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# What Catholics Should Know About Islam

BY  
SANDRA TOENIES KEATING

General Editor  
Father Juan-Diego Brunetta, O.P.  
Director of the Catholic Information Service  
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Knights of Columbus Supreme Council  
Catholic Information Service  
PO Box 1971  
New Haven, CT 06521

[www.kofc.org/cis](http://www.kofc.org/cis)  
[cis@kofc.org](mailto:cis@kofc.org)  
203-752-4267  
203-752-4018 Fax

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- AG* *Ad Gentes*. Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. Vatican II, 1965.
- CCC* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. USCC, 1997.
- DI* *Dominus Iesus*. Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000.
- DV* *Dei Verbum*. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Vatican II, 1965.
- NA* *Nostra Aetate*. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Vatican II, 1965.

*Past experience teaches us that, unfortunately, relations between Christians and Muslims have not always been marked by mutual respect and understanding. How many pages of history record battles and wars that have been waged, with both sides invoking the Name of God, as if fighting and killing the enemy could be pleasing to him. The recollection of these sad events should fill us with shame, for we know only too well what atrocities have been committed in the name of religion.*

*The lessons of the past must help us to avoid repeating the same mistakes. We must seek paths of reconciliation and learn to live with respect for each other's identity. The defense of religious freedom, in this sense, is a permanent imperative, and respect for minorities is a clear sign of true civilization.<sup>1</sup>*

## Pope Benedict XVI

### INTRODUCTION

In recent times, especially after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001, the Islamic world has become a focus of global attention. Most non-Muslims know little of the religion of Islam, and confusing and conflicting statements coming from the mainstream media and the Islamic community itself have done little to help.

The purpose of this booklet is to give a basic overview of the origins of the religion of Islam and its early history, as well as some of the central beliefs and practices of Muslims. In addition, several recent statements made by the Roman Catholic Church concerning its relationship to Muslims are presented here. This pamphlet makes no attempt to cover every aspect of Islamic beliefs, or of Catholic doctrine on other religions. Rather, it is intended to be an introduction to what every Catholic should know about Islam in order to more fully live Church teaching and to understand events occurring in the world today.

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<sup>1</sup> Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with Representatives of Some Muslim Communities*, Apostolic Journey to Cologne on the Occasion of the XX World Youth Day (Cologne, Germany, 20 August 2005).

## *The Second Vatican Council*

The relationship between Muslims and Christians has a long and complex history. Whereas Christians in many areas in the East have lived under Muslim rule since the seventh century, those in the West had very little contact with Muslims apart from the Crusades (beginning in 1095) and later through European colonization. The modern period, however, has brought the world closer together and given rise to a new awareness of the relationships among members of other religions. It was for this reason that the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council chose to devote a separate document to non-Christian religions, entitled *Nostra Aetate* (*In our times*).

After a general introduction emphasizing the common origins of all peoples and our quest for truth, *Nostra Aetate* addresses several of the major world religions individually. Each section singles out beliefs held by the followers of the religion that can be identified as “seeds of the Word” – those partial truths found everywhere that are signs of the working of the Holy Spirit. Since Islam is a monotheistic religion with high regard for Jewish prophets, the Council Fathers recognized it as having a particular relationship with Christianity. The following passages taken from *Nostra Aetate* address Islam specifically:

Upon the Moslems, too, the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men. They strive to submit wholeheartedly even to His inscrutable decrees, just as did Abraham, with whom the Islamic faith is pleased to associate itself. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin mother; at times they call on her, too, with devotion. In addition they await the day of judgment when God will give each man his due after raising him up. Consequently, they prize the moral life, and give worship to God especially through prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for

mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom (NA 3).<sup>2</sup>

With this statement, the Fathers of the Council intended to establish the foundation for building better relations with Muslims through many forms of dialogue. *Nostra Aetate* does not, however, in any way draw attention away from the Church's evangelizing mission. *Ad Gentes*, the Council's document on the mission of the Church emphasizes that, while the Catholic Church continues to hold the absolute uniqueness and salvific role of Jesus Christ, God works in "ways known only to himself" in the lives of non-Christians (AG 7). The central truth of Catholic faith remains "that Christ out of infinite love freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all men so that all might attain salvation. It is the duty of the Church, therefore, in her preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace" (NA 16).

Indeed, God calls all peoples to himself and desires to communicate to them the fullness of salvation. Therefore, God continually makes himself "present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors.'"<sup>3</sup> Through the many ways of dialogue, we discover how God has worked in the lives of those who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ and we seek to discover those "rays of truth that enlighten all men" (NA 2).

Evangelization and dialogue can appear to be in tension. Yet, the Church constantly appeals to all Catholics to continue to hold both commands at the forefront in their encounters with non-Christians. In 2000, the declaration *Dominus Iesus* reaffirmed the Second Vatican Council's commitment both to proclaim the Gospel and to establish open and respectful dialogues with peoples of other religions.

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations of conciliar documents are taken from *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, ed. Joseph Gallagher, trans. ed. (New Jersey: America Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53 and *Redemptoris Missio* 55, 56. In: *Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 82, 102-103.

“Interreligious dialogue, which is part of the church’s evangelizing mission, requires an attitude of understanding and a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal enrichment in obedience to the truth and with respect for freedom” (*DI 2*).<sup>4</sup> In this way, we are each called to be witnesses to the Gospel while at the same time to grow in understanding of our own faith and the beliefs of others.

The first step in this journey toward mutual understanding is to deepen our knowledge of similarities and differences between the teachings of the Catholic Church and those of other religions. Thus, it is through eyes informed by faith in Jesus Christ that we now turn to Islam.

## THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

The sixth and seventh centuries saw the beginning of tremendous changes in the Mediterranean world. The great Roman Empire was in decline following invasions of tribes from the north. To the east, the Byzantine Empire had been engaged in a long and exhausting war with the Sassanian (Persian) Empire, leaving both armies in a weakened state. Much of the infrastructure that provided food and goods was in very bad condition, trade had slowed, and in many places cultural decay had set in.

By this time, Christianity had spread throughout all of these areas, replacing native polytheistic religions. However, controversies over the appropriate way to define the union between the human and divine in the Person of Jesus Christ had led to significant divisions within the Church. For the most part, those in the Western church accepted the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. For different reasons, the Nestorians and Monophysites rejected Chalcedon’s definition, as well as some of the earlier ecumenical councils. These churches dominated in the eastern Byzantine Empire, North Africa, and Persia.

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<sup>4</sup> “*Dominus Iesus*: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” (August 6, 2000); also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Origins* (September 2000): 209-219.

All of these Christian groups were well-represented in the Arabian Peninsula. They shared the peninsula with flourishing Jewish communities and sizeable populations of polytheistic nomads. But much of this political, cultural, and religious landscape changed unexpectedly with the coming of Arab domination in the seventh century.

## THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

### *Childhood and Marriage*

Sometime around the year A.D. 570 Muhammad was born to Abd Allah and Amina, well-connected members of the powerful nomadic Arabian tribe known as the Quraysh. By age six, both of Muhammad's parents had died, leaving him an orphan under the guardianship first of his relatives. By all accounts he was well-cared for, but his experiences as an orphan were to have a profound effect on the social reforms he instigated later in his life.

Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, was a successful caravan trader, moving goods from the East coming to Mecca through Yemen and on to Damascus by camel. As a young adult, Muhammad joined his uncle on regular expeditions through these Christian lands.

He eventually married a wealthy widow named Khadijah. Together they had six children, two sons who died in infancy and four daughters. After Khadijah's death, Muhammad contracted eleven other marriages, mostly as political alliances or to widows of his followers killed in battle. His favorite wife was 'A'isha. She was the youngest and remained by his bedside at his death. Later, she would play an important role in the early Muslim community.

### *The First Religious Experiences*

During Muhammad's lifetime, Mecca was a thriving urban center. It was a meeting place for people of every religion and culture, but it was also very difficult for those who had lost their livelihoods. The destitute sold their families into slavery, and widows and orphans were often forced into prostitution or servitude when their inheritance was stolen.

According to Islamic accounts of his life, Muhammad was very disturbed by this social chaos and had taken up the habit of visiting a cave outside of the city to meditate and pray. It was during one of these retreats in the month of Ramadan in the year 610 that he had his first religious experience.

While he was praying, Muhammad had a vision of a messenger (whom he later identified to be Gabriel) commanding him to recite words that would be given to him. Some of the first words that he heard are found in the *Qur'an* in Sura 96: “*Read, in the Name of your Lord, Who created: He created man from a clot. Read, by your Most Generous Lord, Who taught by the pen. He taught man what he did not know.*”<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad was frightened by the visions, so Khadijah suggested he talk to her cousin, Waraqa, who was a Christian. After hearing about Muhammad’s experiences, Waraqa told him to remember the words he was hearing, since they sounded like those of the prophets of the Old Testament. Muhammad had these experiences for 22 years until his death.

Soon he began to gather a small group of followers who were interested in the messages commanding belief in the One God, Allah. They were mostly those who had believed in the many local Arabian gods and goddesses. It was especially important for them that God was communicating in their own language of Arabic. Muhammad quickly became convinced that the visions he was having were calling him to follow in the steps of prophets of monotheism before him – Moses, Abraham, Jesus, and many others – and bring God’s message to the polytheistic tribes who spoke Arabic.

