An Introduction to Islam

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Preface

This book contains the essence of my teaching about Islam at the college level over the past dozen years. During that time, I have wanted, in a single work, the range as well as the detail that has been incorporated into this volume, within a unified perspective. Although I have tried to provide a historical framework for most of the chapters, this book is not a history of Islam. Rather, it is a topical presentation, arranged roughly in order of the more universal dimensions of the tradition down to the more particular ones; thus we shall consider the Near Eastern and Abrahamic religious systems before Arabia. Then we shall describe Muhammad and the origins of Islam, concentrating on the man and the elements of his remarkable career that are known by all Muslims and that comprise a sort of sacred history. Instead of proceeding to the usual historical sketch of the Arab conquests and the spread of Islam, I have instead provided a long chapter on basic beliefs and duties. Then, a historical chapter provides the basic outlines of Islam’s progress in many regions as it became a world religion. Chapters on the Qur’an, Islam’s sacred scripture, and the Sunna of Muhammad come next, followed by discussions of theology, law, and political theory. At this point, most of what are thought to be the major components of Islamic religion will have been discussed. But this book is different in that it offers a very substantial presentation of Sufism—Islamic mysticism—as a fundamental dimension of the tradition. Following the two chapters on Sufism are two chapters on the Muslim life cycle, the family, community life, and popular religious beliefs and observances; topics that are not usually treated, at least in satisfactory detail, in surveys of Islam. The final chapter is a selective summary of developments and trends in the modern period.

The opening section of the work is a brief survey of some of the major religious traditions of the ancient Near East, including Judaism and Christianity. I have found such an orientation to be useful at the outset when teaching about Islam to students who have a preconception about the religion as a sort of exotic, inaccessible, and essentially foreign human
Chapter 16

Major Movements and Trends
in Renewal and Reform

The Three Phases of Islamic History

The First Phase

It long was conventional in Western characterizations of Islamic history to divide it into three major phases. The first was from its origins to the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century C.E. This was the "classic" period of a distinctive and brilliant Islamic civilization, extending from Spain and Morocco in the west to Southeast Asia and Sumatra in the east. During this period there was a clear superiority of Islamic sciences, armaments, literature, arts, crafts, and philosophy that other civilizations were to benefit from as well as contribute to. The diverse Muslim peoples reached such a level of international and intercultural cooperation and community that being a Muslim in that civilization was like being a Roman citizen during the Roman Empire period. Trade routes, sea lanes, and governmental institutions (like the post office) were remarkably secure and stable for Muslim travelers and merchants, and individuals could traverse the vast distances between Morocco and Egypt and Baghdad and Iran and Central Asia always to find waiting a predictable environment in which the stranger, as long as he was also a Muslim brother, had an honored and recognized niche. Even the law-abiding non-Muslim was guaranteed security and enjoyed hospitality. The uniformity of religious ritual and social etiquette, based on the Qur'an and prophetic sunna and
codified in the law schools, was as reassuring on the practical, everyday level as it must have seemed providential.

Muslims were well aware of the privilege of living in the Dār al-Islām, the “Abode of Submission” that was starkly contrasted with the Dār al-Harb, the “Abode of Warfare,” outside the secure and religiously regulated Islamic umma where, regardless of what local government was in power, there was a conviction that human life should be based on “enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong,” as the Qur’an commands. These two entities, Dār al-Islām and Dār al-Harb, are also ideas that can be analyzed according to the mythic model of cosmos versus chaos. The Islamic world is based on fundamentals, regardless of the struggles necessary to sustain a balanced order. The non-Islamic world, although it obviously enjoyed its own territories and seasons of prosperity and power, finally lacked the cosmic foundation that could give it lasting and definitive legitimacy and security. There was, then, a missionary urgency to spread the benefits of Islam through da’wa, “call,” and jihād, “exertion,” and the remarkable extent of Islamization down to Mongol times is testimony to the fervor and industry of many generations to extend the Dar al-Islām.

The Second Phase

Then came the Mongols, and a second era was ushered in, marked at the outset by widespread devastation and death in Central Asia, Iran, Mesopotamia, and points west. Although great Islamic nations continued to arise in the future, like the Safavids in Persia, the Mughals in India, and the Ottomans in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, the characteristic genius of Islamic civilization no longer found the brilliant and original expression that had been known in classical times, especially in theology, literature, the arts, and science. Rather, there was thought to be a general degeneration in Islamic institutions and a corresponding diminution in the self-confidence and associated military and political power that the umma could muster and apply.

All the while, from the time of the Crusades to the period of European exploration and discovery, the West was steadily gaining in self-confidence, cohesion, and purpose. Spain expelled the last of the Moors in 1492, the fateful year that also witnessed the arrival of the Italian Christopher Columbus in the New World. The Protestant Reformation was about to begin, which in its successive developments in various nations, plus the vigorous countermeasures and innovations launched by the Roman Catholic church, spread Western ways and purposes into regions of previously unknown and unexploited resources. The development of southern trade routes by means of which the Europeans were able to reach distant Asian ports without traveling through Muslim lands and transport goods and people more cheaply and safely than before did much to accelerate the atrophying of Muslim trade dominance and control of routes that the umma had enjoyed in the eastern and southern Mediterranean and Spain, and farther east in Asia and Africa.

It was not so much that the Muslims declined rapidly during the Protestant Reformation and later as that the Islamic world remained relatively static while the West advanced dramatically in all areas of human endeavor. The West also had expanded its sphere of influence to the Western Hemisphere, which was the preserve of the Christian nations, and to old civilizations and societies of Asia and the south seas.

The Portuguese and Dutch came to dominate the Malaysian-Indonesian archipelago, and the British later ruled India, Burma, and other South Asian regions. This ushered in the long period of Western colonialism, which was a difficult challenge to Muslim honor as well as the Islamic way of life in a world ruled by infidels, who were so perversely successful in their enterprises. The domination by outsiders afflicted Hindus and Buddhists, too, and it also altered when it did not obliterate native American as well as African societies and cultures.

