Chapter 5

5

Muslim Traditions

Muslim

Traditions

Chapter Overview

Islam, the most recent of the three Abrahamic monotheistic traditions to develop (after Judaism and Christianity), was founded in Arabia during the seventh century CE. This tradition is based on the divine revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad (570CE–632CE) and recorded in the Qur’an in the period immediately following Muhammad’s death. As in the Jewish tradition, Islamic theology is explicitly monotheistic, stressing the power, unity, and immanence of God (known as *Allah*, Arabic literally meaning “the God”), to whom all beings must submit (*islam* in Arabic). Muslims (one who submits to God) can approach Allah through prayerful contemplation as well as the disciplined study of the natural world (which bears the imprint of God’s creative power).

The cornerstones of Islamic belief are summarized in the *shahadah* (“I bear witness that there is no god except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God”), which affirms both the unity of God and Muhammad’s special role in receiving the revealed truth. Though the Islamic tradition does recognize that all monotheistic religions worship the same god, going so far as to characterize five key figures (Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad) as messengers whose teachings are universally binding for humanity, it nonetheless suggests that Muhammad, as the Seal of the Prophets, represents the final messenger, whose message (as recorded in the Qur’an) concludes the chain of revelation and represents God’s ultimate revelation to human beings.

Although an understanding of the core theological beliefs upon which Islam is founded is important for studying the tradition, it is perhaps more imperative that someone exploring Islam for the first time grasp the emphasis that Muslims place on practice. Although reciting the *shahadah* in front of two Muslim witnesses is all that is technically required to become a Muslim, in actuality an individual will only be recognized as a Muslim if he or she lives out the various ritual practices enjoined of all members of the *ummah* (the worldwide Muslim community). Some of these obligations, such as prayer (*salat*), must be performed daily, others annually, such as almsgiving (*zakat*) and fasting during Ramadan, and others once in a lifetime (the *hajj* to Mecca). These “pillars” combine to form a set of practical obligations that help to constantly focus the adherent’s attention upon Allah.

The importance of praxis is also highlighted by the centrality of Islamic law (*shari‘ah*) in the tradition. Much like the Jewish rabbinical schools that developed the Mishnah and Talmuds, Islamic jurists engaged (and continue to engage) in detailed commentary of the Qur’an and *hadith* (texts detailing Muhammad’s exemplary conduct) in an attempt to glean principles of conduct that will help guide the lives of observant Muslims.

In this chapter, Amir Hussain provides an overview of the specifics of Muslim belief and practice, as well as the religion’s historical development. He begins with an exploration of the life of Muhammad, the formation of the *ummah*, and the division of the tradition into Sunni and Shi‘a over the question of succession, as well as commensurate developments in different schools of law and medieval philosophy. Hussain provides a survey of the Five Pillars of Islamic faith, ritual worship, social responsibility, and the performance of pious duties.

Hussain also explores the development of the Islamic religious sciences (practised by religio-legal scholars collectively referred to as “*ulamma*,” and the flowering of Sufism (Islamic mysticism) wherein women’s authority has been, historically, uniquely acknowledged. He also details the missionary expansion of the tradition throughout Europe, Arabia, Africa, and Asia through military conquest, trade, and proselytization. Hussain pays special attention to the ways in which this expansion led to interrelation, exchange, and conflict with European Christian polities.

Following a discussion of Islamic praxis and artwork with its unique non-pictorial emphasis rooted in the aversion of shirk (the association of God with anything else), Hussain concludes the chapter with an exploration of the challenges Muslims have faced in the post-colonial modern period, and the various Islamic responses to these challenges, including Islamic revivalism, reform, and secular nationalism.