### *The Early Muslim Community*

The group of Muhammad’s followers remained small, but it grew steadily, attracting mostly Arabs who had belonged to traditional tribal religions. This caused alarm among the merchants who relied on

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<sup>5</sup> Sura 96:1-5. All citations from the *Qur'an* are taken from: *An Interpretation of the Qur'an. English Translation of the Meanings: A Bilingual Edition*. Trans. Majid Fakhry (New York: New York University Press, 2004). The numbering in most modern translations follows the Egyptian method, although there are several methods in use worldwide.

money they made from the pilgrimages that tribes made to Mecca every year to worship at many shrines there. These businessmen began to fear that the spread of a new religion worshipping only one god would bring the pilgrimages to an end.

In the year 619, Muhammad made the decision to leave Mecca in search of a better place. Muslims consider the date of the *Hijrah* (“migration”) in 622 to be the founding date of the *ummah* (“community”) of Islam and is counted by Muslims as the beginning of the Islamic calendar. At this time the small group journeyed to a small oasis to the north of Mecca named Yathrib. There the local tribes accepted Muhammad as an arbiter, a kind of judge designated to decide inter-tribal disputes for both Muslims and non-Muslims. The village soon became known as the *Madinat-an-Nabi* (“the City of the Prophet”), today simply called Medina. Over the next ten years, Muhammad’s influence grew. He made many alliances (several of which were sealed through marriage) and the number of his followers increased.

In Medina, Muhammad was able to create a system of governance consistent with his visions. This included rules about inheritance, marriage and dowries, assistance to the poor, widows, and orphans, and the ways in which disputes were handled. Customs surrounding worship, especially the direction of prayer and ritual washing, were developed at this time. It was also in Medina that much of Islamic teaching about non-Muslims was formulated.

Muhammad had certainly known both Christians and Jews while he lived in Mecca, and now he established significant relations with a large Jewish tribe native to the area of Medina. As a condition of a peace treaty, they recognized Muhammad’s political authority in return for religious autonomy and status as allies. This set the groundwork for the later legal relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the great Islamic empires.

It is also during this time that Muhammad gained military power. One of the first uses of this came with a conflict with the local Jewish tribes. This led to several battles in which they were wiped out by Muhammad and his followers.

Muhammad then turned to the city of Mecca. He believed God was commanding him to reclaim the Meccan shrine of the *Kaba* for monotheism. It contained the Black Stone, which had been an object of pilgrimage and worship by the polytheistic tribes for centuries. According to Muhammad's visions, however, the *Kaba* was the original altar built by Abraham and his son Ishmael (*Sura* 2:124-127). Muslims began praying in the direction (*qibla*)<sup>6</sup> of the *Kaba*, and soon the decision was made to try to gain control of the pilgrimage site and purify it from pagan idols. An army was put together, and a number of important battles were fought until the Meccans surrendered in 630.

Medina remained Muhammad's home until his death, and it was from there that he administered the growing territory under his control. For the most part, treaties made with various tribes and cities were alliances with the obligation of tribute payments that eventually developed into a system of taxation. In some cases (especially those involving polytheists), the agreement also included acceptance of Islam and recognition of Muhammad as a prophet.

Within the boundaries of the new *Dar al-Islam* ("House of Islam"), peace reigned and Muslims generally observed Muhammad's strict prohibition against killing another Muslim, apart from punishment for criminal guilt. Consequently, age-old tribal conflicts were put aside and new alliances were forged in the Arabian Peninsula. The growing strength of the Arab armies that resulted from their unification under a single religious ideology allowed them to expand beyond Arabia and into other ancient empires, bringing unprecedented change to the Mediterranean world.

### *Muhammad's Death and the Beginning of the Caliphate*

Muhammad's death, probably from food poisoning, came unexpectedly in the summer of 632. At that time he had reached the

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<sup>6</sup> This is in fact the second *qibla*; Muhammad and his first followers prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, as did most Jews and Christians at the time. The direction was changed after tensions had escalated between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes of the area, resulting in the expulsion of one Jewish tribe and the execution of the men of another.

height of his power and was revered in the growing Muslim community as a prophet of God, successful social reformer, and brilliant military leader.

Soon after his death, his closest companions gathered together to choose a new successor (*khalifa*) who would lead his followers. Many agreed that someone should be elected who could best fill Muhammad's role as military, religious and community leader. A number of the Companions, however, argued that tribal tradition should be followed and 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and husband to his daughter Fatima, should receive the honor as his closest male descendent. Instead, they elected Abu Bakr (632-634), who was one of the first converts and father of 'A'isha, Muhammad's youngest and favorite wife. He was succeeded by 'Umar (634-644) and 'Uthman (644-656), and finally 'Ali (656-661).

The first four leaders from Abu Bakr to 'Ali are known as the "Rightly-Guided Caliphs," the *Rashidun*, and are regarded by the majority of Muslims, the *Sunni*, as upright leaders of the ideal community. It is believed by Muslims that under them the *ummah* (community) most closely followed the example set by Muhammad. Usually this early period is seen as the pure model for reform, and is held in the same high esteem as the Apostolic period for Christians. During this early period (from A.D. 632-661), however, there was a great deal of conflict within the Muslim community. After the reign of Abu Bakr, numerous caliphs were killed by fellow Muslims as various relatives of Muhammad tried to claim the position of leadership. The longest standing of these conflicts surrounds Muhammad's son-in-law, 'Ali.

### *The Shi'a*

Although 'Ali was eventually chosen as the fourth caliph, by that time tensions were high between the majority of the community (the *Sunni*) and the supporters of 'Ali (the *Shi'at 'Ali*). Following a complicated struggle initiated by Muhammad's youngest wife 'Aishah, 'Ali was assassinated and succeeded by the first of the Umayyad caliphs, Mu'awiya (661-680). After this point, the *Shi'a* minority began to

develop separate theological, political and legal customs that continue even today.

According to the *Shi'a*, only a caliph chosen from among Muhammad's descendents can be legitimate.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the *Sunni*, who emphasize the authority of the collective community in union with the tradition, the *Shi'a* maintain that the successor of 'Ali is divinely appointed. This leader is called an *Imam* and has civil, as well as religious authority.

The *Shi'a* believe that God has sent an *Imam* for every generation, even though they may be "hidden." The various groups of *Shi'a* (Twelvers, Zayidis, Isma'ilis, etc.) are distinguished by the number of "visible" *Imams* they recognize before the succession becomes hidden. But for all *Shi'a*, 'Ali and the *Imams* who succeeded him are believed to have a partially divine character and special powers of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> The *Shi'a* expect the return of the Hidden *Imam* at the end of time. Together with Jesus, they believe he will engage in battle with the Antichrist before the Last Judgment. In recent decades, some *Shi'a* had identified the Ayatollah Khomeini as the expected *Imam*, a belief that contributed to the emergence of a theocracy in Iran.

Theologically, many of the differences between the *Sunni* and *Shi'a* are deep, although general religious practices remain the same. Today, approximately 15% of Muslims are *Shi'a*, with the majority living in Iran and Iraq. Since the Shah of Iran was deposed in 1979, there are also significant populations of *Shi'a* living in North America.

## CHRISTIANITY AND THE BASIC TEACHINGS OF ISLAM<sup>9</sup>

From the very beginning, Muhammad believed that the experiences he had were revelations from the God who had been

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<sup>7</sup> The two sons of 'Ali and Fatima, Hasan and Husayn, are recognized as successors of 'Ali. Husayn's martyrdom in 680 at Karbala is commemorated as a central event in *Shi'a* history.

<sup>8</sup> Since divine character is not traditionally claimed for Muhammad, the *Imams* are regarded by some as having greater authority. This is a particular point of contention between the *Shi'a* and the *Sunni*, who do not hold anything in creation to be divine.

<sup>9</sup> In the following sections, the Islamic beliefs and practices discussed are those of the *Sunni* majority, unless otherwise noted.

revealed in the Torah and the Gospels. He identified this revelation particularly with Abraham and the message that God is One. For this reason, Judaism, Christianity and Islam sometimes identified as the Abrahamic Religions and their adherents are called “People of the Book” in the *Qur’an*. Over time, however, Muhammad recognized that there were significant differences between his own messages and what was found in the Bible. This led him to conclude that deviations from the *Qur’an* were in error. As a consequence, Jews and Christians are not granted equal status according to Islamic law. There are numerous theological differences between Muslims and Christians, only a few of which we can outline here.

### *The Qur’an as the Literal “Word of God”*

Although many common beliefs can be found between the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, an important distinction among them is the understanding of how God has communicated to people throughout human history. Muslims believe that the revelations are *God’s literal word* sent down through chosen prophets. The messages are not simply inspired human words, but an actual copy of the divinely preserved “Mother of the Book” found in heaven. This means that the particular words and even the language of the *Qur’an* are regarded by Muslims as sacred. Further, Muslims believe that the messages sent to each of the prophets are *the same*.

At the center of Islam is the belief that the visions Muhammad experienced throughout his lifetime were messages sent directly from God and intended for all of humanity. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims believe that the One God is Creator of all of Creation. God is “The God” (“*al-Lah*”) and there can be none beside Him. According to the *Qur’an*, this one God has sent prophets with his message and law to every people. Muhammad is understood by Muslims to be the last of these prophets and the *Qur’an* is the final revelation given to humanity from God.

Islamic tradition claims that the messages were memorized by Muhammad’s followers, and only after his death, collected by the

Caliph Uthman into the book that we have today.<sup>10</sup> Some modern scholars have disputed this, arguing there is evidence that many of the verses were added later, and only a small number can be tied directly to Muhammad.

