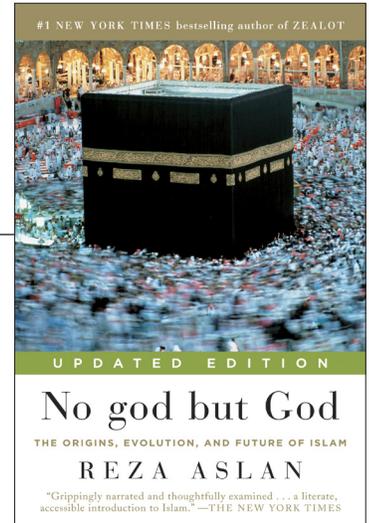




No god but God

The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam

by Reza Aslan



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“Wise and passionate . . . an incisive, scholarly primer in Muslim history and an engaging personal exploration.”

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“[Reza] Aslan offers an invaluable introduction to the forces that have shaped Islam [in this] eloquent, erudite paean to Islam in all of its complicated glory.” —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

• about the book •

In *No god but God*, internationally acclaimed scholar Reza Aslan explains Islam—the origins and evolution of the faith—in all its beauty and complexity. This updated edition addresses the events of the past decade, analyzing how they have influenced Islam’s position in modern culture. Aslan explores what the popular demonstrations pushing for democracy in the Middle East mean for the future of Islam in the region, how the Internet and social media have affected Islam’s evolution, and how the war on terror has altered the geopolitical balance of power in the Middle East. He also provides an update on the contemporary Muslim women’s movement, a discussion of the controversy over veiling in Europe, an in-depth history of Jihadism, and a look at how Muslims living in North America and Europe are changing the face of Islam. Timely and persuasive, *No god but God* is an elegantly written account that explains this magnificent yet misunderstood faith.

• about the author

REZA ASLAN is an acclaimed writer and scholar of religions whose books include *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* and *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. He is also the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (published in paperback as *Beyond Fundamentalism*), as well as the editor of *Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and three sons.

chapter summaries

prologue: the clash of monotheisms

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, many observers have suggested that Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis describes the contemporary world and that it might better be understood as a "clash of monotheisms." This assumption not only misunderstands Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also misunderstands the nature of religion itself.

Religion is not faith. It is the institutionalized system of rituals and beliefs, of scriptural interpretation, practices, and sacred history, which connect people who share a common faith.

This book looks to offer a synthetic account, by the most authoritative scholarly voices—Muslim and non-Muslim, past and present—of the rise of Islam in the political, social, economic, and religious context of seventh century Arabia. It argues that the original message of Islam was one of individual moral accountability and social egalitarianism. Over time, this message has receded against legalistic and sectarian institutionalization until pushed by the deep destruction of nineteenth-century colonialism to consider intellectual, philosophical, and other kinds of reforms.

chapter 1. the sanctuary in the desert: pre islamic arabia

The Ka`ba is a cubical black stone building that sits in the heart of Mecca, believed to have been first established by Adam and re-constructed by Abraham. In pre-Islamic times, it housed over 300 statues that represented the various gods worshipped by people around the Arabian Peninsula. It served as a major regional pilgrimage center.

Muslims describe the period before Islam as the "jahiliyyah," the age of ignorance, understood in terms of moral behavior and spirituality. Jahiliyyah Arabs were understood to be polytheistic, to worship idols, and to engage in immoral behavior with little concern for the moral impact of their actions.

Pre-Islamic Arabs believed that the gods spoke through Kahins, poets who were thought to speak with divine guidance or inspiration and, like oracles, were especially capable of predicting the future.

While the pre-Islamic era was broadly polytheistic, many people focused on one god or saw the gods as arranged into a hierarchy. Henotheism, the belief in and worship of one god without rejecting or denying the existence of other gods, is likely the better characterization of most Arabs around the time of Muhammad.

Pre-Islamic Arabia had a deep-rooted Jewish population whose members were highly integrated into political, economic, social, and religious life. Jewish and non-Jewish Arab tribes appear to have had mutually significant influence on one another, likely connected to their belief in common descent from Abraham (Jews through Isaac and Arabs through Ismail).

Christians were a more recent community and influence in pre-Islamic Arabia. Christian communities surrounded the Arabs in Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Abyssinia (Ethiopia), and Yemen. Several tribes had converted as a group, some acting as clients for the Roman Byzantine Empire. However, Christian communities in this era were deeply divided over theological issues, most notably the question of Jesus' nature.

