in many raids on other tribes. In 630 he gained control of Mecca. He died in 632 in Medina having seemingly united the formerly polytheistic Arab tribes around him.

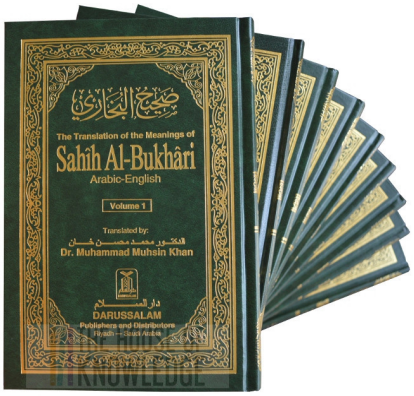
Scriptures

The revelations claimed by Muhammad are found in the Qur'an – a word most probably meaning 'recitation' or 'reading' - and are called *suras* (chapters). There are 114 suras making up some 120,000 words in English translation. Mostly they are not in chronological order but are arranged generally according to their length from longest to shortest (which is more or less the reverse of the chronological order). Many have little context to aid in interpretation. A sura may contain elements from several different periods, while later revelations may cancel earlier ones. So

there are issues about interpretation that can be quite complex. Contrary to popular opinion the Qur'an does not include a requirement for Muslim women to wear the *niqab* or the *burqa*. This is a cultural practice in only some Islamic communities.

The Qur'an is accorded a uniquely divine origin in a manner precluding a human element. It is regarded as a copy from a 'Tablet Preserved' in heaven, and thus even translation from the Arabic in which it is written cannot fully represent it. Given this view it is not open for a Muslim to engage in textual criticism such as Christians do to establish the correct Bible text free from any errors in transmission. In any case, most variant texts of the Qur'an were deliberately destroyed. Tradition, as recorded by al-Bukhari, indicates that the Qur'an was not a complete book at the time of Muhammad's death, but particular portions were in written form and others recorded in the memory of Muhammad's Companions. Abu Bakr, the first community leader or caliph after Muhammad's death, sought to have everything collected. It is claimed that the actual text of the Qur'an was standardised by the third Caliph, Uthman, and variant texts were destroyed, although some questions remain.

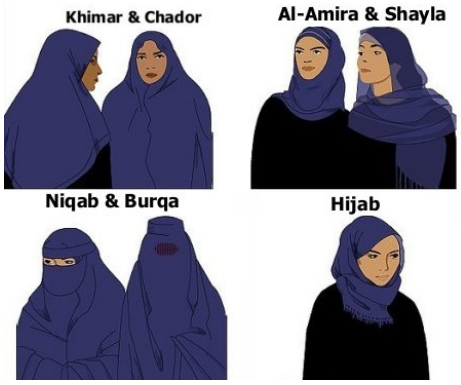
The hadith ('tradition') is important in interpreting the Qur'an, and also an important source of Islamic law *(sharia)* since the Qur'an contains very little legislation suitable for the situation as it developed after Muhammad's death. The hadith comprises collections of sayings and deeds said to be of Muhammad by those who were close to him. In Sunni Islam six collections became recognized, of which those by al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 875) are regarded as the most authentic. Each contains 7,563 hadith (about 4,000 if duplicates are excluded) out of a claimed 600,000 al-Bukhari examined 200 years after Muhammad's death. The Shi'a have four different hadith books collected by three Persian scholars, since they consider many Sunni who passed on sayings were unreliable. The major hadith books of the Twelvers, by far the largest section of the Shi'a, are four, and were collected by three Persian scholars, foremost among them al-Kulayni (d. 941).



In Sunni Islam there are four schools of law, each of which have somewhat different approaches to the use and interpretation of the traditions, and there are also several theological traditions dating

from the 10th century. The schools of law are named after the teachers concerned. Abu Hanifa (d. 767) is the most liberal and represents a majority of Sunni Muslims who generally follow the Maturidi theological tradition which emphasises free will and human reason alongside divine revelation. Malik bin Anas (d.795) gave more weight to precedents originating in Medina and is popular in Africa. Shafi'i (d.820), whose system is official in Malaysia and Indonesia, represents about a third of Muslims. Most of these are Asharite in theological emphasis and so stress divine revelation above human reason and divine sovereignty over human free will. Ibn Hanbal (d.855) is more literalist than the other schools and is the smallest. It tends, like the Athari theological school, to insist on accepting the text of the Qur'an and hadith without theologising.

The strict Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, founded by an ultra-conservative revivalist preacher named Muhammad ibn Abn al-Wahhab (1703-92), take this last kind of approach, and Saudi petro-dollars have extended Wahhabi influence. There are similarities to the Salafis ('Ancestors'), who draw from all four schools of law and have some peculiarities of their own as they seek a return to the teachings of the Prophet and those from the earliest years of Islam as they perceive it. Not all Salafis advocate violent *jihad* ('struggle'), but a good number of such came from one or other Salafi faction. These include the Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1929; Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1987; Al-Qaeda ('The Base'), founded by Osama bin Laden (d. 2011), and the Pakistan-originated Taliban ('Students'). These last two were founded about 1989, initially to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan.