It is hazardous to distinguish historical periods of Islam’s career across such a great range of geographic and cultural frontiers, if by such periods is intended a consistent characterization of the umma’s fortunes vis-à-vis other traditions. For example, toward the end of the fifteenth century, as we mentioned, the last of the Muslims were driven from the Iberian Peninsula under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, thus marking the end of a long era of Muslim presence in Spain, which in earlier centuries dominated there. But in the Middle East and India, Islamic empires were thriving, with power and prestige that were never reached in earlier times, even when the Abbasid Empire was at its peak. This period saw the steady increase of Islamic influence in the Malaysian-Indonesian archipelago, with Muslim communities appearing along the coasts of populous islands such as Sumatra and Java.

The Third Phase

The third, or modern, era in the umma’s history can be said to begin around 1800, but this date requires many qualifications. It marks the time when Napoleon and his forces were in Egypt (they actually entered in 1798) and opened it up to Western influences, development, and exploitation in a manner that was reflected and imitated in other southern and eastern Mediterranean as well as Asian Muslim lands throughout the nineteenth and up to the mid-twentieth century. There were modern Western influences in Egypt and other countries before 1800, but by that time such influences had gained sufficient momentum to change fundamentally the ways Muslim peoples viewed themselves and the world. And their world shrank more with each decade until in the present day there are continuous
Islam in the Modern World

Communications between even the most backward places and the rest of the globe. Even such traditional, medieval outposts as Yemen are rapidly being incorporated into modern life by means of the mass media, transportation, and economic development.

Influences on Islam

It would be a mistake to attribute the changes in Islam during the past two or so centuries solely to Western influences and modernity. Before the time of Napoleon and without any external influences, significant reform movements were begun in the umma itself. In India there was a fundamental reform in the eighteenth century instigated by Shāh Wali Allāh of Delhi (1702–1762). In Arabia during the same period a powerful puritan movement arose under the leadership of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792). It is instructive to consider these two quite different developments, which Fazlur Rahman has called “pre-modernist reform movements” because of their indigenous character and the fact that they arose as a result of forces and issues that were wholly within the Islamic scheme of history and self-interpretation. The Wahhābī reforms especially offer valuable insights into Islam’s tendency to purge and reform itself from time to time in obedience to the radical demands of tawḥīd and its earthly task of “enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong.”

Sufism

Sufism had a fateful influence on the reforms of Shāh Wali Allāh, who incorporated it into his vision of a purified Islam that balanced the various elements of theology, law, society, economics, and politics into a just system in which abuses of the poor, on the one hand, and the deterioration of Muslim power, on the other, would be checked. By the eighteenth century, the old Mughal dominance in India had waned considerably, and Hindu rebellions and revival movements were exerting great influence in the subcontinent, where the Hindus were in the majority. Some Muslim leaders thought that a return to strict orthodoxy was desirable so as to stem Hindu assertiveness. But both Shāh Wali Allāh, and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī before him, wanted to maintain the spiritually invigorating and humane virtues of Sufism while excising its sometimes antinomian and relativistic tendencies, which were being increasingly blamed for weakening the Islamic community. This developed into a major modern critique of Sufism that is far from abating even today. Shāh Wali Allāh’s high-minded reform did have some effect on Muslim rulers of his time, who shared his desire to restore Islamic power in India. But it was too late to turn back to the great Mughal times of the preceding centuries. Thus the Sufi part of Shāh Wali Allāh’s vision of a coherent Islamic synthesis was gradually replaced by a zealous brand of puritanism that resembled, even as it reflected, Wahhābism, to which we now turn.

Major Movements and Trends in Renewal and Reform

The Wahhābīs

In order to understand the peculiar force and point of the Wahhābī movement in Arabia, it is necessary to go back several centuries earlier to that Hanbali maverick, Ibn Taimiya (d. 1328), whom we met earlier in Chapter 11. Remember that Ibn Taimiya, although he was conservatively antiraionalist and suspicious of Sufism—at least the freewheeling sorts—nevertheless considered himself to be a mujtahid and, indeed, insisted that the revelation and prophetic traditions be interpreted and applied anew in each generation. The Qur’an and Hadith are perfect and immutable, but in a world of change and chance, the alert Muslim must be able to analyze the times and in the process bring them under the scrutiny and authority of the Shari’a. Added to this flexible fundamentalism based on an “ecstasy of obedience,” as we observed in Chapter 11, was a fanatical opposition to the cult of saints, which by his time had become a prominent feature of popular Islam in the Near East and beyond. At the heart of Ibn Taimiya’s repudiation of saint veneration was a conviction about the divine unity (tawḥīd) that considered any suggestion of religious respect for a creature tantamount to shirk, “idolatry,” the single unforgivable sin, according to the Qur’an (4:48). Ibn Taimiya, remember, did not insist on any particular form of government for Muslims; it was sufficient that whatever form of rule and order was instituted, it be a “Shari’a politics” (siyāsah shari’iyya).

If Ibn Taimiya thought his reliance on the Qur’an and especially the sunna was fundamental, preserving him and all who followed those sources from innovation and error, it was also true that to rely on the sunna was to base oneself on the early generations of Muslim scholars and jurists, who had made the sunna a corpus of literature and source of law. The prophetic sunna did not appear as an accomplished fact to the Muslims upon the death of the Prophet, as we observed in Chapter 9, on the Hadith literature. It was a long time in the making in the form that came to be regarded as acceptable and authoritative. Ibn Taimiya led the struggle in his day against taqlīd, “blind imitation” of the consensus of earlier scholars-jurists, and he was himself also committed to a kind of taqlīd, for his acceptance of the sunna was not as radical as he seemed to think, nor could his position accurately be characterized as a “back to the Qur’an” movement.3 But his contribution to a fresh consideration of basic problems did have a positive effect on people who came after him, especially the Wahhābīs of Arabia.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and Ibn Sa’ūd

As a young man, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb traveled widely in the central Islamic lands, studying theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence as well as Sufism.4 In Iran he became a Hanbali, after which he took to
preaching a strict doctrine of tawhīd, which brought him difficulties as well as supporters. At Darʿiya in Najd he came to be associated with the local leader Muhammad ibn Saʿūd, with whom he later worked out a scheme whereby Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb would provide religious leadership and teaching for the people and Ibn Saʿūd would serve as political head and highest worldly authority. This partnership evolved into the strong partnership of Saʿūd's power and prestige increased and spread throughout the peninsula, so also did the Wahhābi brand of reformed Islam.