Furthermore, Hussain presents a compelling depiction of the contemporary discussions taking place in Muslim communities (particularly in Western Europe and North America) regarding issues of gender, sexuality and equal participation in Islamic ritual practice. This conclusion encourages a more informed and critical engagement with the depictions and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam in Western media and popular culture. Equipped with a more nuanced understanding of Islamic history and the Muslim sacred story, we as scholars may make our own contribution to the public discourse, helping to clarify distortions and improve the tenor of the conversation.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* distinguish between a “prophet” who conveys a specific message to a specific people at a specific time and a “messenger” who delivers universally binding messages;
* understand Muhammad’s place in Islam as a Prophet and Messenger of God, but not a figure to be worshiped himself;
* recognize that the Muslim concept of a monotheistic, one true God (*Allah*) is held in common with Jews and Christians; however, in Islam the emphasis upon the absolutely unique nature of God makes taboo any association between God and another person or object;
* appreciate that Muslims place an overriding importance upon religious practice and ethical action;
* understand that Islamic law (*shari‘ah*) is the product of different historical communities of Muslims struggling with questions both practical and existential, regarding how to live an authentic Muslim life;
* know that Islam is a missionary religion and, therefore, Muslims are instructed to spread their faith for the sake of universal salvation;
* rememberthat the basic components of the Islamic faith, and the responsibilities of all Muslims, are expressed in the Five Pillars.
* recall that Islamic art is aniconic—deliberately avoiding images of personages.

Key Terms

caliph From the Arabic *khalifah* (“one who represents or acts on behalf of another”). The Caliph was the Prophet’s successor as the head of the Muslim community; the position became institutionalized in the form of the caliphate, which existed in various socio-political forms from 632 to 1924. (p. 252)

*Fatihah* The short opening *surah* of the Qur’an, recited at least seventeen times every day. (pp. 259-260)

*fiqh* Jurisprudence, or the theoretical principles underpinning the specific regulations contained in *shari‘ah.* (p. 266)

*hadith* The body of texts reporting Muhammad’s words and example, taken by Muslims as a foundation for conduct and doctrine; a *hadith* is an individual unit of the literature. (p. 265)

*hajj* The annual pilgrimage to Mecca. (pp. 262-264)

*halal* Ritually acceptable; most often used in the context of the slaughter of animals for meat; also refers generally to Muslim dietary regulations. (p. 310)

*haram* “Forbidden,” used especially in reference to actions; similar in its connotations to “taboo.” (p. 310)

*hijab* A woman’s veil or head covering. (p. 304)

Imamis (“Twelvers”) Shi‘is who recognize twelve imams as legitimate heirs to the Prophet’s authority; the last, in occultation since 874, is expected to return some day as the Mahdi. (p. 270)

Isma‘ilis (“Seveners”) Shi‘is who recognize only seven Imams; named after the last of them, Isma‘il, whose lineage continues to the present in the Agha Khan. (p. 274)

*jihad* Struggle in defence of the faith; some jihadsare military, waged in response to threats to the community’s security or welfare; others are spiritual, waged to improve moral conduct in society. (p. 294)

Ramadan The month throughout which Muslims fast during daylight hours. (pp. 260-262)

*salat* The prescribed daily prayers, said five times during the day. (pp. 258-260)

*shahadah* The Muslim profession of faith in God as the only god, and in Muhammad as God’s prophet. (p. 258 )

*shari‘ah* The specific regulations of Islamic law (jurisprudence, or theoretical discussion of the law, is *fiqh*). (pp. 264-265)

Shi‘a Muslims who trace succession to the Prophet’s authority through imams in the lineage of ‘Ali; the smaller of the two main divisions of Islam, accounting for about one-sixth of all Muslims today. (pp. 272-275)

*sunnah* The “life-example” of Muhammad’s words and deeds, based mainly on the Hadith literature; the primary source of guidance for Muslims. (p. 265 )

Sunnis Muslims who trace succession to the Prophet’s authority through the caliphate, which lasted until the twentieth century; the larger of the two main divisions of Islam, accounting for about five-sixths of all Muslims today. (p. 252)

*ummah* The Muslim community. (p. 310)