Authority for the Twelver Shi'a is represented by religious scholars with the title Ayatollah ('Sign of God'). The Usulis school has been the most prominent in this branch of Islam since the 18th century. It does not assume all hadith are reliable and uses reasoning from the hadith and Qur'an to reach decisions applying to the different circumstances that may exist compared with early times. The minority Akhbari school reach verdicts professedly by direct reference to the Qur'an and hadith. Hezbollah ('Party of God') in Lebanon is a Shi'a advocate of violent jihad.

The apparently irreconcilable statements in the Qur'an, the variety of traditions and the varying schools of interpretation, to which one

must add the cultural accretions to Islam in particular localities, the impact of modernisers, and the fact that any Sunni Muslim can become an imam ('leader'), explode the claim of a monolithic Islam. These facts also explain how one Islamic group will claim Islam is a peaceful religion that condemns violence and killing (Sura 9.32), and another can say death, maiming or exile apply to those who oppose it (Sura 9.33). Happily, most Muslims want to live ordinary lives in peace with their neighbours, and in any case are often cultural Muslims, just as most professing Christians are cultural Christians. However, the rise of those who advocate shari'a and violent jihad as they seek to purify Islam by returning to the perceived teaching and practice of Muhammad and his immediate circle some 1300 years ago, is certainly making a significant impact given early Islam, unlike early Christianity, involved military conquest.

The Four Patriarchal Caliphs

Muhammad's death in 632 after a short illness led to division over who should succeed him as leader *(caliph)* of the Muslim community (*'umma)*. The traditional *Sunni* ('well trodden path') recognise the four early caliphs (called the Rashidun or 'rightly guided' Caliphate). They are Abu Bakr (632-634), whose daughter A'isha was married to Muhammad; 'Umar (634-644), one of whose daughters was a wife of Muhammad; 'Uthman (644-656) of the aristocratic Umayyad family who married successively two women who were most likely children of an earlier marriage of Muhammad's first wife; and Ali (656-661), Muhammad's cousin and first male convert who married his daughter Fatima. These are regarded by the Sunni as being rightly guided in their interpretation of the Qur'an. To them an imam is primarily a leader of prayers in the mosque; it is the scholarly consensus of one or other of the hadith schools that binds Sunnis.

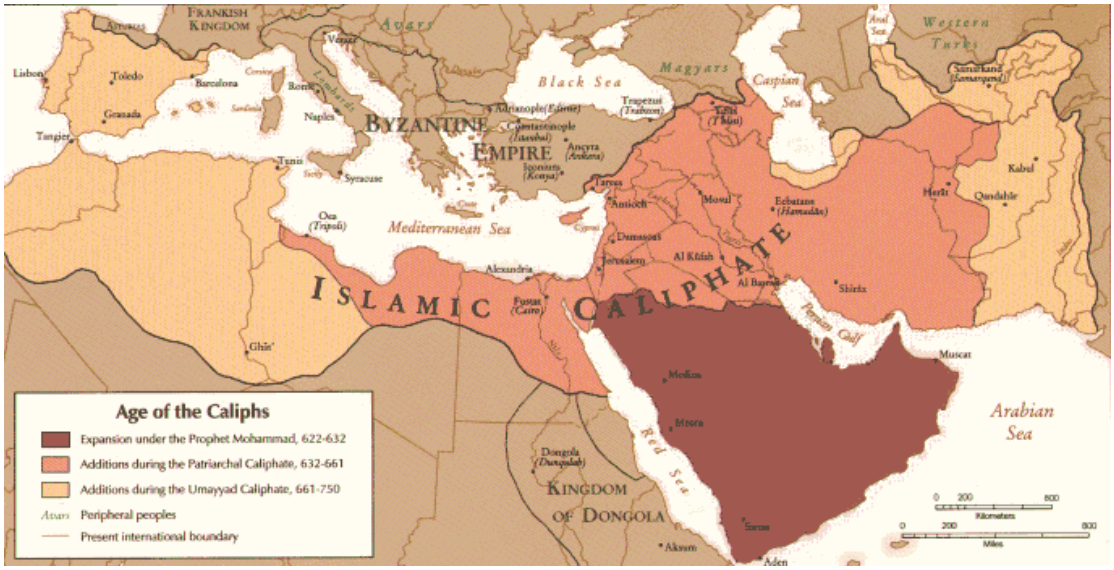
The minority *Shi'a* consider Ali, the fourth caliph, to be the first true caliph. Shi'a Muslims (excluding the syncretistic sects) today constitute around 15% of the world Islamic community. The Shi'a suffered many divisions, and the largest section by far are the **Imamis**, popularly called Twelvers from their belief in twelve infallible imams or spiritual guides from Muhammad's family. For several centuries they have formed a majority in Iran and a significant minority in neighbouring Iraq. To them an imam is primarily a leader of all the believers.

Rapid conquest

A number of the conquered Arab tribes who had revolted after Muhammad's death were soon subdued (the first civil war). Islam spread rapidly under the four patriarchal caliphs, and did so by effective military operations which exploited the weakness of the two great empires – the Zorastrian Sassinid (neo-Persian) and the Christian Byzantine. Iraq, part of the Sassinid Empire, was conquered in 633, and the rest of that Empire in 642. Syria was invaded in 634, and Damascus captured, while the decisive Muslim victory at Yarmouk near Galilee two years later gave access to Syria and the Levant. Jerusalem was taken in 637. The whole of Egypt was under Muslim control by 642.