The traditional Islamic view of the revelation is that it was not subject to any historical or human influences, and so cannot be changed or interpreted in light of contemporary ideas. According to this, the prophets who received messages did not use their own words to describe their experiences. Rather, as one medieval Muslim wrote, the revelation passed through them like water through a tube in a fountain. Just as the water is unchanged by the tube, so, too, the revelation is unaltered by its human conduit. Many verses of the *Qur'an* begin with God's command to Muhammad simply to say what will be given to him.<sup>11</sup>

An exception to this are messages, called *asbab al-nuzul* ("the occasions of revelation"), understood to supersede those given previously. There are very few of these verses, although oftentimes they are of great significance for understanding the development to the early Islamic community.<sup>12</sup> For example, modern scholars have identified a shift in attitudes toward Jews and Christians in the verses associated with Muhammad's early life in Mecca to those linked with Medina. In Mecca, the messages are primarily concerned with opposing paganism and establishing relations with other monotheists. The Medinan texts, on the other hand, are more confrontational and critical of those Jews and Christians who do not accept Muhammad's status as prophet. For

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<sup>10</sup> The messages are arranged according to length, not chronologically. Each group of verses is organized into a *sura* (chapter) that is given a title referring to a term or topic found in it, e.g., The Cow, Women, The Blood Clot, etc. This follows common practices to help one remember information passed on orally.

<sup>11</sup> In the *Qur'an*, God is often referred to in the plural. Just as in the Old Testament, this plural reference is a sign of honor and respect, not of plurality in God's being. Therefore, many verses begin in the form: "Say: 'We have said....'" The appearance of the *Qur'an* through Muhammad is considered by Muslims to be a miracle. It is the only miracle associated with him to be recognized by the majority of Sunni Muslims.

<sup>12</sup> One of the more well-known examples of these concerns the temporary allowance of worship of three pagan goddesses in the so-called Satanic verses. These verses were later removed from the *Qur'an*.

this reason, one finds contradictory statements in the *Qur'an*, which Muslims have generally resolved by accepting the later revelation.

This view of revelation is very different from that of Christians, who hold that the definitive self-disclosure of God is found in the *Person of Jesus Christ*. The Holy Scripture is believed to be inspired and free from all error in regard to matters necessary for salvation.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, it is recognized by the Catholic Church that God uses human beings (with all of their limitations) and events of history to communicate His divine will. Revelation is a dynamic relationship established between God and humanity in the Incarnation, not a fixed written moral code simply to be applied in a given situation.<sup>14</sup>

Muslims often point to variations among the Gospels in the New Testament, as well as the role of Saint Paul in the early church, as proof that Christianity today does not follow from the authentic teachings of Jesus. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of scripture and overlooks the complex relationship between oral tradition and the inspired writing of the Bible. The Catholic Church teaches that “...God chose certain men who...made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the individual books of sacred Scripture, while they reflect the context and personalities of their writers, are truly God’s Word.

## MAJOR THEMES OF THE *QUR'AN*

The *Qur'an* plays a central role in the religious life of Muslims. It is often memorized, parts of it are recited at daily prayer by all practicing Muslims, and its content forms the basis for Islamic law. Just as the Bible, it contains a multitude of themes. We will look at

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<sup>13</sup> See CCC §§101-108.

<sup>14</sup> “Still, the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book.’ Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word...’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living.’” CCC §108.

<sup>15</sup> CCC §106 and *Dei Verbum* 11.

three central themes here. Two of these are summarized in the statement of belief repeated constantly in Muslim prayer: “*There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.*” A third important theme is that of punishment for evil deeds and reward for good. Each of these themes builds upon the other and together they form the foundation of Muslim belief in God. Two other subjects of importance for Christians are the portrait of Jesus and Mary found in the *Qur’an*, as well as the relationship between Muslims, Christians and Jews. These will be addressed in light of their significance for understanding the current relations between the three religions.

### *The Holy Trinity and Absolute Monotheism*

The most important article of belief for Muslims is the statement that “there is no god but God.” It appears in nearly every *sura* (chapter) of the *Qur’an* in various forms, and was the basis for Muhammad’s mission throughout his prophetic career. Muhammad was reared among polytheistic tribes that seem to have had only a vague awareness of the monotheism of Christians and Jews. When he began having visions, he firmly believed that he had been chosen to bring the message of the One God to the polytheists, and this was probably the impetus for his preaching.

Absolute monotheism stresses the unity and oneness of God, the sole creator and sustainer of life. According to the *Qur’an*, God is a personal being who is living and knowing, all-powerful and unique. In prayer, Muslims repeat the ninety-nine names that have been associated with God, including merciful, compassionate, just, beneficent, wise. In this, Islam shares much with Christianity and Judaism.

God, however, is also believed by Muslims to be completely and absolutely different from creation. Traditional Islamic theology emphasizes the radical separation between God, who can only be known from revelation, and creation, which can be known through human reason. Thus, while God’s existence can be recognized from the beauty and greatness of creation, only laws based in revelation can reflect God’s will. Historically, Muslim theologians have rejected the possibility of natural law.

Catholics find this understanding of the separation between God and creation to be contrary to the Bible. God is revealed in the sacred Scripture and in the Person of Jesus Christ as a Trinity, that is, One God in Three Persons. At the very heart of God's revelation is the Perfect Communion of Persons to which we are all invited. Every baptized person is called to share in the life of the Holy Trinity in a real way... "[T]he whole Christian life is a communion with each of the divine persons, without in any way separating them.... The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity."<sup>16</sup>

Human beings are drawn into this relationship in a special way because we are created in the image of God. Catholics recognize that it is our capacity for reason that both places us in a unique relationship with God and demands a particular responsibility to act in accordance with God's will and to care for all of creation. In this way, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, our communion with God and creation is reflective of the Holy Trinity.

Here again, is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam. Central to Muslim theology is a rejection of anything that can lead to idolatry, since nothing is like God, not even human reason or the order of creation. According to the *Qur'an*, humans are created to serve God and submit to God's will. In its account of the creation of human beings, the *Qur'an* relates that God has a special relationship with humanity. He has communicated with them through revelations in every generation, and even commanded the angels to bow down to the man he created from clay. Yet, Muslims deny the notion that humans were created in the image of God and instead emphasize their creatureliness.

Islam is the religion of "submission" to God. The name "*muslim*" means "one who submits."<sup>17</sup> In daily prayer, Muslims reaffirm their

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<sup>16</sup> CCC §§259-260.

<sup>17</sup> The root of the Arabic word *islam* is *s-l-m*, which means to be safe, to preserve, to surrender, or to be blameless. When one submits oneself to God, one finds safety and is blameless in the eyes of God. The related word, *salam*, refers first to the peace and safety that one finds in submission to God, and secondarily to the peace that flows from submission. It is incorrect to say that *islam* itself means "peace" in the general sense that word is used today.

commitment to hold nothing equal to or above God and to submit to his commands. In numerous verses of the *Qur'an*, Christians are admonished to abandon doctrines that lead to belief in the Trinity, Incarnation, or anything else that might imply that God is like creation.<sup>18</sup> This teaching of Islam is very important for understanding the relationship between God and the prophets.

### *The Succession of Prophets*

Even though Muslims believe that God is completely different from his creation, they acknowledge he continually sustains it and cares for it. A sign of God's concern for humanity are the prophets he has sent throughout history to communicate his will. The *Qur'an* emphasizes that God has not left a generation without a clear revelation so that all people have an opportunity to fulfill God's law.

Islam recognizes many figures of the Torah as prophets sent by God with a message. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Isma'il, Elijah, Jonah, Lot, Jacob, Aaron, Solomon, Joseph, Zachariah, and many others. Some are mentioned specifically as having received a revelation – the Torah given to Moses, the Psalms given to David, the Gospel to Jesus. At the end of this long line of prophets God has sent the final prophet, Muhammad, with the message of the *Qur'an*. As a consequence, Muslims, like Christians, do not expect any new prophets or revelations until the End Times.<sup>19</sup>

Although some of the prophets are singled out in the *Qur'an* as exceptional (God spoke directly to Moses, Jesus was conceived through God's Spirit), it emphasizes that they were simply good and honest men – human beings who ate, drank, and died human deaths. They are in no way to be regarded as divine or even as capable of performing

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<sup>18</sup> See for example *suras* 4:171, 5:116-118, 9:30, etc.

<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that orthodox Muslims reject the claims of those Islamic sects who have accepted the visions of later self-proclaimed prophets. Among the most widespread of these are the Nation of Islam (popular among African Americans), the Bahais, and several syncretistic African Islamic religions.

miracles on their own. Any miraculous works that are associated with the prophets were done only with God's permission.

As mentioned above, Islamic theology holds that the revelations that have been sent down by God to the prophets are copies of the original Word of God preserved in heaven. However, as time passes, through the wickedness and failings of human beings, the messages become distorted and forgotten. Therefore, God has sent down various parts of the revelation to correct, restore and confirm what has gone before. The *Qur'an* commands that differences from itself in the revelations are to be rejected, since the messages are always the same for every true prophet.<sup>20</sup>

With the sending down of the *Qur'an*, Muslims believe that the final revelation was given to the last and greatest of the prophets. For this reason, they give Muhammad the title "Seal of the Prophets," reflecting the belief that none will come after him.