**Heresy and Annihilation of Saint Veneration**

Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb followed the lead of Ibn Taimiya and returned to the Qur’an, sunna, and the Sunni legal positions that were worked out in the first three centuries, especially as represented in the Hanbalī madhhab. He and his followers denounced all else as heresy (bidʿa) and worked to rid Arabia of it. Saint veneration was singled out for annihilation, and the early Wahhābis did succeed in razing any mosques, shrines, and tombs that were in any way dedicated to the memory or centered in the ongoing cult of ṣaḥīḥ. Sufism was also fiercely attacked, largely because it was so actively engaged in saint cults and pilgrimages to local shrines. Cemeteries were purged of anything more elaborate than a simple tomb marker. In those days in Arabia, as in other old Muslim centers, there was much imposing funerary architecture. In Arabia it was obliterated. Simplicity in architecture as in the religious life became the watchword for Arabia. Wahhābi mosques even did without minarets and ornaments beyond the most basic furnishings. Anything resembling ʿshūr was stamped out, such as seeking intercession with God through anyone other than Muhammad (and he only on the Laṣṭ Day, as the Qur’an allows), making a vow to any but God, denying the divine decree and predestination in all things, and including the name of any creature (angel, prophet, saint) in prayer.

The Wahhābis constituted (and still do) a sort of religious police force that severely reprimanded any and all offenders and went beyond even the strict Hanbalī majority in certain matters. For example, believers were required to participate in congregational worship. Merely reciting the shaḥada was not considered sufficient for full membership in the ummah; in addition, one’s character had to be examined. Smoking, shaving the beard, and using abusive language were to be punished, for example, by whipping. Even the use of the subha (rosary) in prayer and meditation was disallowed, because it was not known to have been practiced or countenanced by the Prophet and was thus to be considered “innovation” (bidʿa), that peculiarly Islamic term for heresy. (But it was permitted to count God’s most beautiful names on the knuckles, as Muhammad had done.)

**The Success of the Wahhābis**

The Wahhābis had great successes as well as serious setbacks over many years, but on the whole they became permanently established in Arabia, and at their height (ca. 1811) their influence was felt very strongly as far away as Aleppo in the north, to the Red Sea in the west, all the way to the Indian Ocean in the east. Later, Wahhābism put down roots in India as well as in parts of Central Asia. Its indirect influence and inspiration were felt throughout the ummah, even in places where its doctrines were received unsympathetically and its violent methods, based on jihād against fellow Muslims, deplored. The Wahhābis sacked the holy Shiʿi city of Karbala in 1802 and massacred the inhabitants. Of course, Shiʿism was regarded by the Wahhābis as especially idolatrous, with its cult of imāms and pilgrimage practices.

Although the Wahhābis were opposed to Sufism, much more so than even Ibn Taimiya had been, they nevertheless resembled a Sufi order to some extent, as Fazlur Rahman has pointed out. They called themselves and their system the ṭariqa Muḥammadiya and even organized into agricultural communes and villages called ikhwāns, “brotherhoods,” which were to be always ready for jihād, according to various categories and under different chains of command.

Opposition to the Wahhābis was partly based on their rejection of all rational theology and, even more, their prohibition and censoring of many beliefs, attitudes, and practices that were widely accepted and liked, including all veneration of walīs. The most serious reason for opposition, however, was the Wahhābis’ violent means of attempting to enforce their system and spread it to Muslims everywhere. As Rahman has observed, they resembled the violent and fanatical Khārijites of early Islam. And even though they did preach a return to ʿitihād, as indeed they had to, considering their program, their rejection of rational speculation, whether in jurisprudence or theology (which they did not approve in any case), made them ineffectual. One cannot have responsible independent decision making without systematic, independent thinking. It is largely on the practical levels of worship, social organization, and the fostering of an egalitarian common Islamic life-style that the Wahhābis succeeded in any positive manner. But their call for ʿitihād has continued to this day to be heard by highly diverse Muslim individuals and groups. Unfortunately, unlike their hero and inspirer Ibn Taimiya—who was very able in theological dialectic and imaginative legal and political discourse—they were not able to follow him by putting into practice his example and his suggestions for applying the revelation and Muhammad’s principles in a real siyāsa sharʿiyya that would be universally acceptable and reformative.
Other Reform Movements

North Africa

The nineteenth-century witnessed a variety of reforming tendencies in different parts of the Islamic world. In North Africa (Libya), the Sanūṣī movement used social action to combat European colonialism. The Sanūṣiya, named after its founder, a Berber from Algeria, was a combination of Sufi organization and a free-ranging though basically orthodox Sunnism. The founder established several zāwiyas in Cyrenaica and finally died there. But his sons continued the movement after him, and it has persisted to this day.

In the Sudan there arose a Mahdist movement, led by Muhammad Ahmad ibn `Abd Allāh (1834–1885), a self-proclaimed “messiah” (mahdi, “guided one”) who organized his followers for military action and considered jihād against all evils to be second only to the congregational salat among his substitute list of pillars, which also included a shahāda including belief in Muhammad Ahmad’s Mahdi-hood, recitation of the Qur’ān, obedience of God’s commandments, and observance of certain dhikrs that the Mahdi had developed and published. The hajj was dropped. The movement became powerful in the Sudan and saw its task to be overthrowing the Egyptians and their Turkish masters who ruled the Sudan, followed by the actual conquest of Egypt, Arabia, Syria, and the Ottoman capital itself. Many thoughtful Muslims in the Sudan were offended by Muhammad Ahmad’s extreme claims concerning himself, as well as his opposition to scholarship. He did exert a powerful influence, however, by means of his egalitarian policies that enabled slaves and masters to cooperate and fight side by side. There was an enthusiasm among the masses, who were carried along in a seemingly spontaneous flow of eschatologically meaningful action and adventure. The movement’s asceticism, possibly derived from Wahhābism, provided a sense of spiritual superiority and strength.