*zakat* The prescribed charitable tax; 2.5 per cent of each Muslim’s accumulated wealth, collected by central treasuries in earlier times, now donated to charities independently of state governments; except in some Islamic nations where it is still centrally collected (e.g.,. Pakistan); see also *sadaqah*. (p. 260)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. How was Muhammad’s prophetic message initially received by his fellow Meccans? What reasons might have motivated their response to Muhammad?
2. From a scholarly, historical perspective how was the Qur’an produced?
3. Why is the *sunnah* an important resource for Muslims? How is the authenticity of its content regulated?
4. What roles are open to women in Sufi practice? How does this compare with the position of women in mainstream Islamic practice?
5. The term *jihad* is often used in Western media without respect to its nuanced connotations. Provide a brief description of the concept of *jihad* which might help to elucidate its varied meaning for a Western audience.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you see any similarities between the “convivencia” (shared life) that characterized the interrelations of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in medieval Spain, and the inter-culturalism of contemporary North America?
2. How can the architecture of Islamic buildings be understood as an expression of Islamic beliefs?
3. Has your understanding of current world events within the context of geo-politics changed based on your study of Islam? Why or why not?
4. What might be some of the reasons underlying Islam’s appeal among North American converts?
5. What feelings do examples of Islamic art, such as calligraphy or geometric pattern designs, elicit within you? Is your reaction spiritual? Do you think that Islamic art can be appreciated from a purely secular perspective?

Research Paper Topics

1. How has the Islamic commonwealth established by Muhammad and his followers in Medina during the seventh century been used as a model, justification, and ideal for Muslim political institutions over time? Cite examples from Islamic history such as the caliphate, post-colonial Islamic nationalism, and theocratic reform movements. Provide clear comparative analyses.
2. Describe the normative methods of Qur’anic commentary (*tafsir*) employed by Islamic scholars. Describe and analyze any controversies within the community of Islamic scholars related to the use of different interpretive frameworks.
3. How has the principle of *zakat* shaped Muslims economic activities? Present a detailed examination of Islamic economic practices and provide an analysis pertaining to how the ethical injunctions of the Qur’an, and the Prophetic example expressed in the *sunnah*, has led to the development of a distinct Muslim economic worldview.
4. How has the philosophical legacy of classical Greece influenced the development of Islamic philosophy? Why is the relationship of Islamic philosophers to Greek sources of crucial importance to the history of European philosophy?
5. What is implied by the concept of the “closing of the gates of *ijtihad*”? Provide a clear argument either supporting the proposition that the “gates of *ijtihad*” are closed or an argument refuting it.
6. Describe and analyze the tensions which exist between Sufism and mainstream Islamic practice. What historical, cultural, and theological points of contention have strained the relationship between orthodox and mystical Muslims?
7. On what grounds can the Islamic religious tradition be described as a missionary religion? How has the Islamic impetus to preach the word of God been practised throughout history and what are some of the results of Islamic proselytization?
8. Compare and contrast two distinct forms of Islamic revivalism/reform (e.g., Wahhabis compared with the work of Muhammad Iqbal). Focus on the differences in ideological goals and methodological practice. Provide a summary of each figure’s, or movement’s, accomplishments and failures.
9. How was the experience of Islamic conquest different in the Indian subcontinent? How did the religious traditions that Muslim conquerors encountered there force them to adapt their style of governance and what effect did this encounter have upon the Islamic institutions that arose in this religio-political climate?
10. Describe and analyze the scope of Islamic law (*shari‘ah*). Provide a summary of the development of each legal school and explain the similarities and difference that exist between them. In what way do contemporary Muslims, particularly in non-Muslim societies, consult with Islamic legal experts and adhere to the injunctions of *shari‘ah*?

Additional Resources

*Journal of Islamic Studies* (Oxford Journals): Scholarly articles on a variety of Islamic subjects. Archived at <http://jis.oxfordjournals.org/content/by/year>

*Mission Islam*: An Islamic community website with resources for both Muslims and the general public. <http://www.missionislam.com/index.htm>

*Quran Explorer*: For reading and searching the Qur’an in Arabic, English, and Urdu: <http://www.quranexplorer.com/>

*Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet*: The site of PBS’s controversial documentary on the prophet Muhammad: <http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/>

*Virtual Hajj* (PBS): This website provides a virtual experience of the *hajj* pilgrimage: <http://www.pbs.org/muhammad/virtualhajj.shtml>

Armstrong, K. 2000. *Islam: A Short History*, New York: Modern Library.