According to tradition, this was verified by an experience that is often referred to as Muhammad's Night Journey. Some time after he had begun to receive messages, Muhammad had another vision in which he was carried through the night on a winged horse to Jerusalem. There he met other prophets (including Jesus) and was put to a test by an angel. He succeeded in proving his worthiness and was recognized by the others as preminent. Later, he was led through the heavens until he was greeted by Abraham, whom Muhammad recognized as being like himself.

Although this vision is not considered to be a part of the revelation of the *Qur'an*, it is foundational for Muslims. It establishes the preeminence of Muhammad as the final and greatest of the prophets, who is recognized by all other prophets including Abraham and Jesus. It is also the basis for the Muslim claim to Jerusalem as the third most Holy City for Islam. The Mosque of Umar (the Dome of the Rock) is built on what is believed to be the site of Muhammad's

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<sup>20</sup> E.g., *Sura* 42:13-15.

experience there. Its position on the Temple Mount symbolizes the belief that Islam has superseded Judaism and Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to recognize here that Muslims do not consider their religion to be a young or new religion, but rather *a return to the original religion*. The central teaching of the *Qur'an* is that God is One and commands worship of Him alone and observance of certain laws. This same message has been sent by different prophets at various times, but the purpose is always the same – to call human beings back to a proper relationship with God. Thus, according to Muslim theology, God's will can be known to anyone who seeks it in the revelation, and those who refuse it will be judged on the Last Day.

### *The Last Judgment and Reward and Punishment*

Like Christians and Jews, Muslims await the coming of the end of the world and the final judgment. At that time, God will raise all people from the dead and reunite their bodies with their souls. Then they will stand before God's throne to be judged according to their good and evil deeds and justly rewarded or punished. The *Qur'an* states that at that time no one will be able to hide what he or she has done. Yet, God is supremely just and benevolent.

For Muslims, among the most important names that are given to God are “merciful” and “compassionate.” In fact, every *sura* (except *Sura* 9) begins with the prayer “In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate and Most Merciful.” As the omniscient and omnipotent Creator of all things, nothing can occur apart from God's will. Consequently, Islam has a much more limited acceptance of free will than is found in Christianity or Judaism.

Orthodox Islamic theology has traditionally held that God created human beings as creatures with limitations and a limited free will. Muslims reject the notion of a “fall” from perfection and original sin. Creation (with the good and evil found there) is as God intended

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<sup>21</sup> Also on the Temple Mount is al-Aqsa Mosque, which was built on the sight of what is believed to be Solomon's Temple. Muslims revere it as the place in which God made his Covenant with Abraham.

it, even when it is mysterious to us. This is in harmony with the *Qur'anic* view that human beings are neither made in the image of God (which could lead to idolatry), nor are they like God in any other way. Instead, the *Qur'an* emphasizes that God's absolute power over creation allows human beings to choose to follow his will or not.

The problem of free will is perhaps the most difficult in Islamic theology and philosophy, and there are many different opinions on how it is to be understood. However, most orthodox views lean in the direction of God's total knowledge and control over human history, and therefore in favor of some form of predestination. Nonetheless, this does not in any way limit God's mercy and justice. God is known as beneficent and one who forgives those who repent. The act of belief is one of ultimate trust in God who rewards and punishes justly. For the devout Muslim, this trust takes the form of obedience to the divinely revealed will of God.

The reward and punishment for good and evil deeds expected by Muslims is generally much more concrete than that awaited by Christians. The *Qur'an* describes heaven and hell not as states, but as actual places where creaturely desires will be fulfilled or withheld. The emphasis is on God's reward and punishment of creatures as *creatures*. For this reason, heaven is depicted as a beautiful garden oasis filled with fabulous food, drink and other sensual pleasures, while hell is a place of evil and torture. Those who have rejected God and his prophets will suffer the eternal penalty, those obey God's will receive the rewards due to them.

### *Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an*

For Muslims, the last and greatest of the prophets was Muhammad. However, several other prophets play a central role in Islamic belief. Abraham is considered to be the father of the Arabs, Moses is the only person who has spoken directly to God. But Jesus (Isa in Arabic), the prophet who preceded Muhammad, is recognized as having a special relationship to God.

According to the *Qur'an*, Jesus, the son of Mary, is the Messiah whom the Jews expected. His story begins with the life of his mother.

Mary is the subject of an entire *sura* and is the only woman mentioned by name in the *Qur'an*. At her birth, her father, Imran,<sup>22</sup> dedicates her to God and she is eventually sent to assist her relative, Zacharias, who is the keeper of a shrine. There, God chooses her to be the mother of his prophet, Jesus, and casts his “spirit” into her. At Jesus’ birth, Mary flees to the desert where God cares for her, sending food and drink to sustain her and the child.

Because the father of Jesus is not known, Mary is accused of immorality. In one of the accounts of Jesus’ childhood miracles, Jesus speaks from the cradle defending her honor, saying that he is a prophet who has come with the Gospel.<sup>23</sup> God has blessed him and commanded him to honor his mother, to be steadfast in prayer and to give alms to the poor. In another *sura*, Jesus emphasizes that both he and his mother are honorable and pure, even though they are but human servants of God.

Other stories of Jesus’ life are scattered throughout the *Qur'an*. He is depicted as one who performs miracles with God’s permission, whose disciples request a sign in the form of a table set with food (perhaps a reference to the Eucharistic meal), and as a prophet who confirms the Torah, but corrects distortions found in it. Along with several other Old Testament prophets, Jesus predicts the coming of Muhammad after him. Jesus also commands Christians to cease in saying that God is three and that he is divine. These Christian teachings are held to be direct violations of the prohibition of polytheism and idolatry. At the Last Judgment, he is expected to bear witness against those who say that he is God.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the *Qur'anic* account of Jesus’ life and that of the New Testament is its denial of his death on the cross and therefore of the resurrection. According to the *Qur'an*, the Jews who intended to kill Jesus did not succeed, but “it only appeared so to them.” Tradition has proposed several

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<sup>22</sup> According to commentators, this is the father of Moses and Aaron. Apparently they have identified Mary with Miriam of the Old Testament.

<sup>23</sup> Many of the miracles associated with Jesus in the *Qur'an* are similar to those found in the apocryphal gospels, which may indicate the beliefs of the Christians who were living in Arabia at the time of Muhammad.

interpretations of this difficult verse, but the most widely accepted is that God made someone else (another disciple or Judas) look like Jesus who was then crucified in his place. Because God loved Jesus so, he saved him from death by taking him immediately to heaven.

A further difference is the claim that Jesus promised that another prophet would be sent after him whose name would be Ahmad.<sup>24</sup> The statement, found in *Sura* 61:6, forms the basis for the argument that Muhammad is the last and final prophet.

Both Jesus and Mary are held in very high esteem in Muslim piety – Mary was chosen by God to be the honorable mother of Jesus, the expected Jewish Messiah and prophet of God. The Jews slander Mary and reject Jesus, even attempting to kill him. Christians, on the other hand, are described as having exaggerated in their religion by making Jesus and his mother into gods, while at the same time casting off dietary restrictions and other divine commands.

This assumption underlies the Islamic understanding of the links among the three religions and has directly influenced Islamic law on some matters. The most obvious example of this is in the secondary status in society given to the “People of the Book” in *Shari‘ah*. Although they are recognized as having received a revelation from God, their perceived errors in interpretation and practice are used to justify the preference given to Muslims before the law. Thus, Jews and Christians may continue to practice their religion in a limited way, but not gain converts or increase their influence in Islamic society.

### *People of the Book*

The relationship between Muslims and Christians and Jews is not a major theme of the *Qur’an*, but the issue has continued to grow in importance in the modern world, and so is of great interest for Catholics today. From the very beginning, Muslims have lived in close

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<sup>24</sup> This is apparently based on a misunderstanding of the Syriac word for *paraclete* found in John’s Gospel, accepting the traditional meaning of the word as ‘comforter’ or ‘advocate.’ Christians at the time of Muhammad dismissed the claim, but later Muslim writers continued to argue that the Gospel had been corrupted and that it is related to the name ‘Muhammad.’

proximity with non-Muslims. In fact, certain areas of the Muslim world have always been home to large populations of Christians (and significant Jewish communities) who fell under the jurisdiction of Islamic law until they were colonized by Europe. Their continued presence has led to a developed theology of the relationships between the three religions.

As seen above, Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last in a long line of prophets who were instruments of God, mediating God's Word through ecstatic experiences. Those religious communities that received these messages are recognized in the *Qur'an* as "People of the Book," that is, peoples who have possessed an authentic copy of the divine scripture. Among those specifically mentioned are the Jews and Christians (as well as an unidentified group called the Sabaeans).

Because of their special relationship with God and his prophet Abraham, these monotheists are granted particular rights and privileges in the *Qur'an* and in Islamic Law. So long as the People of the Book paid the required tax and stayed within the bounds prescribed for them by the law, they lived in peace with their Muslim neighbors, practicing their religions with some restrictions.<sup>25</sup>

In general, Christians and Jews continued to flourish in parts of the Arab empire, sometimes gaining positions of great influence and accumulating wealth through trade. Compared to the fate of religious minorities in Europe, those of the Muslim world lived well under the protection of the law. One should note, however, that jealousy, the quest for power and religious zeal have led to the destruction of property, and enslavement and killing of conquered peoples even in best of the times. Incidents of violence and persecution of Christians

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<sup>25</sup> Although Islamic law generally only prescribes harsh penalties for non-Muslims for crimes such as insulting the Prophet or his family, murder of a Muslim, proselytizing Muslims, marrying Muslim women and other serious violations, other restrictions have been enforced in varying degrees over the centuries. These include limitations on public display of religious symbols and ceremonies, building and repair of religious buildings, and even restrictions on property ownership and dress. The last of these are not prescribed in the *Qur'an* but have their roots in the earliest customs of the Islamic community.

and Jews do occur, often justified with the condemnation of the People of the Book in the *Qur'an*.