The Sudanese Mahdist uprising attracted the attention of the whole world in 1885 when the British defender of Khartoum, General Charles George “Chinese” Gordon, was killed after a long siege of his garrison ended in a decisive victory for the Mahdzists, who stormed it. Muhammad Ahmad himself died in the summer of 1885 at Omdurman, where a qubba was erected over his grave. Even before his death, Muhammad Ahmad was considered to be a saint, even though he forbade saint veneration and visits to shrines. The Mahdist domination of the Sudan continued until 1898, when it was brought to an end by a punitive expedition led by British General Kitchener.

India

In India during the nineteenth century there were several reform movements, one led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi of Raē Barelī, who is thought by some to have been inspired by Wahhābism. Whatever the truth of that, Sayyid Ahmad’s puritanical reforms resembled Wahhābism but went further by denying allegiance to any or all Sunnī schools of law. Jihād became the core of the movement, both against the Sikhs and later the British. Sayyid Ahmad died in battle in 1831. The nineteenth century was a very difficult one for Indian Muslims, who were deprived of any semblance of power and had to console themselves with religious reforms and dreams of driving out the British. An influential reforming theological seminary was established at Deoband in 1876, in which moderation predominated, without, however, suggesting an abandonment of traditional Islamic principles, including the duty of Muslims to rule themselves.

Sufism and Reform

Fazlur Rahman has observed that although Sufism was influential in a number of premodern reform movements, it was a transformed Sufism, largely divested of its medieval doctrines and practices, especially those that were so heavily informed by the theosophical cosmology of Ibn ‘Arabī, with its hierarchy of saints and “perfect human” (al-insān al-kāmil). Sufi organization and discipline were turned instead toward activism, with the figure of the Prophet dominating through an emphasis on his interior moral and spiritual nature. The old medieval Sufism continued, however, and it can still be seen today, although it has long since ceased to be very influential for the masses. The old Sufism came increasingly to be regarded as a weakening and corrupting factor in an Islamic community that needed to overcome serious disabilities, whether spiritual, moral, legal, or political.

Need to Reform

A sense that things had gone wrong in the umma seems clearly to antedate the kinds of Western challenges that later convinced Muslims everywhere that reform was not only necessary but inevitable. The Wahhābīs were horrified by the degenerate behavior that could be witnessed in Mecca, the central Muslim sanctuary. Morals were lax and superstitious practices rife there and throughout the Hejaz. The Sanūṣī movement in Libya was aimed at fighting the tribal violence, moral decay, and economic deterioration of Muslim peoples who were not at the time very much concerned with the West.
Some Modernist Thinkers

Movements such as those led by Shāh Wali Allāh of Delhi, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and the Sudanese Mahdi were powerful in their own day and continued to exert influence long after, especially Wahhābism. But in the nineteenth century, Islamic thinkers attempted to come to grips with science, technology, and Western political and economic domination over most of the globe. If the older movements were essentially indigenous products of the umma, the latter were responses to outside ideas and forces. Sometimes they were apologetic, seeking above all to defend Islam against the secularizing and relativizing tendencies of modern thought. At other times they were militantly anti-Western, dedicated to the overthrow of imperialism, especially of the British Empire. Sometimes the responses were accommodating and adaptive, viewing the West and science as a mixed blessing, with elements to be admired and imitated, while resisting beliefs and behavior thought to be incompatible with Islamic principles.

All Islamic reformers, whether hot, lukewarm, or cold toward Western science and institutions, were nevertheless aware of the umma’s weakness and desirous of doing whatever was possible for renewal and reform. A common theme was, and remains, the reopening of the gate of Ḥijāḥ. Not only Ṣufis, with its quietist and often superstitious beliefs and practices, but also the great majority of the ‘ulamā‘ were locked into old patterns and unable to wake the Muslims to the challenges of the modern era. The perception of the umma’s deteriorated state came about internally, as was evidenced in the premodernist movement. The strength to deal with it also came from native Islamic resources of conviction and responsibility. The story of Islamic reform and the purification of institutions and thought down to the present is not imaginable without the Muslims’ faith in the proper destiny of the umma under the Shari‘a. Muslim peoples did not adopt Western religious or ideological systems wholesale, nor did they seek to shed their Islamic traditions and life patterns. The assertive dimensions of Islam, as most dramatically expressed in Ḥijāḥ, never died out, even though the Muslim nations’ institutional structures were tottering and sometimes ineffective.

Al-Afghānī

One of the most energetic and original of all Islamic reformers in the last century was Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897), a tireless activist who traveled from country to country calling his fellow Muslims to wake up and drive out Western influences from their midsts. This could be accomplished only by internal renewal, purification, and reorganization. That is, it was not enough to get rid of outside forces; the umma also needed to be reformed, both according to enduring Islamic principles and procedures and with the admitted benefits of modern science and thought. Afghānī was not a narrow fundamentalist but a humanistic champion of basic rights and sympathetic to the masses of poor, powerless people across the Near Eastern and Asian world of his day. In a sense, he was a harbinger of Third World causes that have become such a prominent aspect of the poor nations’ struggle for survival today.

Al-Afghānī was more a social and political activist than a thinker, but he did appreciate the power of the press and published his ideas in articles and pamphlets that were read from Europe to India, although wherever they were in control, the British tried to suppress them. With his younger admirer and colleague, the Egyptian Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), Afghānī published a little paper that took its name from a society they had founded: Al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā, “The most firm handle,” taken from a phrase in the Qur‘an: “Whosoever disbelieves in idols and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreakable. . . .” (2:256). The articles had a wide range of subject matter, but they all were composed for purposes of action and not simply intellectual reflection. They treated political, social, cultural, and economic as well as religious and theological issues. Although they appear to reflect Afghānī’s thinking, the pieces also reveal the developing thought of the greater thinker ‘Abduh, although he was not recognized until after he returned to Egypt from exile in Paris. Afghānī stirred up strong anti-imperialist feelings among Muslims and convinced many that a pan-Islamic movement would help renew and re-unite the umma. Afghānī finally died in Istanbul, where he had spent the last five years of his life under a kind of house arrest, luxuriously looked after and allowed to receive visitors but unable to leave the city.