The overall picture of pre-Islamic Arabia should be one in which henotheistic paganism intersected and overlapped with Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. This was a vibrant religious environment, with various monotheistic movements like Hanifism emerging as people sought new, meaningful ways to express their faith and develop their spirituality.

Muhammad was born into this rich religio-cultural mix in the 500s. Tradition identifies his birth year as 570 CE. His father died when he was a baby and his mother when he was a young child, so he was placed under the guardianship of his grandfather and then his uncle. As was customary, he was raised partly in the desert by nomadic relatives. The losses he suffered and his time with the Bedouin would later be cited as the source of his compassion for others, especially the vulnerable.

chapter 2: the keeper of the keys: muhammad in mecca

By Muhammad's time, the Quraysh tribe had dominated Mecca for nearly 300 years through their control of the Ka`ba, the annual pilgrimage and other religious rites associated with it, and the resultant pilgrim trade.

Scholars today debate the size and importance of Mecca as a trade entrepôt, with some considering it a major node in international trade networks and others questioning whether it attracted much trade at all. However, the presence of the Ka`ba and its collection of idols was an attraction that led to whatever trade economy did collect in Mecca.

As a sedentary, urban society, Mecca disrupted the more egalitarian social and economic practices of nomadic Bedouin life. Tribes were led by a sayyid or shaykh, who was chosen by the tribe in accordance with his abilities. It was neither an inherited nor a particularly powerful position. The tribe's military engagements were led by the qa'id, its religious affairs were overseen by a kahin, and disputes and other community issues were adjudicated by a hakam. While the tribe's members gave bay`a, or an oath of allegiance, to the shaykh, it was not a lifetime allegiance but depended upon his continuing to maintain the safety and stability of the tribe.

In Mecca, the concentration of personal wealth made possible by the pilgrimage economy seems to have weakened the traditional tribal structures, which in turn weakened their ability to protect fragile and marginalized members of the community. Economic inequality seems to have fostered social stratification, concentrating power in the hands of a small elite and creating what would come to be seen as an unjust, immoral social structure.

Muhammad, from a distaff clan, with no living parents or clear prospects due to his lack of family connections, would likely have been positioned among the less favored in Meccan society. But, as is well known to history, a woman named Khadija—wealthy, widowed, and from a prominent clan—hired him as one of her employees and later proposed to him. Theirs seems to have been a close and mutually respectful relationship, with several children, and Muhammad mourned deeply when Khadija died.

Still somewhat detached from Mecca's socio-economic structure, Muhammad had taken to meditating in a cave outside of Mecca. In 610 CE, he was visited by a voice and a presence that told him to "Recite!" Terrified, Muhammad returned home, where he was comforted by Khadija, who told him to take the message seriously. This began what Muslims consider the set of divine revelations transmitted directly to Muhammad via the Angel Gabriel, making him a prophet.

Islam distinguishes between prophethood and messengerhood. It considers God to have provided revelations to a series of men, starting with Adam and continuing through Muhammad. These prophets—including Abraham, Solomon, and other figures well known to the Judeo-Christian tradition—are charged with preaching the message of the revelation to their communities. However, some prophets are also called to be messengers to carry a complete scripture to their communities: Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Muslim tradition has often stated that Muhammad was illiterate and argued that his illiteracy was further proof of the veracity of the Qur'an: an illiterate man, it is argued, could not invent such a rich text. However, scholars argue that the idea of Muhammad as illiterate may represent a misunderstanding of the Qur'an's calling him a prophet for the unlettered, rather than personally illiterate. This fits with the Qur'an's argument that it is the first scripture for the unlettered (i.e. lacking in a set of divine revelations) Arab community.

The early revelations delivered to Muhammad focused broadly on religious and social themes: on the goodness and majesty of God and on the urgency of righting the moral wrongs of Meccan society—especially the mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable. Muhammad's role in this respect might best be understood as that of "warner:" that those who supported economic and social injustice would be punished for it by God.

Muhammad's message found few listeners in these early years, but those who did embrace it tended to follow a pattern. While some were from the vulnerable communities Muhammad preached about, many were younger members of wealthy and influential clans. Although his following was too small for his message to yet be considered a threat, the implications of an argument about morality and socio-economic justice were considerable.

In 613, Muhammad's charge seems to have shifted. In addition to his revolutionary social and moral message, the religious component was increasingly foregrounded. He began to emphasize the insistent, uncompromising oneness of God and the sin of polytheism. What became known as the shahada, the testimony of faith that "There is no god but God," shifted Muhammad's message toward a new theology. In doing so, it also brought his message into conflict with the Quraysh, for whom henotheistic monotheism was familiar, but universal monotheism was a religious and economic threat.