The protection granted to the People of the Book is based on an assumption of preference given to Muslims. Although monotheists are accorded certain rights in the *Qur'an* and law, neither Christians nor Jews are granted equality with Muslims. Both of these religious communities are portrayed in the *Qur'an* as having altered their scriptures and strayed from the original message sent to them by God. As a consequence, they are believed to have lost some of the privilege given to monotheists. In particular, the Jews are said to have manipulated dietary laws and rejected prophets (Jesus and Muhammad), while the Christians have added teachings (Trinity and divinity of Jesus) and hidden predictions of Muhammad's coming.

The *Qur'an* is understood by Muslims to have come to correct these distortions. When Christians and Jews refused to accept it, they forfeited some of the rights granted to true believers. The Islamic law commands that they be allowed to practice their own religions with some limits in the hope that they will eventually return to "proper" Muslim worship of the One God.

Such systems of privilege for particular classes within society were common and accepted for centuries. But today this structure has come into conflict with contemporary expectations of democracy and religious freedom. To a great extent the problem of religious minorities in the Muslim world is symbolic of the multitude of difficulties facing those who would like to reestablish Islamic law in their countries today, and lies at the center of the concerns of many Muslim radicals.

## THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE

### *Early Conquest*

The Arab conquest of the Mediterranean world had begun already in Muhammad's lifetime. Under his military leadership, the Arabian Peninsula came under his control and the armies began to push northward to Syria and the borders of the Sassanian (Persian) Empire. After his death, the expansion continued, and Arab armies quickly took Syria, Egypt,

Palestine, Iraq, and Persia. Within a few decades they had reached Spain in the West and the far edge of the Persian Empire in the East. Only at the Battle of Poitiers in 732 was Charles Martel able to defeat the Arab armies and stop their advance into Europe. It would take over seven centuries to regain all of France and Spain from Muslim control.

Thus, within a century after Muhammad's death, the Arab empire extended from France to the Indus River. This tremendous military success was held by the early Muslims as a sign from God that the revelations to Muhammad were true – they believed it could only have been with the help of God that a small desert tribe would inherit the known civilized world.

### *Religious Taxation*

The early expansion of the Arab empire was not seen by Muslims primarily as a means to spread Islam. The intention was instead to extend political control over a large territory. According to the *Qur'an*, forced conversion is strictly prohibited (“*There is no compulsion in religion; true guidance has become distinct from error.*” *Sura 2:256*) and many of the earliest caliphs took this very seriously.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, Arab armies initially offered the citizens of conquered cities the two options of converting to Islam or of paying a special tax, called the *jizyah*, in return for certain privileges, which included the right to worship as a Christian or a Jew. This followed the Arab tribal custom of clientship by which a weaker or subjugated client tribe paid tribute to a stronger tribe for protection. Both parties had certain recognized rights and duties, and the agreement was seen to be advantageous to all. Yet, it

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that this command has been variously interpreted over the centuries. There are several *hadith* regarded as authentic that lay down harsh punishment for those who have abandoned Islam for another religion. Such conversion, even to another monotheistic faith, is considered apostasy and is punishable by death. Although Jews and Christians were granted limited safety, legal infractions (such as the public display of religious symbols) could be used to revoke the protection. This accounts for the frequent imprisonment and execution of those accused of ‘defaming Islam or the Prophet.’ Such limits on religious freedom are of great concern to the Catholic Church.

was understood that the dominant tribe (in this case those who converted to Islam) received privileges not granted to clients.

For those who resisted the Arab conquest, punishment was harsh. It is known that numerous monasteries and churches were destroyed, and inhabitants of resisting cities were killed or taken into slavery. Cities that accepted the taxation system were generally left intact, and a minimal governing structure was established to collect the tax, giving a strong incentive for immediate surrender. Usually tribute was given to the conquerors. As part of the treaty, monotheists (particularly Christians and Jews) were allowed to practice their religion so long as it did not directly conflict with Islam; conversely they were not expected to fulfill military duties and certain other obligations required of Muslims. This general structure later became enshrined in Islamic law as a way to deal with non-Muslim minorities living in the empire.

### *The Golden Age of Islam*

The Arab armies spread through the Sassanian, Roman and Byzantine empires. In each major city, they left minimal government personnel and usually relied on the infrastructure that was already there. This meant that local languages, religions and cultures continued relatively unaffected for some time after the conquest. It was only with the rise of the ʿAbbasid caliphs to power that significant changes began to be felt.

The ʿAbbasid dynasty gained control of the caliphate in the year 750 and held it until the Mongolian invasions in 1258. Under their guidance, the empire began to more clearly reflect the ideal society envisioned by Muhammad. Among the many policies they developed and enforced, perhaps the most significant were the insistence that Arabic be recognized as the official language of the empire, and that Islamic law, *Shari'ah*, be observed. The ʿAbbasids also enforced equality among all Muslims, regardless of race or social class, and granted them a wide range of privileges. In addition, certain occupations, especially government positions, were now reserved to Muslims, giving encouragement to non-Muslims to convert.

The general stabilization of society under the ʿAbbasid caliphs allowed all aspects of culture and religion to flourish. This period (during which Europe was struggling after the collapse of the Roman Empire) is seen as the Golden Age in the Islamic world. Scholarship thrived and cultural streams came together in the major cities of Baghdad, Kufa, Basra, Alexandria, Damascus, Isfahan and Nishapur, and in Spain. Consequently, advances were made in every aspect of life – medicine, agriculture, astronomy and astrology, mathematics, theology, philosophy, law, and so on. In many of these fields knowledge developed in the Muslim world was not surpassed in Europe until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

At the beginning of the ʿAbbasid period, the vast majority of those living in the Arab empire were not Muslim. But as the empire became more established and more incentives were added for conversion, significant portions of the population began to accept the new religion. In addition, some of the local authorities increased the taxes levied on non-Muslims to a level that strongly encouraged those who did not wish to convert to emigrate. Often these were wealthy landowners who chose to resettle in the Byzantine Empire.

By the eleventh century, most large cities in Asia Minor counted Muslims as their majorities, although significant Jewish and Christian populations were still found throughout Muslim dominated lands. This continued to be the case until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when huge numbers of Christians and Jews began to emigrate to Europe and North America.

### *The Crusades and the Mongolian Invasions*

Whereas Christians in the East were well aware of the beliefs and practices of their Muslim neighbors, those in Europe had had very minimal contact with Islam after the defeat of the Arab armies at Poitiers (the exception to this was in Muslim Spain). Travelers to the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Land returned with some news, but the limited knowledge of Islam and Eastern Christianity in Europe was often distorted and inaccurate. At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the first of a series of wars was initiated by the papacy for religious and political purposes.

The actual circumstances surrounding the beginning of the First Crusade are still somewhat mysterious. According to medieval sources,

several factors apparently contributed to Pope Urban II's decision to encourage armies to march to Jerusalem in 1095.<sup>27</sup> First, although expansion of the Islamic empire had slowed by the ninth century, battles continued to be fought along its borders, particularly with Christian Byzantium. The goal of Muslim leaders for four centuries had been to capture Constantinople. Several Christian emperors had appealed to the European powers previously for help, but their pleas went unheard. Now, the appearance of the Seljuk Turks, who had converted to Islam, made the situation more pressing.

Second, feudal ideals led young Christian noblemen to identify the occupation of the Holy Land by Muslims as dishonor to their supreme Lord, Jesus Christ. As a result, many saw it as their duty to God to recapture Jerusalem. They firmly believed that death at the hands of 'God's enemies' would be rewarded by the remission of sins.

Finally, renewed interest in pilgrimage and the veneration of the relics of saints in popular piety caused increased travel to the Holy Land. Although claims of violence to pilgrims may have been exaggerated, the road to Jerusalem was dangerous and many people were killed en route.

Pope Urban argued that Christian armies were needed to reconquer the Holy Land to make it safe for pilgrims and to stop the expansion of the Muslims into Byzantium. The pope probably also hoped that the distraction of a foreign war would put an end to the bloody battles continually erupting between European noble families, as well as gain land and wealth for the papacy in the East. Ultimately, though, the Crusades proved a disaster for all sides.<sup>28</sup>

Although the Crusades were launched with the blessing of the Church, it is clear from historical evidence that Church authorities had very little control over those who set out immediately for Jerusalem.

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Urban's address in Clermont has not been preserved, and later accounts give conflicting information about its content. This has made it difficult to separate facts from legends surrounding the beginnings of the Crusades.

<sup>28</sup> An excellent book outlining the reasons and effects of the earliest Crusades is: Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (2005). Also useful is Jonathan Phillips, *The Fourth Crusade and the Sack of Constantinople* (2004).

The First Crusade reached the Holy Land in 1099. Eyewitness accounts report that Eastern Christians and Jews were slaughtered along the way by uncontrolled armies and camp followers who believed that they were heretics, in spite of attempts by local bishops to stop them. This tragedy greatly contributed to the division between Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics that continues to exist today. In Jerusalem, many were killed indiscriminately on both sides when the Crusaders encountered fierce resistance.