‘Abduh

Muhammad ‘Abduh was born in 1849 to a poor peasant family in Upper Egypt. He early showed great intellectual ability and was sent to study religious sciences at the famous mosque-school in Tanta, which was associated with the tradition of Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, the great Sufi saint. Later he entered the Azhar University in Cairo, where he much later became its modernizing and thus controversial rector. From his teens, ‘Abduh was interested in mysticism and sometimes meditated and observed an ascetic withdrawal. Because of his contact and, for a time, close association with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh’s world broadened to take in Western thought and science and areas of Islamic tradition that he had not known well before.

‘Abduh’s thought and activities were marked by restraint and reflective tolerance, even though he shared with his mentor Afghānī the hope of seeing Islam strengthened and Western influences and power withdrawn
from the Islamic nations. 'Abdulw was a rational theologian, a sort of neo-Mu'tazilite, who saw no essential conflict between reason and revelation, religion and science. 'Abdulw looked back to the scientific and philosophical thought of classical Islam and argued that Islam at its most authentic had always been on the side of science and progress in a universe in which a kind of natural law of discernible cause and effect operates under a benevolent and righteous God.

Ethics were at the core of 'Abdulw's thought, and because of that, he was an active person who could not retire from the world and view it abstractly or in a detached, intellectualist manner. The reform of Islam was his life's work, and it had to be grounded in real-life situations. One of the central points of his thinking and activism was patriotism, and he did much to foster Egyptian nationalism, believing that a people that is proud of its native land would be much better able to protect it from enemies, whether from without, like the imperialist West, or from within, where strong men's despotic rule had been the norm for centuries.

Toward the close of his life, 'Abdulw was often at the center of controversy. He claimed the right of ijithad for himself and others and, in a respectful manner, worked outside the old fashioned fiqh or taqlid to urge people to return to the Qur'an and the sunna. He was also critical of saint veneration, although higher forms of Sufism informed his conscience and shaded his style toward tolerance, without giving up firmness. He was not a champion of the old medieval Sufi world view, with its theosophy of saintly hierarchy. For 'Abdulw, that sort of thinking was no longer viable in a world in which science and realism mattered most. This realism led him to emphasize ethics over reflection and the rational exploitation of what he regarded as primitive and, therefore, pure Islam.

For all his spirituality and crusading for enlightened beliefs and practices in the modern world, 'Abdulw was also very resilient. In his autobiography, the young, blind Taha Husayn tells of the respect the Azhar students had for 'Abdulw and the excitement he aroused with his efforts to bring the venerable institution into the modern world in curriculum and teaching methods. Husayn tells of the young men in his dormitory preparing for the evening lecture, when they "would talk about the Imam himself, discussing his extraordinary qualities, recalling his judgments on the sheikhs, or theirs on him, and repeating the crushing replies with which he used to silence questioners or objectors and make them a laughingstock to their fellows."'12

'Abdulw always relied on the Qur'an and began a great modernist commentary on it that was finished by others after his death. Although he recognized universal laws of nature, he also constantly called upon his fellow believers to look beyond those laws to their creator. The regular and beneficient workings of nature provide signs (ayât) by which we may contemplate and love God.
Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī was not closely identified with any single country, because he tirelessly traveled throughout the Dār al-Islām and beyond—even for a time to America—spreading his doctrine of pan-Islam and renewal, free from the great powers. Muhammad 'Abduh also traveled and for a time was banished from his native land, but he always worked to improve his Egyptian environment and remained there in his later years to serve his country as well as his religion through hard, practical work. His example was not to be forgotten, for as far away as Indonesia his ethic of social action and improvement of people's daily lives through education and proper health care had results. The liberal-minded Indonesian Islamic service organization, Muhammediyya, with its female counterpart, 'Ā'ishīya, were founded because of 'Abduh's inspiration and thinking.

Sayyid Ahmad Khān

A third modernist Muslim thinker was Sayyid Ahmad Khān (1817–1898), who is almost entirely identified with India, where in 1875 he founded the famous Anglo-Muhammadan College at Aligarh (now the Muslim University of Aligarh). Sayyid Ahmad Khān was a liberal Muslim thinker of marked philosophical leanings. He admired the modern West and sought in his experimental college to bring to India the best of Western educational content and methods. Generations of young men were graduated from Aligarh and took their places as leaders in modern fields. But Aligarh did not provide much Islamic education, and this increasingly became a liability for the college as more militant Islamic movements emerged.

Al-Afghānī was highly critical of Ahmad Khān and accused him of being a materialist (dahri) and even the Antichrist (al-Dajjāl), in a vitriolic repudiation of Indian materialists that appeared in Al-'Urwa wa 'l-Wuthqā, the paper he edited with 'Abduh. Another term applied to Ahmad Khān was nechari, after “nature,” because of his peculiar views of natural cause and effect that operate, in his view, autonomously and without God's managing. Here Ahmad Khān was more radical than Muhammad 'Abduh, who continued to see divine providence behind the observable and somewhat predictable flow of natural causes and effects.

Ahmad Khān lived a long, useful life and did much to encourage improvement in education and other social arenas. In his own day he came to be regarded as too sympathetic with the West and lacking in the Islamic militancy that his jihād-prone coreligionists increasingly preached. It is interesting to speculate whether his materialism would have been forgiven by Afghānī if he had not so admired the hated British, upon whom the gentle Ahmad Khān believed that God had bestowed "all good things spiritual and worldly" in greater abundance than anywhere else.
Islam and Nationalism

One of the most notable trends of modern times has been the establishment of independent national states. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this occurred mostly in Europe and the Americas, although in Asia and the Middle East there were movements in this direction that were concluded in the twentieth century, especially after World War II and the end of most colonial establishments across the globe, such as the Dutch East Indies (which became the Republic of Indonesia), British India (which later split into India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), French North Africa (which after liberation became the independent nations of Morocco and Algeria), and others. Turkey alone among the Middle Eastern nations was created without having experienced the degradation and humiliation of colonization and foreign rule. Turkey emerged after World War I under the leadership of the remarkable Mustafa Kemal, whose adopted name Atatürk ("Father of the Turks") suggests something of his importance. The Ottomans themselves had been powerful colonialists for centuries, having come close to extending their rule as far as Vienna (in 1683) and absolutely dominating the Arab world and North Africa well into the nineteenth century, when Egypt was lost (and then ruled by Britain) and other places were taken over by France, Italy, Russia, and Greece (which gained its independence in 1829).