The Quraysh responded to Muhammad with a non-violent but socially and economically powerful rebuke: they "boycotted" his clan. While the boycott did not last long, it was replaced by increasingly hostile treatment to Muhammad's followers just as Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib and wife Khadija each died. With little prospect for improvement, Muhammad sent a large group of followers to Abyssinia (Ethiopia), to seek protection under the Christian emperor. This key moment—the first hijra, or migration of the community—reflected both their willingness to put religious bonds above tribal ones and reflected Muhammad's willingness to have co-believers live under non-Muslim rule.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian group returned to Yathrib, a town several hundred miles north of Mecca. Riven by internal conflict, the leaders of Yathrib invited Muhammad to come as shaykh and arbiter, someone who could restore the town to peace. Only a desperate town would have invited someone with a reputation like Muhammad's and only a small community in desperate need of sanctuary would have accepted.

chapter 3: the city of the prophet: the first muslims

The hijra in 622 CE marked a key moment in the coalescence of an early Muslim community. The Islamic calendar starts with this event rather than the birth of Muhammad or the start of divine revelation. It distinguished those who traveled with Muhammad as Muhajirun, emigrants from their natal town and family ties. Those in Yathrib who accepted Muhammad's message and embraced the nascent religion of Islam were known as Ansar, helpers.

The Medinan period became understood in Islamic history as the model for the Arab Muslim Empire that formed after Muhammad's death to encompass the Middle East. In the modern period, it has become the ideal to which Islamic revival and Islamist movements refer when invoking the goal of an "Islamic" state. It's used both to argue for democracy and autocracy. However, the historical reality of Muhammad's time in Medina was likely more complex.

Yathrib was a collection of fertile areas controlled by Jewish and Bedouin tribes. The Jewish groups appear to have settled first and occupied the most arable lands. By Muhammad's time, Yathrib was riven by internal disputes, not between Bedouin and Jewish groups, but between the two major Arab tribes: the Aws and Khazraj. Their conflict was so protracted it threatened Yathrib as a whole, hence their invitation to Muhammad, who had a reputation as a mediator that pre-dated his revelations.

At some point during Muhammad's time in Yathrib, the town came to be known by another name: Medina al-Munawwara or Medina al-Nabi: the enlightened city or the city of the prophet. This was a sign of Muhammad's importance in transforming the city and transforming existing Arab forms of governance. He appears to have layered the formerly discrete positions of shaykh, hakim, and qa'id and replaced the kahin position with that of prophet and messenger.

One of the key "products" of Muhammad's time in Medina, which has been profoundly influential in Islamic history, is the well-known Constitution of Medina. Although the document likely was not created during Muhammad's early time in Medina, it has become influential as a conceptual model for the power of the ruler in a Muslim polity, as well as for allocating rights and responsibilities to various communities defined by religious identity.

The time in Medina allowed Muhammad to put forth a vision of a more equitable society. He regulated the blood price by which tribes assessed the value of a person injured or killed by a member of another tribe, erasing status-based differences in value. He required a zakat or annual tithe of all followers, intended to support the poor and needy. He implemented the improvements in women's status—legal rights of inheritance, companionate marriage, and more—expounded in the revelations.

Muhammad also married again during his time in Medina, nine women in total. Most were widows, not all were Muslim, and several were older than him. While his marriage to Aisha, the

daughter of his closest friend Abu Bakr, appears to have been a loving, companionate marriage, his marriages appear to have been intended more as political and social unions, modeling compassion and family life for the emerging Muslim community.

The wives of Muhammad were distinguished over time by their beginning to wear some kind of veil, the details of which are unspecified in the Qur'an and the hadith. It was a practice unique to his wives, as evidenced by the phrase "donned the veil," used as a synonym for marrying Muhammad. While there is no clear historical evidence as to when ordinary Muslim women began covering their hair and/or faces, it appears that the practice developed much later, as a pious emulation of Muhammad's wives. Muslim women in the modern era especially have pushed back at male interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith, noting that those interpretations reflect their own personal and cultural biases, not the message of Islam.

The time in Medina was also a rich period for the collection of what would later form the hadith, the stories about Muhammad's actions and sayings that are considered second only to the Qur'an in authority. Collected and authenticated in the early medieval period, hundreds of years after Muhammad, they are revered by most Muslims. Some question the veracity of particular hadith, either because they recount a story that seems unlikely to have come from Muhammad or because the original hadith transmitter might have had personal reasons for justifying a particular belief or action with a story from Muhammad's life. Collectively, the hadith and other stories circulating about Muhammad comprise the sunna, the prophetic path or model that Muslims can emulate.