In the following centuries, several more crusades were launched, but the minimal gains of the armies had no lasting effects. Throughout this period, more peaceful movements led by missionaries (especially the Franciscans) attempted to convert the Muslims by preaching the Gospel. These efforts were not successful, but did result in the spread of more accurate information about Islam among European intellectuals.

In 1187, the famous Muslim general, Salah ad-din (Saladin), took the areas gained by the Crusaders and the European attempt to reclaim the Holy Land came to an end. Saladin's magnanimity in the capture of Jerusalem became legendary when he allowed the nobility to leave the city unharmed in return for ransom. His actions have been contrasted in some historical accounts with the brutality of the Crusaders. This should be seen, however, within the context of the times. Both sides accepted and practiced the cruelties of war – destruction of cities, rape and plunder, enslavement of the conquered and execution of prisoners – as the norm. This is not to excuse or justify the actions of any of those involved, but rather serves to remind us of how easily we can be blinded by our cultural circumstances to the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

In many ways, the Crusades were regarded by Muslims of the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a temporary setback. Later, however, when European powers began to colonize parts of the Ottoman Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Crusades were identified as the beginning of Western intrusions into Muslim lands and attempts to suppress Islam.

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<sup>29</sup> The apology of Pope John Paul II on March 12, 2000 for the Crusader sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade is a clear reminder to us that our sinfulness can cloud our response to the crises of our times and lead us to acts contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In reality, a more pressing problem for the Islamic world came with the invasion from the northeast of the Mongolians and the destruction they inflicted. Hulaga Khan, the grandson of Gengis Khan, and his armies quickly captured the capitol of Baghdad, bringing the 'Abbasid caliphate to a close in 1258. This date is considered to be the end of the Golden Age of Islam.

### *The Medieval and Colonial Periods*

While Muslims in the East struggled with decline and foreign invaders, a brief but important cultural flowering was occurring in Islamic Spain. It was through interaction between Muslims, Christians and Jews, especially in the area of translation of ancient texts and commentaries, that the fruits of Muslim scholarship entered Europe. Until 1492, with the fall of Granada and the beginning of the Reconquest, southern Spain had been home to large populations of Muslims (Moors) and flourishing Jewish communities. It was here that European interest in Greek culture was born, setting the Renaissance into motion. However, by the seventeenth century, nearly all of the Muslims of Europe had been forced back into North Africa.

In Asia Minor, the caliphate was eventually claimed by another group of invaders, the Ottoman Turks, who drove back the Mongolians and rapidly converted to Islam. The Ottomans finally succeeded in capturing Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453 after several bloody sieges. There they established a new Islamic sultanate, which, along with the Persian Safavid Empire and the Indian Mughal Empire, encompassed an area stretching from Eastern Europe to India. The fall of Constantinople and subsequent Islamization of the city greatly weakened Christianity in the East. Churches were turned into mosques, restrictions placed on public worship, and Christians lost nearly all political and social influence.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The effects of the capture of Constantinople are still felt today. It was for this reason that Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Turkey at the end of November 2006 was so carefully watched by the world. The Holy Father's meeting with Orthodox leaders during the visit drew attention to the very difficult situation of many Christian communities in Turkey, in spite of their ancient roots there.

The beginning of the dissolution of the great Islamic empires came with the defeat of the Ottomans by the Hapsburgs at Vienna in 1683. In the next two centuries, large areas previously under Islamic rule and law became colonies of the British, French, Dutch, Italians and Portuguese. For many Muslims, this was a religious as well as a political crisis. Previously, the Islamic world had paid little attention to the peoples beyond its borders. Now, some questioned whether subjugation and rule by unbelievers was punishment from God. Responses to this question took many forms and are the source of much of the turmoil in the Middle East today.

## ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD

### *Responses to Modernity: Secularism and Revivalism*

The modern reaction to the loss of control over areas that have been under Muslim rule has been varied. Some Muslims were immediately convinced that modernization in the form of imitating Europeans was the best response to the new situation. This led to the institution of centralized bureaucracies and secularization of the legal system. Especially in North Africa, French or British law was adapted to accommodate Islamic marriage and inheritance laws. The complete failure of the reforms, however, only resulted in revolts by those interested in restoring Muslim domination and a return to pure Islamic law.

In the early twentieth century, the Muslim community suffered another blow when the caliphate was abolished in 1924 with the Treaty of Lausanne. In the decade after the First World War, many Islamic areas were occupied by foreigners as the transition was made from colonial governments to modern states. But these were soon caught up in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Several countries became pawns as monarchies and dictators were held in place by the superpowers. The continual interference of foreign powers in areas that in Muslim minds rightfully belonged under Islamic rule became symbolized in the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the consequent displacement of Palestinians.

As Muslim countries began to lag even further behind economically and socially, movements for reform grew. Young men, often educated in Europe and America, sought a solution for the dismal situation of the Islamic world that would bring it back to its earlier position as a leading power. Some thought that the success of secular Turkey could offer a model. But others felt that only a complete religious reform would succeed. They rejected what they identified as Western secularism and materialism, and sought instead to revive Islam as a total and comprehensive way of life.

### *Islamic Revivalism*

Revivalist movements have taken many forms, but the most important today have their roots in two ideologies – the Wahhabiyya and the Muslim Brotherhood. Although they have different origins, they share much in their solutions for the ills of contemporary Muslim society. The Wahhabi movement was begun in Arabia in the eighteenth century by Abd al-Wahhab as an attempt to purify Islam and return to the ideal community instituted by Muhammad. The Wahhabiyya rejected all later legal and theological interpretations that did not strictly adhere to the practice of Muhammad.

What distinguishes the Wahhabiyya is their identification of Muslims who did not agree with them as unbelievers, despite the fact that this idea has received very little support in Islamic tradition. Through one of the initial followers, Muhammad Ibn Saud, the Wahhabiyya gained great influence in Arabia with the domination of the Saud family. Al-Qaida, is a particularly violent movement among the Wahhabiyya that has spread beyond Arabia.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a modern Egyptian movement that reached its high point in the 1960's with Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in 1966. The radical movement emphasized the righteous minority within a corrupt and ignorant society dominated by unbelievers. According to Qutb, the only way to overcome the oppressors was for all true believers to engage in armed struggle, *jihad*, against the repression of Islam.

After the Muslim Brotherhood was suppressed in Egypt, the ideas of Qutb continued to spread. Other revival and extremist movements have drawn on his writings to fashion a response to what they perceive as the anti-Islamic trends of secularism, materialism and feminism. Recent decades have seen revolutions in Muslim dominated areas, such as Iran and Afghanistan, which have attempted to remove all foreign influences. Other countries have moved towards establishing Islamic law since the end of the Cold War, much to the concern of the international community.

Another notable extremist movement is the Shi'ite Hizbullah. Although it is distinguished in origin from other movements, it shares an extreme anti-Jewish and anti-West ideology with them.

Extremist interpretations, although significant and influential, are not the only ones. There are Muslims who have begun the difficult task of bringing the *Qur'an* and tradition into dialog with non-Muslim ideas. In particular, some contemporary thinkers are searching the tradition for ways to make the previous distinctions between believer and non-believer more compatible with democratic ideals. These activities should be encouraged and protected wherever they are taking place.

### *In Sum*

The religion of Islam has undergone tremendous changes from its appearance in Arabia in the seventh century through its rise as a great world force. Today it claims a billion adherents. However, as other powers have gained dominance on the world stage, Muslims have been forced to reexamine their history in an effort to redefine their identity in the modern world. For many, this has been a painful process. The struggle to absorb aspects of modern ideology that are compatible with their beliefs while rejecting what is contrary is demanding. It is also a task that people of all religions continually face in the modern world.

For Muslims, two points have continually stood at the center of reform and renewal – the example of Muhammad and the *Qur'an*. In the practical realm, Muhammad has served as the model military leader, social reformer and religious prophet. For the origins and purpose of

Creation and humanity, however, Muslims look to the messages of the *Qur'an*. Therefore, let us now turn to the teachings of Islam.

## ISLAMIC LAW AND SOCIETY

### *The Qur'an and Sunna as the Foundation of Society*

Islam is a religion that emphasizes ordering one's life to conform to God's law. Muslims do not place a great deal of emphasis on adherence to particular doctrines – there is no official creedal statement recited in worship (Islam does not have an equivalent to a Nicene or Apostles' Creed). Rather, what identifies a person as a Muslim is his or her obedience to a particular set of divine laws. The body of Islamic law is called *Shari'ah*, meaning “way” or “path.” Muslim tradition has held that one can only be judged by his or her outward observance of the law, since only God knows what is in one's heart.<sup>31</sup>

The purpose of Islamic law is to create a complete environment claimed for Islam and submission to God. There is, consequently, no concept of the separation between religion and government in traditional Islam. Religion is understood as an inherent aspect of society and cannot be reduced to a private affair. Those who are not Muslims living within the realm governed by *Shari'ah* are provided for by the law and have the right to apply their own religious law in certain situations (such as marriage contracts and inheritance) when it does not conflict directly with *Shari'ah*.

Historically, Muslims have understood the world to be divided into three different “spaces” – the *Dar al-Islam* (“House of Islam”) includes all places living under *Shari'ah*; the *Dar al-Harb* (“House of War”) refers to what lies beyond the borders of the *Dar al-Islam* open to conquest; finally, the *Dar al-Sulb* (“House of Treaty”) includes those areas not practicing *Shari'ah* but which have valid treaties with Muslim governments.