People of the Book

Jews and Christians in Arabia predate Islam. There were significant Jewish tribes in Medina. In 627 Muhammad ordered the beheading of the men of the Qurayza tribe of Jews (some 600 men) and the enslavement of the women and children. There were Christians in Najran with whom Muhammad had dealings. They were probably Monophysites, but the views attributed to Christians in the Qur'an are quite unrepresentative. However, as 'people of the Book' Jews and Christians were permitted, as a general rule, to practice their respective faiths in Muslim lands with some restrictions (such as on evangelism and on buildings for worship), provided they submitted to Muslim rule by paying *jizya* (a special poll tax based on Sura 9.29), otherwise death. The same provision was soon extended to the Zoroastrian faith common in Persia. Such non-Muslims were termed *dhimmis*, and dhimmitude was in effect second-class status - protection for a price. Sometimes reasonable, jizya could also be highly punitive and over time people converted to Islam in an effort to avoid it. Jizya largely disappeared in the 19th century but restrictions on non-Muslims remain in most Muslim countries today. (In June 2014 the *Islamic State of Syria and the Levant*, now called *Islamic State*, a body of Sunni extremists with a 7th century mindset, declared a restored caliphate across parts of Syria and Iraq. They required the Christians in Mosul, who had lived there for over 1800 years, to convert to Islam, pay jizya, leave or be killed. They also called on all Muslims to acknowledge the Caliphate.)



The Umayyad Caliphate 661-750

In 656 Mu'awiya, the governor of Damascus and a member of the Umayyad family of Mecca, rose against Ali, the fourth caliph, and civil war continued for some time. Ali agreed to a truce and to put the competing claims to arbitration, but was murdered by a faction of his followers who did not agree one could or should arbitrate in what was God's will. The Umayyad family recovered the caliphate in 661, established a dynasty, and ruled from Damascus. Sindh, in what is now Pakistan, was captured in 712, and much of the Iberian peninsula was secured about the same time. However, invasion of Gaul was halted when the Franks defeated the Muslim army at the significant Battle of Tours in 732. Of course the idea of an effective single caliphate for all Muslims in respect of spiritual and temporal matters was never realistic given the factional fighting among different powerful clans, the lack of provision in the Qur'an for administration of such extensive territories, and varying interpretations and agendas.

Just how Islam developed its distinct identity in this period is not altogether clear from available sources. Certainly there was interaction with Greek thought as Islam expanded. Wasil ibn Ata (699-749) of Basra was influential among those who neither supported or rejected the claims of Ali and those opposed to him. The adherents of his theological school were called **Mu'tizilites** ('Separatists') and used Hellenistic approaches in developing a theology that could maintain the unity of God and his justice in the face of outside criticism. This school of thought therefore argued that the Qu'ran was the creation of God since, if it was regarded as eternal, as was the accepted view among Muslims, it would be co-equal with

God, and a predestination that did not allow free agency would follow contrary to God's justice. The Qur'an was therefore subject to reasoned inquiry, a place for human free will was to be recognized, and the attribution of human characteristics to God in the Qu'ran in a metaphorical sense. The Sunni would finally reject these views in 850, but they retained influence among Shi'a, and there is some renewed interest today.

Pic*: Sufis near the burial place of Rumi*

The origin of Sufism

The one-sided emphasis on the transcendence of God in Islam would inevitably not satisfy some people. As the tensions in Islam increased with a worldly Umayyad Caliphate and emphasis on Islamic law, it is understandable that a reaction would surface, perhaps influenced by Christian and Zoroastrian strains of thought and practice encountered in the new Muslim lands. At any rate, what became known as **Sufism** (traditionally from the Arabic for 'wool' because of the garments worn in the early period) is evident at least as early as 700 as an ascetic practice that became a mystic interiorisation of Islam. In some cases Sufism was a virtual pantheism in which God and the creation were seen as one. Under al-Ghazali (c.1056-1111), the prominent philosopher and theologian, Sufism was brought back within an orthodoxy sufficient for most, although there are those today who regard it or sections of it as heretical. There are Sufi orders in Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Dancing and singing to promote closeness to God are common. The best known to Westerners are the so called Whirling Dervishes of Turkey, much influenced by the Sufi poet Rumi (1207-73).

Radical views

There were also other radical views that did not sit well with later orthodoxy. The faction responsible for Ali's death, called **Kharijites** ('those who withdrew'), insisted that a Muslim's failure to follow closely the Prophet's example made you apostate and worthy of death. They caused a lot of trouble among Muslims for the next 300 years, and still inspire some of the extreme sects in Islam today. A more moderate section of Kharijite-type called **Ibadites,** numbering about 2 million today, is found mostly in Oman where it has been for

over a thousand years. They elected their own imam. They put more emphasis on the Qur'an, their hadith collection is smaller and different from others, and they have left open what is called *ijtihad* ('effort'), that is, the possibility of new interpretations for new situations, a possibility which the Sunni closed in the 10th century.