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. When Muhammad first began to preach the content of the revelation he claimed to have received, his fellow Meccans greeted him with reactions ranging from simple disinterest to open hostility. For 12 years Muhammad struggled in his mission to spread the word of God as he understood it. The reasons for the Meccans’ rejection of Muhammad’s prophecy were likely rooted in various aspects of their politics, economy, and religious practices. Arabia in the seventh century was a tribal society and although Muhammad is said to have had a good and trustworthy reputation, he wielded next to no actual political power. Further, the Meccans’ polytheistic religious practices were well ingrained in their culture, and they had not seen fit to convert en masse to either of the other two monotheistic faiths (Judaism and Christianity) with which they would have been familiar. Finally, there were economic consequences that the Meccans would face in converting to a monotheistic religion and abandoning Mecca as a pilgrimage site for worshipers attending the festivals centred around the pre-Islamic Ka’ba, which housed an iconic collection of different statues and representations of a pantheon of gods and goddesses. (pp. 247-250)
2. The modern historical-critical understanding of the Qur’an is that it is an anthology of transcriptions pertaining to the recitation of prophetic sayings articulated by Muhammad over the course of 23 years (approximately from 609–632 ce). At the time of Muhammad’s death in 632 ce, it is believed that a number of his followers had committed his recitation (Qur’an) to memory, and that Muslims were well acquainted with their sacred story through an oral tradition. However, with the Prophet’s death the flow of revelation was closed and it became imperative for the community to consolidate his recitation in one official form. Thus, over the course of 20 years, and under the direction of the first three Caliphs, and official text was created based on an array of physical fragments of transcriptions recorded on different media, along with the oral tradition which would have still been strong. Because these fragments were recorded by various authors, and standard vowel marks were only added later, different readings of the same text were possible. The language in which the Qur’an was written is Arabic, and hence a critical reading of the Qur’an requires a proficiency in Arabic, as translations generally change the tone of the text which is central to the meanings conveyed within its *ayahs* (verses) and *surahs* (chapters). While Muslims regard the Qur’an as divinely revealed, secular scholars approach it as a historical document produced in a specific religio-cultural context. (pp. 255-256)
3. Although the Qur’an represents the ultimate authoritative scriptural source in Islam, many questions and problems related to quotidian life are left unaddressed in its passages. Hence, Muslims required another textual resource upon which to draw from in their endeavors to live a fully Islamic life. It was to meet this need that the Sunnah (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad were collected and recorded. The identification of Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets”, makes his life-example the best model available for Muslims confronting questions of what is permitted and what its prohibited in Islamic life. The *sunnah* is composed of *hadiths* (sayings) of the Prophet, and their authenticity is regulated by the ability to trace the chain of transmission of a given hadith back to an eyewitness of the event from the Prophet’s lifetime. Six collections of *sunnah* are commonly acknowledged as authoritative, and they all emerged within a few centuries of the Prophet’s death. (p.265)
4. Historically, women have occupied a great many authoritative roles within the Sufi tradition. Women Sufis have served as teachers of both men and women, and they have been accorded the status of *shaykhah* (masters of the mystical tradition) and venerated as saints. Rabi’a is the prototypical example of a highly regarded female religious figure within Sufism. Women within Sufism enjoy a degree of gender equality in worship and leadership which contrasts starkly to the place of women within mainstream Islamic practice; where women are segregated at worship, and are generally restricted to teaching and leadership roles which are exclusively related to female groups. (p. 281)
5. The Arabic term *jihad* translates as “struggle” and conveys two distinct meanings. In the first, and for Muslims the most important, sense *jihad* pertains to the inner struggle that all Muslims must undertake to live a more Islamic life and to meet the rigorous ethical standards set by the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet in the *sunnah*. In this respect, *jihad* is a self-critical activity requiring a constant consciousness of one’s actions and motivations within one’s respective social environment. In the second sense, *jihad* conveys the struggle to make one’s society more Islamic. This meaning is often appropriated in Western discourse and equated with “holy war.” Although there have been examples of this definition of outer struggle that culminated in armed insurrection, particularly in the period of resistance to colonial rule, outer *jihad* has historically been undertaken in the struggle to revive and reform cultural and social mores within traditionally Islamic societies, which have been subject to acculturation and secularization during periods of non-Islamic influence. (p. 294)