Turkey

Turkey emerged in Anatolia when the decrepit Ottoman Empire collapsed under the victorious French and British campaigns in World War I. It could easily have become a European colony had it not been for the powerful support of Atatürk in central Anatolia in the name of the Turkish people and army, without any permission from what remained of the continuing, but feeble Ottoman government in Istanbul. By means of decisive military moves, including the expulsion of the Greeks in 1921 and 1922 and the establishment of a new capital in Ankara (in the heartland), Atatürk led the new nation to international recognition by 1923. He then abolished the sultanate, that final vestige of the caliphate on which many Muslims had continued to place their hopes for an international Muslim revival. Atatürk then proceeded to disestablish Islam by canceling the Shari'a, outlawing Sufi brotherhoods and activities, requiring the salat to be performed in Turkish, adopting the Roman alphabet (and thus rendering future generations incapable of reading Arabic, whose script the old Ottoman Turkish had been written in), and even forbidding the wearing of the fez. Atatürk insisted that progress lay in Westernization, and so he proceeded to try to make Turkey into a "European" country.

The idea of emphasizing things Turkish was itself fairly new, for the old Ottoman regime had been internationalist and committed to pan-Islamic symbols and customs, which were useful for the imperial administration across the Muslim lands that it had so long dominated. In the early twentieth century, as if in anticipation of Atatürk, intellectuals like Ziya Gökalp (1875–1924), under the influence of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, developed a modernization program based on the three coordinated ideas of "Turkification, Islamization and Modernization."14 Gökalp's ideas were certainly radical, for "Islamization" meant a return to a primitive Islam when he imagined there was the freedom to innovate and think freely, before the characteristic classical legal and religious institutions had developed and come to dominate Muslims. The Turkish language, culture, and customs were revived and enhanced so as to render the most meaningful symbols and structures for national life. Religion and state were separated in a secularizing revolution that nevertheless recognized Islam as the proper religion for Turks, but without adopting pan-Islamic or theocratic programs.

Atatürk went much farther even than the intellectual Gökalp-Alp, by sponsoring a Turkism that went, in Kenneth Cragg's word, into "irreligion."15 Since Atatürk's time, the Turks have continued to carry on in a more or less secularist fashion. But after World War II there was a rebirth of theological education, and the Sufis became slightly visible, even though their activities technically are still prohibited. But mysticism is a part of the Turkish soul and the great renewal that is occurring among Muslims everywhere is attractive to Turkish sympathy and participation.

Saudi Arabia

Since Turkey emerged as a new and independent national entity, many other predominantly Islamic peoples have also achieved nationhood. Although most have sought to modernize their governments and economies, as well as their education, health, and planning, some have made it their explicit goal to do so through Islam. The modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia, although not a democratic nation by any means, is nevertheless dedicated to using its oil wealth to improve its citizens' conditions of life, while at
the same time maintaining a strictly fundamentalist Wahhābi-based religious posture, at least officially. The handsome green and white flag of Saudi Arabia has a sword over which is written the shahāda, with no mention of either Arabia or the royal dynasty.

The few remaining Muslim monarchs are feeling great pressure these days from revolutionary forces, whether religious or secularist, and it is unlikely that they can last indefinitely. The Saudis see it as their task to protect and maintain the holy cities of Mecca and Medina as well as to foster Islamic religious, social, and educational programs throughout the world. These activities have led to the building of mosques, schools, Islamic centers, and publishing operations in such diverse places as Britain, Indonesia, Pakistan, the United States, Egypt, and Australia. The Saudis also see it as their duty to use their wealth in the service of fellow Muslims who are the victims of natural calamities, such as earthquakes, floods, and famines, although in the last category there is far more need than even the Saudis and other wealthy Arab oil states can provide. When several years ago, there was a violent attempt to take over the Grand Mosque in Mecca, people around the world, especially Muslims, were shocked by such an event’s taking place in the sacred precincts of the Ka’ba itself. That siege was just one indication of how militant Muslims sometimes can be when they dedicate themselves wholly to what they conceive to be the restoration of “true Islam.”

Pakistan

The state of Pakistan was established after World War II as an attempt to build an Islamic nation populated by a variety of Muslim peoples already living in the northwest and northeast of the main Indian subcontinent, as well as many who emigrated from the new republic of India in order to live in the new Islamic nation. As we noted earlier in this chapter, the nineteenth century saw Muslim power and prestige on the decline in India, so that by the beginning of the present century, anxiety overt the political rights of Muslims there led to the formation of the Muslim League (1906), which provided a voice for Muslims and a forum for considering alternatives in anticipation of the eventual British withdrawal from the region. There periodically were conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim communities, despite efforts at conciliation and cooperation by such leaders as Mohandas (“Mahatma”) K. Gandhi (d. 1948) on the Hindu side and the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) on the Muslim side. After all, it was in the interests of both Muslims and Hindus to free the subcontinent from British rule. But there turned out to be too much separating the two religious communities for there ever to be a joint national arrangement.

Iqbal proposed in 1930 the establishment of an administratively separate Muslim region in four northwestern provinces and because of this later gained the title “Father of Pakistan.” Some Indian Muslim students in Britain adopted the name of the new nation from the Urdu words pak (“pure”) and stan (“country”), with the added meaning of pak plus the letter s as an acronym of Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Sind, the four provinces in question. But Iqbal did not live to see the birth of Pakistan. In 1940 the politician Muhammad Ali Jinnah led the Muslim League in its call for the establishment of Muslim statehood in the regions where Muslims comprised a majority. After the war, Britain agreed to a separate Islamic nation in connection with Indian independence, which was granted in 1947. That fall, there were massacres of Hindus and Muslims, especially in Punjab, during the frantic exchange of large sectors of populations struggling to reach the safety of their majority groups. More than a million people were killed before relative stability could be established. In East Bengal, which became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, there was much less violence.
Islam in the Modern World

After the partition of India and Pakistan it was obvious that India had the advantages of bureaucratic machinery, diversified population and economy, and a central geographic position. Pakistan started off with crippling deficiencies in nearly all of these areas, but with the conviction that a pure Islamic order could be established and serve as an example to other Muslim peoples. Over the years since its founding, Pakistan has had periodic conflicts with India, particularly over the status of Kashmir.