Karbala 680: martyrdom and messianism

Following Ali's death in 661, his son Husan, conceded the title of Caliph in exchange for peace with the Umayyad claimant. Husan's brother Husayn followed him as the third spiritual leader or Imam of those who regarded Ali and his descendants as the legitimate line. On the Caliph's death in 680 Husayn expected to recover the caliphate, but he and a small number of followers were massacred by the massed forces of the new Caliph (Yazid I) at Karbala (in Iraq), and Husayn's body was desecrated. This killing of the Prophet's grandson was a great shock to Muslims. It marks the formal separation between what became the Sunni and the Shi'a, and his martyrdom is annually commemorated as a kind of dramatic passion play on the *Day of Ashura* by the communities of the main section of Shi'a. It involves such things as self-flagellation. The Imam's death is seen as in a sense redemptive and prayers are made to him. Sunni remember Ashura too, but link it more particularly with the liberation of the Hebrews from Pharoah.

Pic: *Re-enacting the death of Husayn*

Husayn's son, Ali Zayn ibn Ali, became the 4th imam. He was pious but sickly and unable to fight, so he had not been at Karbala. In 686 a revolutionary group, aiming to avenge Husayn's death, raised a rebellion against the Umayyads in favour of Ali's third son, Husayn's half-brother Muhammad bin al-Hanafiyah. It seems that their leader, Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, regarded al-Hanafiyah as a Mahdi ('Divinely Guided One') who would bring justice. This is the earliest known reference to a Mahdi in Islam. The rebellion failed and Mukhtar was killed the following year. But many who supported

Mukhtar, including Persian converts, accepted only Ali and his three sons as the divinely appointed Imams. They were called **Kaysanis** after Mukhtar's bodyguard. Al-Hanafiyah pledged allegiance to the Umayyad caliphate, but that related to temporal rule not spiritual; in any case he was not particularly active. At his death in 700 many Kaysanis thought he had not died but was in hiding, and that he would return as Mahdi to rule the world in justice. Some considered he had occult knowledge. Given he was regarded as still alive, though hidden, there would be no further Imam for this group which in fact was extinct by the 11th century.

In view of some similarities with Christian ideas, it seems likely the Mahdi concept was influenced in its development from Zoroastrian thought, which had already been impacted by some aspects of Christian teaching (see *The Presbyterian Banner*, March 2013). The concept of a Mahdi is found in the Sunni *hadith* but it developed in a special way among Shi'a. In a number of later cases different groups believed their Imam had gone into the hidden state called occultation, but would return near the close of history. Others of the Shi'a rejected al-Hanafiyah because his mother was not Fatima and therefore he did not carry the blood of the Prophet. They continued to accept Husayn's son Ali Zayn ibn Ali as the 4th Imam, and they see their 12th Imam, an infant who disappeared in 873, as the Mahdi who will reappear near the close of history. These are the Twelvers, the largest section of Shi'a today. Dominant in Iran since forcible conversion from Sunni in the 16th century, they are also a majority in Iraq and numerous in India and Pakistan.

Islamic Leadership

The main preoccupation for many Muslims in the period after Ali's death seemed to be the succession to leadership of those who did not accept the Umayyad Caliphate as legitimate, and this was tied up with the question of authority or certainty. Was the role of imam principally to lead the mosque prayers (the Sunni position) or was it much more than that, leaders of real authority for the whole community (the Shi'a position)? Were imams to be hereditary, elected or appointed by God? Were standards of conduct required in addition to belief in the basic Islamic principles? Of course the religious question was tied up with politics. We've already seen the position of the extreme Kharijites, who thought sin not repented of made a Muslim an unbeliever. The position of the Kaysanis, who accepted only Ali and his three sons, has also been noted. The Shi'a

accepted Ali and his descendants through Ali's son Husayn, but they suffered many divisions too.

The imams, descendants of Ali, who are accepted by the Imamis, the largest Shi'a branch by far, number twelve, including Ali, hence the Imamis are popularly called ***Twelvers***. This number was settled by the 10th century, and perhaps was influenced by the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus. These imams are regarded as perfect examples for Muslims and, together with Muhammad and his daughter Fatima, are sometimes called by these Shi'a 'The Fourteen Infallibles'. They are regarded as free from all sin from the beginning to the end of their lives. Most of the Twelve, according to these Shi'a, met death by poisoning on the order of the Sunni caliphs. However, Sunni and Twelver Shi'a only became finally settled through the collections of traditions of the prophet, and the schools of interpretation centuries after Muhammad.

Picture: *Shia poster: Ali & his two sons, then below Ali and the 11 imams, the one on the extreme left with blanked out face is the Mahdi.*

The 12th imam of the Twelvers (al-Mahdi, b. 869) disappeared in 873. Twelvers hold that he did not die but entered into what is called the *minor* occultation (concealment). It is believed that until 941 al-Mahdi communicated to deputies, and from then on he advised that no more deputies would be appointed and he went into the *major* occultation. He is expected to reappear as the Mahdi along with Jesus and will purge Islam of all the Sunni 'distortions'.

The Twelvers' collections of deeds and sayings of Muhammad were settled by about 1050. This form of Shi'a Islam became the official religion of Iran under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) and Sunni Islam was forcibly displaced. The additional words "I testify that Ali is the friend of God" are found in their version of the Islamic profession of faith. The Twelvers emphasise a cult of saints, and of

pilgrimages to their graves. These are reckoned a substitute for pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the absence of the imam the Twelvers came to recognize jurists as his legitimate representatives in religious matters. The Iranian revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomenei (1902-89), developed the further idea of Islamic government by the leading Shi'a jurists. Khomenei became the first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and was popularly described as imam.