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<sup>31</sup> For this reason, persecutions for doctrinal disagreements are almost unheard of in the Muslim community. In most cases, the followers of dissenters in early disputes eventually died out. The only major schism based on doctrinal differences is that between the Shi'a and the Sunni. The exception to this are the Wahhabiyya, who will be discussed below.

Although the Muslim world has changed dramatically since the end of the Ottoman Empire and European colonization, this worldview represents the context in which Islamic law developed and continues to exercise influence in those areas of the world where it is practiced.

### *The Hadith and the Sirah*

Islamic law has its basis in two important sources. The first of these is the *Qur'an*. Among the messages received by Muhammad, approximately eighty concern rules for structuring society. The vast majority of *Shari'ah* is based on the example of Muhammad. Although Muhammad is never held to be divine (Muslims do not even attribute miracles to him), as the last and greatest prophet chosen by God, he is believed to be the perfect model for all other human beings.

The first Muslims collected and preserved stories, called *sunnah* (customs), of Muhammad's life in great detail. These were passed down through oral tradition until the end of the eighth century when rulers became interested in establishing a uniform law code throughout the empire. At that time, the *sunnah* were organized into vast collections of *hadith* (reports), categorized according to topic. They cover every aspect of life, from ritual washing and preparing food to care and release of slaves, taxation, marriage, divorce, sale of property, and so on. The Sunni recognize eight authoritative collections and the Shi'a, one.

A second foundation for law is the biography of Muhammad. The earliest biography was written by Ibn Ishaq in the eighth century, the *Sirah Rasul Allah*. At least four other important biographies of Muhammad were written later. They are understood by Muslims to aid in the interpretation the *Qur'an* and provide a model for daily life of the *ummah* and the individual.

### *The Duties of Shari'ah*

Islam envisions a society of believers bound together by common practices and worship of the One God in contrast to relationships determined by tribal ties. Historically, community, called the *ummah*, considered the caliph ("successor") to be Muhammad's representative as military, social, and religious leader. However, since the dissolution of the caliphate in 1924, there is no single position of highest authority

in the Muslim community. This has left the *ummah* without a visible unifying symbol.

Following an age-old tradition, *imams* who are local leaders of mosques and schools lead the community. Muslims do not recognize a structured hierarchy of religious leaders; instead, *imams* rise to prominence because of their piety and ability to interpret the tradition. Legal decisions are made by *qadis* or *muftis*, who are trained specialists in *Shari'ah*. When their decisions are of interest to the wider *ummah*, they may be issued by any leader of a theological school in the form of a sermon called a *fatwa*.

*Shari'ah* can be divided into two types of laws – those concerning duties to God and those concerning duties to family and society. In areas of the world governed by *Shari'ah*, the two are fully integrated. For Muslims living in areas ruled by a secular law, the duties to God take on a special importance as an expression of unity with the worldwide *ummah*.

### *Duties to God – The Five Pillars*

The duties of every Muslim to God are summarized in the Five Pillars: the profession of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage. These five are not found together in the *Qur'an*, but are rather important practices that have been formulated based on the example of Muhammad.

**Profession of Faith** (*shahada*) One becomes a Muslim through the recitation of the statement: “There is no god but God and Muhammad is his Prophet.” This needs only to be said once, preferably before a witness, for a person to become Muslim – there is no formal process of catechesis. The profession is repeated in prayer and is considered to be the heart of Islamic belief.

**Prayer** (*salat*) Muslims pray five times a day facing the direction of Mecca. It is required of men and recommended for women if possible.<sup>32</sup> Daily prayer is preceded by washing of various parts of the body. Ritual

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<sup>32</sup> It is recognized that women have obligations to family and household that limit their ability to fulfill the requirements for prayer. For this reason they (as well as the sick, very old and very young) are exempt from daily prayer, although many choose to pray privately.

prayer is performed in a mosque or anywhere using a prayer rug and involves various postures along with recitations from the *Qur'an*. Friday prayer is obligatory for men and usually includes a sermon by an *imam* and study of the *Qur'an* and commentary texts.

**Fasting** (*sawm*) During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast to commemorate the sending down of the *Qur'an* to Muhammad. During this time no food or drink is taken between sunrise and sunset, with evenings being a time of celebration. At the end of the month, Muslims attend the mosque and give alms on the *'Id al-Fitr* (Feast of the Breaking of the Fast).

**Almsgiving** (*zakat*) All Muslims are required to pay a special tax on property above a minimum to support those in need (especially widows and orphans). This is assessed at the end of the year and distributed by religious authorities. Charitable giving beyond the tax is strongly encouraged and practiced by many Muslims

**Pilgrimage** (*hajj*) Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime is required if one has the means. Today it is possible for many Muslims and has become an important ritual that some repeat numerous times. The *kaba*, the shrine of the Black Stone now contained in the cube-shaped "House of God," has been an object of pilgrimage from ancient times. Today, only professed Muslims are allowed to enter the city of Mecca.

Today these Five Pillars bind Muslims throughout the world, expressing the core beliefs of what it means to submit to God – to profess faith in God, follow his guidance given in the *Qur'an*, recognize his prophets and care for the poor and needy.

### *Duties to Society – Women and Religious Minorities*

Muslims have generally insisted on a society in which the laws of God are fully integrated into daily life. The *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*, which reflect the patriarchal and tribal environment in which they appear, are believed by most Muslims to be the absolute foundation upon which law should be built. As a consequence, *Shari'ah* is a

patriarchal system of law primarily concerned with the preservation and protection of the family within society. Therefore, there is a great deal of interest in Islamic law for the rights of children and of spouses in marriage, just maintenance of family members, protection of inheritance, and provision for those who have lost their means of support (widows and orphans).

Modern critiques of *Shari'ah* for its inequitable treatment of women (particularly concerning polygamy and dress) and non-Muslims have obscured the tremendous advances it presented centuries before similar developments in European law. *Shari'ah* allows women to contract their own marriages, own and manage property, receive inheritances and to refuse an arranged marriage. Divorce is allowed but is strongly discouraged and is strictly regulated by law with prescribed financial obligations for care of the woman and any existing children. Polygamy is also limited by the requirement to provide for each wife and children equitably. Similarly, while non-Muslims are not equal to believers before the law, they received a degree of legal protection not enjoyed by religious minorities in Europe and other parts of the world until recently.

Nonetheless, because the *Qur'an* explicitly states that God favors men above women and gives men authority over them, most Muslim interpreters of *Shari'ah* have maintained the strict division between men and women and its resulting patriarchal structure. Today, more and more Muslim women are beginning to question this hierarchy, along with the validity of polygamy, the ease of divorce, arranged marriage, and other practices that have long been associated with Islam. To date, very little has changed within the *ummah*, and traditional customs are followed by most Muslims.

Rather, the desire to institute *Shari'ah* in areas where Muslims are the religious majority is on the rise. Historically, Muslim self-identity was closely tied to living in a state structured by Islamic law. This was lost with European and, later American, domination. The establishment of *Shari'ah* poses difficult problems today, especially those aspects of Islamic law that are in direct conflict with modern notions of human rights (particularly of the place of religious freedom and sexual equality).

Many of the more controversial interpretations of *Shari'ah* reflect local customs that became widespread, rather than a basis in the *Qur'an* or *hadith*. An example of this is the full veiling of women, which is probably based in a Persian interpretation of modesty rules and not on precedents set by Muhammad's wives. It has nonetheless become symbolic of scrupulous observance of *Shari'ah* for many Muslims and has become the center of conflicts with secular law.

These difficulties are the focus of legal scholars who are seeking for a way to adapt Islamic law to contemporary situations and expectations. There is often a great deal more flexibility within the law than is perceived by outsiders (and some traditionalists) and many scholars hope that modern interpretations can make *Shari'ah* a viable alternative to European and America law.

## OTHER PRACTICES

### *Sufism*

The Sufi tradition traces its roots to mystical experiences attributed to Muhammad, but it was only in the ninth century that a Sufi discipline began to be formulated. Previous to this, individual mystics, including women, engaged in practices intended to encourage mystical experiences and bring the person closer to God.

It is likely that Sufism has close connections to eastern Christian monasticism, with its emphasis on progress through a hierarchy of stages, mortification of the flesh, poverty, and repetition of special prayers. There are some important differences that make Sufism particularly Islamic. In keeping with the *Qur'anic* condemnation of celibacy, Sufis are usually married. Further, Sufis live in society, even when they seek to remain apart from it. In some places, Sufis have formed brotherhoods similar to monasteries, with entire families devoted to Sufi practices.

The emphasis in Sufi discipline is on love of God. According to traditional teaching, the Sufi is God's friend, and seeks to fulfill certain obligations as a sign of this friendship. Through constant remembrance of God (expressed through the repetition of short prayers), the Sufi

becomes the instrument of God to make the divine present for others. The greatest systematizer of Sufism, Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240), incorporated neo-Platonic views to describe the various stages through which one must pass to finally behold God as the ultimate Reality.

The Sufi emphasis on a mystical relationship between the human and divine has often been viewed with suspicion by more traditional Muslims. In particular, the role of mystical experience and liberation from the material world has been at the center of conflicts between Sufis and orthodox authorities. One famous Persian mystic, al-Hallaj, was executed because he had identified himself with God. His extremism led to the formulation of strict rules for the formation of Sufi students.

Sufism played an important role in Ottoman Turkish and African Islam, and was very popular in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today it is of less significance in the Muslim world, although some orders are still active in areas of Africa and Turkey.