After Muhammad's death, his companions became the guardians of his legacy and of the early Muslim community. They seem to have been more comfortable with pre-Islamic norms and customs, particularly when it came to women. Umar, for example, who became the second caliph or successor after Muhammad, seems to have interpreted Qur'anic revelations and Muhammad's example through a particularly misogynistic light. It is his influence that has led to some of the more culture-bound, restrictive guidelines for women's behavior often associated with Islam.

chapter 4: fight in the way of god: the meaning of jihad

Although Muhammad and his followers had left Mecca, the Quraysh had not forgotten them. What appears to have tipped the scale was Muhammad's declaration that Yathrib, like Mecca, was a sanctuary city or haram. This, along with Medinan raids on caravans bound for Mecca, began to challenge Mecca's position in the region. Skirmishes broke out back and forth, until in 624 the Muslim and Medinan community fought the Meccans in the Battle of Badr, seen as a sign of divine favor when Muhammad's followers, outnumbered, won a decisive victory. Yet war was not integral to the message of Islam.

Although the word jihad is mentioned in the Qur'an, the concept of jihad as a military endeavor developed centuries after Muhammad's death. It emerged from a late antique context in which battles and wars were constant and normal expressions of statecraft, and in which—since most states had a religious identity—religion was a normal part of the motivation and justification for warfare.

The concept of "holy war" is a Western Christian one, made famous by the Crusades. Jihad is better understood as a struggle and a striving and, when applied to warfare, as the concept of just and justified war. Hence it has generally been understood as a defensive war, following the Qur'anic reminder that God dislikes aggressors. The contemporary argument that jihad justifies any kind of aggression against any kind of target, represents a modern coopting of the classical doctrine by extremists.

The resumption of conflict between the Quraysh and Muhammad's followers brought in Medina's Jewish tribes, who had strong trading connections with the Quraysh. After the pyrrhic victory of the Battle of Uhud, several aligned with the Quraysh, reasonably assuming that they would prevail. When this did not happen, Muhammad accepted the surrender of two Jewish tribes and allowed them to leave Medina in peace. During the siege known as the Battle of the Trench, the Banu Qurayza supported the Quraysh. After the battle, which Muhammad won, the Banu Qurayza submitted to arbitration. They received the traditional punishment: death to the fighters and the dissolution of the tribe. This harsh judgment, laid down by the head of the Aws tribe, has been scrutinized by scholars for indications of anti-Jewish sentiment. But

non-Jewish tribes were punished similarly and Jewish tribes who did not ally with the Quraysh were not stigmatized. Jews continued to live in Medina until expelled under Umar years after Muhammad's death.

Ultimately, Muslim rule in the centuries after Muhammad would be known for tolerance of other religions. Tolerance is not equality and it does push the state to see its population in terms of their religious identity. Jews and Christians were not considered equal to Muslim subjects, but they were valued parts of the overall community. They were exempt from Muslim-specific taxes and obligations, while paying the *jizyah*. As the Qur'an suggests, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other monotheistic communities were all part of the same *ummah*, hence the term *ahl al-kitab*, People of the Book or divine scripture.

Muhammad's own views of Judaism are difficult to discern, but given that the Jewish tribes of Arabia were largely Arabized in culture and practice and that the Arabs were familiar with monotheism and generally respected Judaism, it is hard to discern any constant sectarian hostility in Muhammad. The Qur'an, while critical of Jewish views for what it considered Judaism's deviation from the divine message, did not condemn Jews or Judaism outright. It expressed more opprobrium at the Christian concept of Jesus as the Son of God and God incarnate, seeing this view as a profound misunderstanding of Jesus' role as messenger. In subsequent centuries, Islamic scholars would argue that the Qur'an replaced the Torah and New Testament. But, in the early period after Muhammad's death, Muslims continued studying the three scriptures as well as the Psalms.