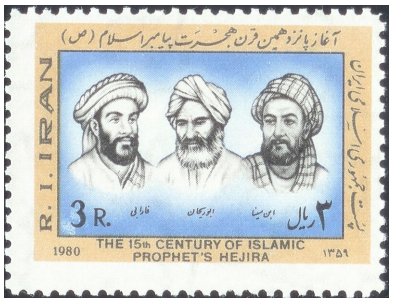
Caliphates and the Golden Age

There were several *caliphates* - purported rule over the whole Islamic community - and plenty of conflict among rivals we cannot cover here. After some years of discontent the Sunni Umayyad caliphate (661-750) came to an end with most of the family massacred. The Abbasid dynasty replaced it, except in Spain, where the Umayyads maintained an Emirate (later Caliphate). The Abbasids claimed descent from the uncle of the Prophet, and had had the help of Shi'a Muslims in overthrowing the Umayyads. However, once in power the Abbasids supported the Sunni version of Islam, which the majority of their population followed, and this alienated the Shi'a. In 763 the Abbasid capital was transferred from Damascus to the new strategically located city of Baghdad, interestingly enough designed by a former Zoroastrian and a Jew. Several regions under the Caliphate ruled through emirs moved to effective independence, and from 909 to 1171 there was a rival Shi'a Caliphate in North Africa (the Fatamids). Around 820 the Abbasids had created an army of largely Turkish slaves called Mamluks (= 'owned') to stabilize their Caliphate. The Mamluk army became so powerful that a century later much royal authority had to be yielded to it.

Bagdad itself flourished for 500 years as a centre of intellectual life, with a fusion of Arab and Persian culture, until the Mongol invasion of 1258. This effectively ended the already weak Caliphate, despite it claiming religious authority from a base in Egypt until 1517. The (Nestorian) Christian population of Baghdad was spared at the intervention of the Christian wife of the Mongol leader, Hulagu Khan (grandson of Ghenghis), but at least 90,000 people, and perhaps several times more, were slaughtered after the city surrendered. The Grand Library and numerous other buildings were destroyed, and only in the 20th century did the city regain significance. Its destruction was the symbolic end of Islam's Golden Age.

The Abbasids were wealthy patrons of knowledge, education and the arts. From the 9th to the 14th centuries, Islamic thinkers made

advances far ahead of Christendom in a number of fields. The major areas of Islamic scientific attention included mathematics, astronomy, optics, engineering and medicine. However, it is important to recognize that much input was received from earlier Greek and Hindu thinkers, while Nestorian Christians translated many Greek texts into Syriac and from thence into Arabic. Eminent in a line of polymaths were the Persians al-Kindi (801-873), al-Farabi (872-950), al-Biruni (973-1078), and Avicenna (980-1037), while Averroes (1126-1198) of Andalusia (southern Spain) wrote commentaries on Aristotle. The interaction with other intellectuals should be noted: for example, Al-Farabi's teacher was a Christian, Yuhanna b. Haylan, while the Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), regarded al-Farabi as second after Aristotle. However, it was in the later Christian West that the scientific disciplines were to make real progress in a complex interplay of religious, political, social, intellectual, legal, and economic factors still debated by academia.



Picture: *Iranian stamp featuring al-Farabi, al-Biruni and Avicenna.*

The Ottoman Empire

Disregarding the Mogul Empire (1206-1368), whose advance further east than Syria was stopped in 1260, the next real power was the Turkish or Ottoman Empire founded in 1299 by Osman I. It steadily progressed and in 1463 Mehmet II, at age 21, led the army that conquered Constantinople (now Istanbul) and massacred many of the inhabitants. Christians who fled to the West brought Greek manuscripts of the New Testament with them which were important in the publication of the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516, that by Erasmus. The sultans who led the empire up to around the mid 1500s were generally capable. Mehmet introduced a training school for boys to produce statesmen, numbers of whom were Christians. But, with increasingly weak central rule, the Ottoman Empire went into gradual steady decline and lost much territory. In 1922 Ataturk abolished the Sultanate, and a secular government was introduced in Turkey.

Shi'a divisions

The divisions in the Shi'a line were generally over who was the legitimate successor of the imam. On the death about 713 of the 4th

Shi'a imam, some rejected the man chosen as the 5th imam because he refused to take up arms against the Caliph and lived quietly. They followed the 4th imam's half brother Zaid, who had revolted against the Caliph because he regarded him as corrupt. The Zaidis are popularly known in the West as ***Fivers***. Their religious beliefs are close to the Sunni, but they were more radical politically. For them, the imam had to be an active and energetic visible leader, and they rejected the adoration that was growing up around those who held the office. The Fivers established a state in northern Iran in 864 which persisted with some interruptions until the 12th century. The largest concentration today is in northern Yemen where an imamate operated from 893 to 1962.