### *Jihad*

The Muslim concept of jihad is perhaps the most confusing aspects of Islam for non-Muslims. The term means “effort” or “struggle,” and appears numerous times in the *Qurʿan* in various contexts. Tradition also supports different interpretations, some of which have dominated over others.

In order to understand the role of *jihad* in Islam, it must be acknowledged from the outset that Muhammad has always been revered by Muslims as a brilliant military leader and that the primary activity of the Muslim community in its first century was military expansion. In fact, the rapid conquest of (predominantly Christian) lands was widely held as proof from God of the truth of the revelations to Muhammad. Military *jihad* continues to be recognized as a legitimate and even required activity to defend Islam from those who wish to limit or destroy it. At the same time, rules concerning combatants are to be observed and indiscriminate killing is always forbidden.

It was only later that the focus shifted from the outward “military *jihad*” to the internal “spiritual *jihad*.” Especially with the rise in interest in mysticism, some Muslims began to emphasize a tradition that reports Muhammad as saying that the inner *jihad* against unbelief that every person experiences is more difficult than military *jihad*. Many Sufis made this struggle the center of their spirituality. Consequently, the spiritual *jihad* became an important part of the religious life of many Muslims.

However, in the past century, the perception that Islam is under attack from external, especially secularizing, forces has caused a revival of interest in military *jihad*, not for expansion but for defense. The tension between the desire of many Muslims to reestablish control over their own societies and implement *Shari‘ah* and the constraints put on them by historical circumstances and the international community has encouraged more radical elements to claim that they are engaged in *jihad*. There are serious questions about the legitimate calling of *jihad* by radical groups.<sup>33</sup> The majority of legalists agree that modern suicide attacks in the name of Islam do not constitute legitimate examples of *jihad*. Instead, Muslims are urged to promote and defend Islam through peaceful means.

## COOPERATION BETWEEN CATHOLICS AND MUSLIMS TODAY

Currently, the relationship between Muslims and Catholics is of special interest to the Church. For over thirty years, the Church has remained in fruitful dialogue with the leaders of various Islamic communities and has cooperated in a variety of endeavors with Muslims throughout the world.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was established in Rome to oversee interreligious activities of the Church. In 1988 the Secretariat was renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). Among its goals are the promotion of respect, mutual understanding and collaboration between

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<sup>33</sup> Some of the most important issues concern the absolute prohibition against suicide, who can call a *jihad* in the absence of a caliph, and the killing of non-combatants.

Catholics and members of other religions, and support for the study of religions. The PCID has a special section devoted to Islam and hosts, as well as participates in, numerous gatherings dedicated to improving the relations between Muslims and Christians. *Pro Dialogo*, a regular publication in English and French, makes documents, important speeches and addresses, and reports of the activities of the PCID available to the public.

The PCID also supports and provides resources for local bishop's conferences to encourage dialogue and cooperation on the local level. The Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops oversees and promotes activities to encourage better relationships between Muslims and Catholics in America.

### *Forms and Topics of Dialogue with Muslims*

As the Church has engaged in dialogue with members of other religions, we have come to the realization that dialogue takes place on many levels. In a document entitled *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*,<sup>34</sup> several forms of dialogue were identified. Most importantly, it is recognized that all Christians are called to the dialogue of life. Everyday life is the context within which one most often meets the followers of other religions, and it is here that the example of Christ demands an attitude of concern, respect and hospitality towards others. From this deep sense of Christian mission flows two other dialogues – that of works (collaboration in common projects) and of religious experience (sharing one's faith with others). Of interest to specialists is the dialogue of experts, which supports scholarly work and exchanges on particular theological problems (AC 28-35).

Not every person is called to all of these forms of dialogue, but all Catholics are called through baptism to engage in the dialogue of life.

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<sup>34</sup> *Document of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* (May 10, 1984), in: *Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 566-579.

Pope John Paul II emphasized this in his address to the Islamic leaders of Senegal:

But our commitment to do God's will leads us beyond the task of living together in harmony. Modern life has many problems. In dialogue, we who believe in the goodness of God have a special duty to address the problems of our people and search together for solutions which can make modern society more just, more humane, more respectful of the rights, dignity and human freedom of each individual.<sup>35</sup>

Since official dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Muslims has begun, several areas of disagreement, as well as promising areas of cooperation have been defined. It is impossible here to list all of them, but a few may be mentioned. Of particular concern for Muslims is the conflict between the Christian view of Jesus (as God incarnate) and God (as Trinity) and that presented in the *Qur'an*. They also question the effectiveness of the sacraments and the role of the Church both as a sacrament and an institution.

Christians, on the other hand, do not accept dietary restrictions, polygamy, and many other practices prescribed by Islamic law. There are also serious disagreements about missionary activity. Christians are called to be missionary (see Matthew 28:19ff.). Likewise, Muslims actively seek converts to Islam, yet Muslims are forbidden from converting to another religion. Those who do convert may be punished severely. Further, religious minorities are not granted equality according to *Shari'ah*.

*Nostra Aetate* officially recognized several areas of potential agreement with Muslims in Christian understanding of God, who is one, living, knowing, all-powerful. Muslims have a common reverence for the sacred Scriptures of Christians and each emphasize the importance of community and the efficacy of prayer. In many practical ways, Muslims and Christians cooperate in activities great and small to protect the dignity of the family, care for the poor and needy, and promote economic and social justice. These areas of cooperation

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<sup>35</sup> Dakar, February 22, 1992. *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 77.

continue to increase as members of both religions have recognized common ground in their responses to problems in contemporary society.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the historical differences and recent focus on divisions between Muslims and Christians, in many places the bonds uniting these two faith communities have in fact been strengthened since the Second Vatican Council. As Christians we are called to continue this task, healing divisions and working together to fulfill God's loving plan for every nation. Pope John Paul II emphasized this, saying that this is particularly true of the

bonds of dialogue and trust which have been forged between the Catholic Church and Islam. By means of dialogue we have come to see more clearly the many values, practices and teachings which both our religious traditions embrace: for example, our belief in the one almighty and merciful God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the importance which we give to prayer, almsgiving and fasting. I pray that this mutual understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims, and indeed between all religions, will continue and grow deeper, and that we will find still better ways of cooperation and collaboration for the good of all.<sup>36</sup>

This, indeed, is the prayer of the whole Church today.

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<sup>36</sup> "To the People of Pakistan," Karachi, February 16, 1981. *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 235.

## FOR FURTHER READING

- An Interpretation of the Qur'an. English Translation of the Meanings: A Bilingual Edition.* Trans. Majid Fakhry. New York: New York University Press, 2002.
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- Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples.* Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991.
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## GLOSSARY

<i>ayatollah</i>	High-ranking Shi'ah religious leader
<i>caliph</i>	“Successor” of Muhammad; leader of Sunni Muslims until 1924
<i>dhimmi</i>	Religious minorities who receive protected status according to Islamic law
<i>fatwa</i>	Formal legal decision generally issued by a mufti (an expert in Shari'ah)
<i>hadith</i>	Collections of the sunnah used to interpret the <i>Qur'an</i> that form the basis of Islamic law
<i>imam</i>	Leader of prayer; for Shi'ah, the title of the successors of 'Ali
<i>mufti</i>	A Sunni expert in Shari'ah
<i>mullah</i>	Local religious leader
<i>sheikh</i>	Tribal leader; for Sufis, head of an order
<i>Shari'ah</i>	Body of Islamic law based on precedent with an emphasis on communal consensus rather than on individual judicial opinion
<i>Shi'ah</i>	Muslims who believe leader of the ummah should be a member of Muhammad's family beginning with his daughter, Fatima, and son-in-law, 'Ali
<i>sunnah</i>	Muhammad's actions and sayings that are the basis for Islamic law along with the <i>Qur'an</i>
<i>Sunni</i>	Majority of Muslims (85%) who accepted the rule of a caliph not from Muhammad's family
<i>ulama</i>	Religious scholars or clergy
<i>ummah</i>	Islamic community

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra Toenies Keating is assistant professor of Theology at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island. She earned a License of Sacred Theology at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam in Rome, and a Ph.D. in systematic theology at the Catholic University of America. Her area of expertise is in the theology of Muslim – Christian relations, with a particular emphasis on theological exchange in the medieval period.

Dr. Keating has published numerous articles on aspects of medieval apologetics and has published *Defending the 'People of Truth' in the Early Islamic Period* (Brill, 2006). She serves as a consultant to The Holy See for the *Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims* at the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue.

What Catholics Should Know About Islam. Sandra Toenies Keating. The Knights of Columbus presents The Veritas Series.

“Proclaiming the Faith in the Third Millennium”. What Catholics Should Know About Islam. BY. S. The purpose of this booklet is to give a basic overview of the origins of the religion of Islam and its early history, as well as some of the central beliefs and practices of Muslims. In addition, several recent statements made by the Roman Catholic Church concerning its relationship to Muslims are presented here. This pamphlet makes no attempt to cover every aspect of Islamic beliefs, or of Catholic doctrine on other religions. People in the United States knew next to nothing about Islam or the Muslim world until the hostage crisis. So all of a sudden there was a rush to try to understand Islam, and as is so often the case in the initial phases of that rush, there was a lot of misunderstanding. Longstanding stereotypes made their way into the coverage in the attempt to explain what was happening in the world. I was taking some courses in Islam, and I was very intrigued by the disconnect between what was in the texts I read for the course and what I saw in the media. What are some of the most important things that Catholics should know about Islam? The five pillars of Islam are a good place to start. The first is the testimony of faith: "I testify there is no God but God" and "I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God."