Muhammad and the Quraysh made a truce in 628 CE, but it did not last. In 630, Muhammad and the warriors of Medina marched on Mecca, but the city surrendered peacefully. Instead of taking retribution, Muhammad granted all Meccans amnesty, provided that they take an oath of loyalty to him, not a conversion to Islam. He proceeded to the Ka`ba, where Islamic tradition recounts him carrying idol after idol out of the building to smash them on the ground. The Ka`ba was to be an empty building and the symbolic House of God.

chapter 5: the rightly guided ones: the successors to muhammad

The death of Muhammad was both unsurprising—after all, the idea of one and only one God meant that Muhammad was human and not divine—and terrifying for the early Muslim community. His closest friends reacted in very different ways. Umar denied that Muhammad had died, saying that he had been taken to heaven or went on a trip. Abu Bakr, instead, stood before the community and said the words that would become famous in Islamic history: “O People: If you worshipped Muhammad, know that he is dead. If you worship God, know that God is alive and does not die!”

Muhammad's death threw the community into confusion and sorrow. Who would lead them in terms of political, military, and administrative guidance? Who would lead them spiritually? Coupled with these questions was sorrow for the loss of a charismatic leader and for what they believed was the end of direct communication from God, since the revelations were believed to end when Muhammad died. As allied tribes began slipping away, community members wondered how to move forward, since most believed that Muhammad had given little guidance for what to do when he was gone.

Despite the confusion over process, a leader needed to be chosen. There appeared to have been some rough consensus that for practical reasons, he needed to be from the Quraysh tribe. In the end, Abu Bakr was chosen during a *shura* or consultative council meeting likely made up primarily of Medinans. He was named the *khalifa*, or successor, to Muhammad, but what “successor” meant was left undefined. Abu Bakr treated the position as akin to a tribal *shaykh* position, focusing on stabilizing and safeguarding the community. He started the Meccan-Medinan community on a path to what would become unprecedented military success.

The likely contender against Abu Bakr for the position of successor, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali, was not present at the *shura*. Various reasons have been suggested over time as to why he was not chosen—youth, military experience—but it may also have reflected the preference among Quraysh from other clans that the Banu Hashim not be seen as the locus of both spiritual (prophethood) and political (caliphal) power. Ali agreed to Abu Bakr's selection for the sake of community harmony, but the seeds of the eventual Sunni-Shii split were

sown—perhaps more so when Abu Bakr, to prevent another bout of chaos upon his own death, appointed Umar as his successor.

Abu Bakr's time as caliph was short (a man close to Muhammad's age, he died two years later), but he successfully fought military and political campaigns against a crop of "copycat" prophets and tribes who abandoned their alliance with the Muslims upon Muhammad's death. Those tribes appear to have seen their conversion to Islam as part of their political alliance. The Muslims treated it as both treason and apostasy. This established the precedent in some subsequent Muslim societies of treating apostasy as a crime punishable, like treason, by death, although this is not prescribed in the Qur'an.

Umar served as caliph for a decade and proved himself a remarkable diplomat and military leader. He treated non-Arab converts to Islam equitably (in the early days, converts to Islam had first to apprentice themselves to Arab Muslims) and governed with consultation and consensus, rather than autocratically. He also oversaw a massive territorial expansion, as the armies under his rule conquered Byzantine and Sassanid lands.

Umar was succeeded by Uthman, an early convert not particularly known for his leadership skills. He was from the Umayyad clan, a powerful and wealthy clan that had produced the last non-Muslim ruler of Mecca, Abu Sufyan. His selection was seen as a further sign that the old Quraysh elites were coopting the role of caliphate and starting to make the ummah look more like pre-Islamic Mecca. Uthman's decision to install members of his clan in key positions seemed to confirm this. He was seen as supporting nepotism, not merit. Ultimately, he was murdered—to little opposition or criticism.

Uthman is also recognized as the caliph who completed the process of codifying the Qur'an, gathering all the various versions of the revelations that Muhammad had received and compiling their authoritative texts into one complete scripture. Once complete, copies were sent to all Muslim outposts and no other version was accepted. This monumental effort produced the Qur'an as it has come down in history: one consistent text in Arabic, used by all Muslims regardless of sect.

Ali was finally chosen as caliph, a reassuring figure in the chaos that followed Uthman's murder. He did not use the term khalifa, preferring amir al-mu'mineen: leader of the believers, often translated as commander of the faithful (mu'mineen was used more commonly than Muslim in the early days of Islam). Aisha, with whom Ali had had an antagonistic relationship since before Muhammad's death, led a revolt against him that culminated in the Battle of the Camel. Seen as the first fitna or split within the Muslim community, it was a sign of how disunited the ummah had become less than a generation after Muhammad's death.