Some esoteric groups

(1) Isma'ilis

After the death of the 6th Twelver imam in 765, a minority rejected the man chosen and favoured his father Ismail, who either had died or could not be found. If Ali is excluded, Ismail is the 7th imam, hence the term ***Seveners,*** sometimes used. Some said Ismail was hiding from persecution by the new Abbasid rulers and had designated his son Muhammad as imam. Muhammad too had to go into hiding because of opposition, hence he was now called Muhammad al-Maktoum ('the hidden one'), who passed on the imamate in secret for more than a century. The **Isma'ilis** stressed an inner mystical meaning to the Qur'an accessed after secret initiation, and absorbed some of the ideas of pre-Islamic religion and philosophical thought. In the swirl of political and theological currents of the time millenarian fervour was high, and devotion to the Ali family became more and more extreme among some.

The weakening of the Abassid Caliphate brought the Isma'ilis more into the open and in 909 they were able to form the Fatamid Caliphate in North Africa which in 973 founded Cairo. A radical element (the ***Qarmatians***) engaged in regular raids on caravans to Mecca and in 930 briefly occupied that city slaughtering many pilgrims. In 1009 the Fatamid Caliph al-Hakim destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but after his disappearance in 1021, the ***Druze*** sect proclaimed him as Mahdi, and secreted themselves in Lebanon. In 1094 the main body of Isma'ilis split over which of Nizar or his younger brother Musta'li, should be their 19th imam.

Nizar was executed by his brother, who had become recognized as Fatamid Caliph, in 1097. Today most of the Mustalis are in India and

called ***Bohras***. A minority are in Yemen. Nizaris formed a State in northern Iran in 1090 under Hassan-i Sabbah. Some of the Nizari, commonly called ***Assassins*** (from whence the word came into English), perfected the art of political murder, killing in public selected prominent Muslims and Christians. They even made an attempt on the life of Saladin in 1175. However, the Nizari influence in Persia and Syria was broken by the last quarter of the 13th century.

Most Nizaris moved from Iran to the Indian sub-continent around 1300 and their converts became known as ***Khojas***. In 1817 their then

imam, Hasan 'Ali Shah, known as Aga Khan ('Lord and Master') left Iran and was recognized by the Bombay court as Supreme Pontiff (to use Latin terminology) of the Nizaris, and the legal owner of Khoja property. Nowadays using the term ***Isma'ili***, this section has spread to over 25 countries and is the largest group of Isma'ili origin with a claimed 10 to 15 million followers. In earlier times the Aga Khan was seen as a manifestation of God. He receives tithes from his followers. A billionaire in his own right, the current (since 1957) twice-divorced, racehorse-owning Aga Khan IV *(pictured)* has also used community funds at the rate of some $400 million a year for significant public projects, and in many respects is a voice of reason and tolerance.

(2) Druze (Ahl Al-Tawheed = 'People of Monotheism')

The Druze originated in Egypt about 1016, but are now found chiefly in Syria and Lebanon. Total following is in the range 350-650,000 with several thousand in Australia. Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim is worshipped and his cruelties and eccentricities are interpreted symbolically. The Druze have a theory of repeated cycles of history each having a significant prophet, such as Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, free of mistake or sin, with certain assistants alongside them. They hold to the transmigration of souls and have other Gnostic and mystic beliefs that are kept from the eyes of outsiders. They practice dissimulation.

(3) Alawis/Alawites (Nusayris)

Alawis ('followers of Ali') were generally known until the 1920s as Nusayris, after Muhammad ibn Nusayr of Samarra in Iraq, who claimed to be the *Bab* ('Gate') of the hidden 12th Shi'a imam. The real organiser of the Nusuyris was al-Khasibi who became leader of the group in 926. He furthered the movement while adopting the guise of

being a faithful Twelver. He died about 969 leaving Nusayri cells in Syria, and Iraq. The Alawis today represent about 10% of the population of Syria, which has had an Alawite President since 1971, and are also found in communities speaking Arabic in southern Turkey. In 1974 the leader of the Lebanese Twelver Shi'a said that Alawites are Shi'a Muslims. This was also the year Syrian President Hafez al-Assad made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Certainly there are political aspects to this, but there has been increasing outward conformity to Sunni Islam in Syria as a matter of policy. To what extent the peculiar beliefs of the Alawis are being maintained as adherents move to the cities remains a matter of conjecture. Numbers are in the range 2 to 3 million.

(4) Alevi *('followers of Ali')*

The Alevi are Turkish followers of Ali influenced by the Bektashi Sufi order founded in the 13th century. They have been moulded by the historic circumstance of being a marginalised and persecuted minority, in earlier times found mostly in Anatolia. In some respects like the Alawis of Syria, the Alevi have their own distinctive rituals, although beliefs and practices vary in different regions and there is no central authority. They accept a trinity of divine energies consisting of Allah, Muhammad and Ali. They emphasise sexual equality, interpret Islamic practices symbolically and are tolerant of others. The Alevi form at least 15% of the Turkish population but have often not been recognized because they have conformed to Sunni practice outwardly while retaining their own beliefs. In politics they have favoured the secular model. Of recent years there have been clashes arising out of the discriminatory policies of the Turkish government, which is now promoting Sunni Islam. In turn this has stimulated a renewed interest in Alevis concerning their faith. Following is at least 10 million.