In 1971 East Pakistan declared its independence and took the name Bangladesh, which led to a civil war, with West Pakistan troops entering the former eastern province and committing horrible atrocities against the weaker population, millions of whom fled to India as refugees. India supported the new nation of Bangladesh and fought a brief war with Pakistan, which led eventually to a cease-fire and the restoration of order, with the new state established. Since that time Pakistan has been ruled by a military government that backs a program of strict islamization of the society and its institutions.

Although Pakistan today is a relatively poor nation, Bangladesh is destitute. Yet in Pakistan, at least, there is an Islamic spirit that, through educational programs, large-scale publishing efforts, and foreign missions, provides some of the most vigorous Islamic religious leadership worldwide. Although the fundamentalist spirit is strong in Pakistan, the country also has a large, sophisticated intellectual class thoroughly at home in the worlds of modern science, philosophy, and religious reflection. Sir Muhammad Iqbal, the Father of Pakistan, was a world-class thinker whose legacy continues among his people, regardless of the practical problems of developing a truly Islamic national venture in the complex modern world.

Indonesia

The inhabitants of the former Dutch East Indies began to call for independence early in the present century, but it was not until the Japanese occupation during World War II when it appeared that definite progress could be achieved after the Allied victory. In 1945 the great nationalist leader Sukarno and his close associates proclaimed Indonesian independence. Over the next four years there was a constant struggle with the Dutch colonialists, who had reestablished themselves after the war. But in 1949 independence was finally won and a parliamentary type of government established.

The formation of Indonesia from the many different peoples, languages, customs, and regions was a miracle. Today the nation ranks fifth in the world in population (now approximately 150 million) and first in the number of Muslims, approaching 90 percent. Although basically an agricultural nation, Indonesia nevertheless contains some of the major world supplies of natural resources, like petroleum, tin, bauxite, and timber. Islam arrived

in the islands late but was well established by the close of the sixteenth century, especially along the coasts of Java and Sumatra. The religion was carried largely by Muslim traders from India, although Arabs regularly reached its shores, too. Sufi piety and organization were dominant in the Islam that was planted and they proved to be a perfect fit for the mystical and reflective peoples of the archipelago, where Hinduism and Buddhism had long provided a refined and sophisticated symbolism, coupled with indigenous beliefs and practices, especially on Java.

Indonesian Islam is different from the Islam of the Near East or South Asia, in that it exists harmoniously with other religions, whether major ones like Christianity and Hinduism or regional belief and behavior patterns. On Java, the most populous island and the center of the government, culture, and economy, there are three generally recognized classes of Muslims. First are the Santris, who are quite orthodox and to some extent arabized and conscious of their relationship with Muslims everywhere. Then there is the Abangan category, the majority, who are Muslim but syncretized with traditional regional beliefs and customs. Finally there is the Priyayi class, Muslims, but deeply influenced by their aristocratic past as Javanese, with older Indian-influenced attitudes and behavior patterns.

The strict Muslim groups were disappointed at independence with their leaders' decision not to make the Shari'a the law of the land. This was done, it was said, in the interests of national unity. Instead, a compromise of "five principles," in Indonesian Pancasila, was promulgated as the basis of Indonesian nationhood: monotheism, humanism, national unity, democracy, and social justice. This program has continued to the present to provide Indonesia with guidance and relative harmony, although there continue to be forces in favor of the Islamization of the government and the society, led by the Santris. Neither Sukarno, whose rule came to an end in 1965 amidst a bloodbath of Muslim-led anti-Communist hatred—in which possibly as many as one million people were slaughtered—nor his successor, Suharto, has been content to allow the Muslim domination of their regimes.

Nevertheless, under President Suharto, Indonesian Islam has thrived, judging from the projects that have been sustained, like mosque building, the development of Islamic schools everywhere, the establishment of a national system of Islamic universities that train religious teachers and leaders for small towns and villages, and government policy that favors Islam on the old bitter issue of whether religious bodies should have the right to proselytize.16

This last problem emerged anew after the Abangan Muslims were persecuted politically by Santris following the 1965 massacres of Communists. Hundreds of thousands of these Abangans converted to other religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and especially Christianity.17 Anyone who might have been suspected of lacking in religious zeal was in danger of being
regarded as a Communist and, therefore, an atheist. Thus a religion was a port in a storm, but the large-scale conversions to Christianity were a surprise. All the same, Islam is securely established as the majority religion in Indonesia. It remains to be seen whether a Santrī-led Muslim wave will succeed in capturing the government and establishing the Shari‘a as the law of the land, as happened in revolutionary Iran and as is still being attempted in Pakistan. Probably the tolerant live-and-let-live attitudes of the Indonesians, especially the Javanese, will prevail, and the practical approach of Pancasila will continue to enable the leaders to preserve a balance among the factions and populations. But the question remains: Is Islam true to its origins and its destiny if it does not strive to make God’s religion one and God’s people one? The Santris, although they are a minority among Indonesian Muslims, nevertheless are linked to the global renaissance of Islam and thus want Shari‘a rule in Indonesia.

**Iran**

The final example of Islam and modern national entities is also the most dramatic in form and fateful in results, which have not yet ended. The Shi‘i revolution in Iran in 1978–1979 brought to a brutal end the long period of Shah Reza Pahlavi’s program of modernization of that ancient nation’s economy, society, educational system, and military. The shah was an autocrat who dealt very harshly with his opponents, to the point of maintaining a large secret police that arrested people on the slightest suspicions or pretexts and often imprisoned them without trial, tortured them, and, in many cases, executed them. On the surface and in the public, the shah tried to present an image of a benevolent monarch bringing his people into prosperous and progressive modern times. And many people in the middle and upper classes did indeed prosper, especially from the country’s oil wealth. Western-style recreations, fashions, social life, music, entertainment, and consumer goods were abundantly available in all the cities and large towns, accompanied by garish posters, billboards, and shop fronts. Women in the cities went about in short dresses and without the traditional Islamic covering of the hair and arms, something shocking and unacceptable to more conservative Muslim sensibilities, which were all the time still very strong, although beneath the surface and waiting to reemerge. The shah’s repressive internal security measures, combined with his Westernizing ways and the increasingly hostile relationship between popular modern culture and Islamic values and customs, led to a situation that was exploited by the ‘ulama’ and other religiously or ideologically oriented factions, whether conservative, middle of the road, or radical.18