(5) Yazidi

The Yazidi is a syncretistic Kurdish and Arabic-speaking religious community which originated out of the Sufi order *'Adawi*, founded in northern Iraq around 1130 by an Arab mystic named Shaykh 'Adi ibn Musafir al-Hakkari. It mixed pre-Islamic beliefs with Islamic ones. Shaykh 'Adi claimed Umayyad descent and died in 1162. Early in the 13th century some of the group, largely nomadic Kurdish tribesmen, emphasized Ali's divine attributes and regarded Yazid I, the first Umayyad caliph (680-683), whom they claimed as an ancestor, as a divine incarnation. Yazid I is disliked by Sunnis and hated by Shi'a so this may have given rise to the name Yazidi, although the view that it comes from one of the names for God ('Ezid') is current nowadays among the Yazidi themselves.

There is belief in one God who does not concern himself with his creation directly but rules it through seven angels, the chief of which

is Malak Ta'us ('Peacock Angel'). The Peacock Angel disobeyed God but was forgiven and restored, and is now a kind of intermediary between God and humanity. Despite many claims that have led to much persecution, the Yazidi are not devil worshippers. They do have some unusual beliefs. Yazidi hold that, unlike the rest of humanity, they are descended from Adam but not Eve. It has tight social relationships, converts are not accepted, and marriage outside the group is forbidden. They believe that through the transmigration of souls the spirit can gradually be made pure. Shaykh 'Adi is believed to have achieved this and his tomb is the site of an annual pilgrimage. Yazidi communities exist in Aleppo in Syria, near Mosul in Iraq (where they have experienced much recently at the hands of Islamic State extremists), and elsewhere in Central Asia. Total number is probably around 500,000 including 50,000 recent migrants in Germany, but much as regards beliefs and numbers is unclear due to their largely oral tradition and relative isolation.

Conclusions and contrasts

The preceding narrative has provided something of a survey of Islam's origin and development. Given most readers may not be very familiar with history outside Europe it may have been a bit difficult to grasp some of it. However, I want now to try and summarise some

of our findings, offer some suggestions for Christian response to the Islamic challenge and provide an outline contrast with Christianity.

1. *Islam is effectively multi-denominational*. It is not monolithic. There are three main lines as we have seen - the Sunni, the Shia and the marginal esoteric groups. Within each there are different schools of religious interpretation. The Twelver Shia are more centralized, but in the majority Sunni there is no truly central authority. Media spokesmen may be the crowd pullers and not necessarily representative. Islam has never had a truly unified approach religiously or politically, with the possible exception of the period under the first one or two Caliphs. The Qur'an itself is capable of widely diverse viewpoints. Thus many spokesmen insist Islam is a religion of peace quoting Sura 5:32: 'if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.' but they do not mention the next verse (see box). The scholarly Islamic schools provide further diverse viewpoints, from the secular non-practising Muslim to the most extreme fundamentalist.

[5:32] On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our messengers with clear signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land.

[5.33] The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: that is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter; [5.34] Except for those who repent before they fall into your power: in that case, know that Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. [*From Yusef Ali's translation (1934) quoted here because it is regarded as the best English translation of the Qur'an by many Muslim scholars.]*

2. Muslim leaders frequently put the blame for extremists on *the foreign policy of the USA* and its allies, and so further a tendency to push some of their people into a victim mentality and into radical positions. While there is now much more Muslim condemnation of groups like the so-called Islamic State, it is still too often hedged about or qualified, while the restrictive practices of most Muslim

nations as regards religious minorities and the place of women are not roundly rejected by the Australian spokespersons, even as they claim and enjoy their own freedoms here. This does not help ease concern among ordinary Australians about Islam's future intentions. Whilst we can recognise US political interests, and not always find them wise or correct, the typical Muslim approach does not address the problems of their own history and cultures. Too often massively rich Muslim rulers give little real respect or dignity to the masses of their poor, and use religion as a control mechanism, a religion that is tied by a claimed Divine revelation to a kind of 7th century tribalism hard to adapt to the modern world.

3. We also hear much about the blameworthiness of the Christian holy wars, *the Crusades*. The first of these ran from 1096-99, and enjoyed a papal promise of remission of all penance to all who engaged in it from a true heart. It was successful in establishing several Crusader states after massacring most of the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem who had resisted. The Crusade was a delayed response to the Muslim capture of Jerusalem in 637, and a reaction to the expansion of the Sunni Muslim Seljuq Empire which had taken Jerusalem from the Shi'a Fatimids by force in 1073 and placed it under the Abbasids (although they lost it back to the Fatamids in 1098). Much of what was involved in the Crusades is of course contrary to Christ's teaching and an abhorrent episode in Christian history. However, in the context of Muhammad's teaching and the spread of Islam by force, the 'crusader' argument is merely a convenient excuse, foisted upon an ignorant audience, for Islam's lack of progress over recent centuries. Indeed, at the time Islam was more concerned about its inner conflicts than the Crusades. Saladin, a very capable Kurdish soldier in the service of the Shi'a Fatamids in Egypt, gained power in 1171 and switched to the Sunni Abbasids. He included Jerusalem among his military conquests in the following years. Only in the 20th century have the Crusades been a significant element in Muslim polemic as the Ottoman Empire lurched to its close in the face of internal weakness and European colonial expansion.

4. *The political situation in the Middle East* certainly involves Israel, although in many ways the Palestinians seem to be used by various Islamic factions for their own ends. The bigger picture is the rivalry between Arabs (mainly Sunni), Iranians (Shi'a) and Turks (Sunni) for dominance in part or all of Iraq. Syria is (or was) the most developed

of the countries in the region with 25% non-Sunni and a secular rule by one of the minorities (the Baath Party dominated by Alawites) led by Dr Assad. Syria has support from Iran and Russia, while Saudi Arabia (with its severe brand of Wahabbi Islam) is an ally of America, and Turkey is a member of NATO. The action of the US in insisting on denying any role post-Saddam to those in the secular Baath Party of Saddam Hussein, has put these people with their administrative experience out of work and made them easy recruits for Islamic State given also the pro-Shi'a policies of the Maliki-led government. Turkey is playing a difficult game in on the one hand co-operating in some ways with IS against the Kurds, and on the other not wanting extremism on its own territory, but refusing to take effective measures against IS unless the US becomes involved against Assad. While it may well be right for the West to help stop the barbaric slaughter of minorities, in the end the regional problem is something the region must solve.

5. The Islamic Councils are of course rightly anxious to present a moderate form of Islam, but they also need to keep a broad constituency happy. There is an element that reflects ancient animosities towards fellow Muslims of a different stripe. It's rather like the Roman Catholic-Protestant enmity that was common prior to the Second Vatican Council 1962-65. Unless something remarkable happens, these intra-Islam animosities will be with us for a long time, and the Islamic Councils don't want to highlight them. There is also a lot of negativity towards 'the Jews' in the Islamic community because of the Palestinian situation, while the 'Two Dannys Vilification Case' in 2004 did not bring credit on the Islamic Council of Victoria either. It looked like a set-up by the Muslim side and an attempt to prevent criticism of Muhammad, but nor were the two Dannys or the Judge lily-white (see *The Presbyterian Banner*, Jan/Feb 2005). All sides avoided a proper balance. It remains that some conservative Christians still tend to tar all Muslims with the

same brush. They tend to view Muslim statements rejecting extremism as an example of saying what others want to hear while harbouring the hope of imposing *sharia* as soon as they have the numbers. This is not the appropriate response.

6. It is important to recognize a few facts in the *Australian context*. In Australia at least 70% of census Muslims are not religiously active (according to Waleed Aly). Many have come here to get away from extremism, and there are in any case wide cultural differences among the 70 different national backgrounds. Further, there is no reason to doubt that most professing Muslims in Australia want only a decent life for themselves and their families, and have no interest in extremism, even assuming they read the Qur'an and the hadith or attend mosque. Verbal and physical assaults are to be deplored. Significant numbers of Australian Muslims, some still in detention centres, are becoming Christians. They won't if we tar them with the extremist brush without justification. (The same encouraging situation is true in the Middle East: I understand attendance at mosque in Iran is in single figures, while Middle East Reformed Fellowship reports encouraging responses to their radio ministry.) On the other hand, while not necessarily thinking it wise to make an issue of the burqa in Australia, it is passing strange that westerners are criticized for expressing reservation/opposition to it (*not* to those who wear it), when even a regional Muslim leader such as Ameer Ali describes such face veils as 'the lingering relics of a patriarchal, misogynist and tribal culture'.

7. *Christianity and Islam*. Christianity insists the Bible is a unified book unfolding progressively the drama of God's redemptive purposes and his gracious covenant as he speaks in different times and ways through the prophets but finally in his unique Son, who is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his being (Heb 1:1). Jesus also endorsed what we call the Old Testament as fully authoritative because inspired by God, and he, through the Spirit, inspired the New Testament writers similarly.

The one living and true God, infinite, eternal and unchanging in himself and his attributes, exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These names don't refer to physical realities but indicate the relationship of reciprocal love that exists between the persons. God is not a committee (that would be tritheism, three gods), but God is a fellowship of love. Under the term 'trinity' Christians seek to summarise the teaching about God in the Bible. The Son took human

nature to his divine person to act as our sinless mediator, and to give his life a ransom for many, so that whoever entrusts themselves to him has eternal life as a free gift of grace on the basis of the righteousness of Christ.

Islam asserts Jesus is a prophet like Abraham, Moses, David &c., that Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets, and that the Qu'ran is the final, fixed and perfect revelation directly from God to humans. Islam believes the Bible as we have it today is corrupted, but parts of it that agree with Islam are true. Thus, Jesus was born of a virgin but was NOT crucified but taken to heaven. He will return to participate in the Judgment by destroying the false messiah and unifying the Muslim community. There is no original (or race) sin and no atonement, but there is the resurrection of the body and a heaven and a hell. A person is admitted to heaven when God, who weighs a person's good deeds and his bad deeds, so wills.

Islam may be regarded in its origin as a kind of major Christian heresy. Muhammad united the pagan Arab tribes in a monotheistic ideal influenced by Christians and Jews, but he did not go far enough. He so emphasized the otherness of God (his transcendence) that God became like a Great Sultan in the sky to whom we have nothing to do but submit. The problems of Islam in the end get back to this misrepresentation of God's nature and character. Readers might find the simple gospel presentation at www.three-two-one.org a useful starting point in sharing the gospel in a Biblical way. (An Arabic version is on this web-site too.)

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