There had long been rivalry and competition and, at times, bitter conflicts between the rulers of Iran and its religious scholars, who regarded themselves as rulers of that Shi‘i nation by divine right, which they have

also imagined coincides with the real wishes of the masses. This is not a fantasy in Shi‘i countries, because of the people’s continuing identification with the special legacy that has descended to them from Muhammad through ‘Ali and Fātima and their martyred son Husayn. The Iranians were not always dominantly Shi‘i, although there has been since early Islamic history a goodly representation of them. It was not until the Sāfavid dynasty (1502–1736) that Shi‘ism was established as the state religion. Since then, Shi‘i convictions have had a firm grip on Iran’s popular beliefs, attitudes, and customs as well as religious, educational, and social institutions.

Shi‘ism was appropriate for Iran, because of its tendencies toward a metaphysical dualism of good versus evil, light against darkness, and a view of history that sees in the future a final showdown between God’s true worshippers and the wicked. These and other notions reflect something of Iran’s Zoroastrian past, even as they go beyond it in new, Islamic ways with symbols and observances appropriate to the triumphal religion. (During the American hostage crisis and later, when Iranian leaders and their ayatollahs have cried out against the “Great Satan,” whether with reference to Washington, Moscow, or some other adversary, they have used a title that has its roots in the old Iranian symbol system. Satan, as a potent religious concept, was probably born in Iran, from whence it entered post-Exilic Judaism and later Christianity and Islam.)19
to have the authority to exercise what the Iranian Shi'i's call valayat-i-faqih, "rule exercised by an eminent mujtahid in the absence of the imam." Many Iranian Muslims do not hesitate to call their hero "Imâm," thus using the sacred title of the one who went into occultation and is expected to return and usher in a final, golden age of the Shi'i's vindication.

The traditional Shi'i tendency to follow their religious leaders—mujtahids, 'alims, ayatollahs, and so forth—in the conviction that they possess God's guidance and enlightenment was illustrated a few years ago when an Iranian gentleman was being interviewed on American television about the upcoming referendum in which the citizens of revolutionary Iran would vote on whether to accept or reject the draft Islamic constitution. The person being interviewed admitted that there were some parts of the document about which he had some questions and doubts but that he was going to vote in favor of it anyway, "Because I trust Imâm."

Iran today is the most vigorous and radical context of Islamic revival and reform, with many efforts to influence and change other Islamic nations, whether Shi'i or Sunni. There is a conviction that the old sectarian (Shi'i-Sunni) split no longer makes any sense but serves only to divide and confuse Muslims in a manner that delights their enemies in the West and other places. Whether that martyrdom-prone and fanatical Iranian government will settle into a more moderate relationship with its neighbors remains to be seen. But as long as the charismatic Ayatollah Khomeini lives, the revolutionary fervor will continue unabated, it appears.

Conclusion

Modern Islam is a complex, vigorous amalgam of peoples, movements, and goals, and not the monolithic, centrally coordinated enterprise that outsiders sometimes assume it to be. Anyone who has looked closely at the history of Islam and has come to appreciate the strength of its community mindedness will realize that Islamic solidarity on certain issues—proper social relations, resistance to domination by secularist political and cultural forms, obedience to the Qur'an and sunna, and the vision of a unified Dār al-Islām to solve the world's ills—is a hallmark of the tradition, with roots in the early period. There is no doubt that many, if not most, Muslims would like to see their religion spread to people in all places. This is at the heart of da'wa, the "call" to Islam that is the basis of the missionary endeavors, which have been effective in recent decades, whether in Africa, Europe, or the Americas.

It is beyond the scope of this book to speculate on what the future may hold for Islam in those areas of the world where it has no long tradition. It appears that the American Muslims, for example, are becoming a branch of the mainstream of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, in which they will
be a minority for some time to come. But there is some resistance among Muslims to being melded into the American religious and cultural mix, an attitude due partly to ethnicity and its separate customs and practices. This resistance is also based on such things as Islamic distinctiveness in family and social relations and the incompatibility of an observant Islamic life-style with certain features of American popular culture and pastimes. On the other hand, it is well within the boundaries of what is not only respectable but also responsible for Muslims to become active in the political, cultural, educational, economic, and welfare of the environments they share with others. Black Muslims, for example, are actively trying to improve the living conditions of poor people through the establishment and promotion of businesses, educational institutions, clinics, and other welfare operations. One of their most successful programs has been in the rehabilitation of prisoners and their adoption of a new, positive identity as Muslims.

In the West, the Islamic movement is now playing a role that it has never played before. As the older Christian domination of life and institutions has steadily waned in modern times, so that in much of Europe and the Western Hemisphere people are essentially secularist in outlook, Islam has come on the scene militantly convinced that religion must triumph over the meaningless, drifting, and idolatrous forms of belief and behavior. The message is similar to the one that both of its cousins, Judaism and Christianity, also emphasized over the centuries and millennia. But Muslims see their religion as not only closely related to those two others but also as more capable of serving the needs of humans in the service of God. This conviction is based on the view that Islam is the perfection of the Abrahamic venture in world history, dedicated to "enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong."

Notes


3. Ibid., p. 243.


6. Ibid., p. 246.
Suggestions for Further Reading

McPherson, Joseph Williams. The Moulids of Egypt (“Egyptian saint’s days”). Cairo: N. M. Press, 1941. (Describes scores of festivals throughout Egypt. A wonderful excursion into the Egypt of the 1920s and 1930s.)

Qaradawi, Yusuf et al. The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam (Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam). Arabic ed. 1960; Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, n.d. (Otherwise difficult-to-find information on a wide range of topics, such as foods, clothing, games, sports, and sexual behavior.)


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PART SIX

ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD

Adams, Charles C. Islam and Modernism in Egypt. London: Oxford University Press, 1933. (Especially good on Muhammad 'Abduh and his circle.)


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