The community was split not along the sectarian lines that would later emerge, but on the question of leadership: what clan "owned" the caliphate? How should the caliph be chosen? The Umayyad clan seems to have considered the caliphate to belong to itself and thought it should be a political position. Ali and his supporters appear to have considered it to have a more spiritual role. After defeating Aisha's supporters, he turned to the Umayyad warriors in Kufa, who were led by Mu`awiyah, Abu Sufyan's son.

Although likely to prevail militarily, Ali agreed to arbitration to decide between the two. The arbitration found that Mu`awiyah was not treasonous but defending the murder of Uthman. As Ali dealt with the Kharijites, an extremist group who abandoned him after he accepted arbitration (on the grounds that battle would have allowed God to decide the victor), Mu`awiyah marched to Jerusalem, where he proclaimed himself caliph. Ali was murdered by Kharijites before he could follow Mu`awiyah. Mu`awiyah consolidated his position and ultimately passed his position to his son, Yazid, establishing the Umayyad Empire. The early vision of the khalifa as a tribal-style shaykh ended, replaced by an imperial, heritable form of rule.

The Umayyad Empire was overthrown in 750 CE, replaced by the Abbasid Empire. Although appearing to control territory that stretched from western Africa into South Asia, the Abbasids were often little more than nominal rulers who enjoyed only minimal tribute and an oath of allegiance from autonomous vassal states. Most accepted the Abbasids' claim to have inherited the caliphate from the Umayyads, although some, like the Fatimids in Egypt (an Ismaili Shiite state) claimed it for themselves. After the Ottoman Empire conquered the Mamluks in Egypt

and claimed Mecca and Medina, the sultan added caliph to his list of titles. It was prominent in Ottoman political discourse until the late 1800s, when Sultan Abdul Hamid II used it as part of a bid to give himself greater authority against encroaching European powers. After the Ottoman Empire was disbanded, Kemal Ataturk officially ended the caliphate, stating that the linking of religious and political authority was detrimental to Islam. Since then, there have been few laments for its absence, and—aside from extremist groups like ISIS—no real effort to resuscitate it.

chapter 6: this religion is a science: the development of islamic theology and law

Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun, who ruled in the 800s, attempted to transform the caliphate into an institution with both religious and political authority. Known as the mihna (or inquisition), he forced ulama (or Islamic religious scholars) to submit to one particular set of philosophical views regarding the nature of God and the extent of human capability. Ultimately, Ma'mun's efforts to turn the caliphate into a kind of papacy failed, leaving the ulama free to take the role of guardians and definers of Islam.

Religious scholars distinguish between orthodoxy (correct or accepted theories and doctrines) and orthopraxy (correct or accepted behaviors, whether ritual or ethical). Protestant Christianity is generally considered a more orthodoxic religion and Orthodox Judaism is generally considered (despite its name) more orthopraxic. Islam falls in between, leaning more toward orthopraxy, but with doctrine and behavior seen as interconnected.

The Five Pillars (al-arkan, in Arabic) constitute the fundamental ritual requirements of Islam. They are modifiable in accordance with the individual's physical, mental, financial, and other capabilities. All but one focus on community rather than the individual and all are considered obligations that the believer and community of believers owe to God as Creator.

The first pillar is salat, the ritual prayer expected to be performed by capable Muslims five times each day. Unlike the foundational Christian prayer, the Lord's Prayer, daily prayer in Islam is not aimed at making requests of God, but at honoring God.

The second pillar is zakat, the annual charitable tithe used to support the poor and vulnerable. Although today some Muslim-majority states have zakat ministries that accept zakat funds, paying zakat is an individual obligation and believers can choose how and where to distribute their tithe.

The third pillar is sawm, the annual fast that takes place from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan. It appears to have been initially modeled on Jewish fasting practices and includes no food, drink, or sexual intercourse—anything that might make the body and spirit impure—during daylight hours. It is considered an opportunity to remember Muhammad's first revelations as well as to re-center and develop spiritually. Ramadan is a month of night-time feasts and time spent with family and friends which ends with the Eid al-Fitr, the holiday of breaking the fast.

The fourth pillar is the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca for a prescribed set of rituals that Muslims must undertake once in their lifetime, if able. The hajj, which entails a set of ritual activities that primarily echo those of Abraham and Hagar (the mother of Ismail), begins with pilgrims reciting the talbiyah: "Here I am at your service, Lord, here I am," a reminder that the hajj is performed for the glory of God.

The fifth pillar is the shahada, the testimony of faith, which is summed up in the statement: "I believe that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is God's messenger." It acknowledges tawhid (the doctrine of God's oneness, unity, and uniqueness), the foundational heart of Islam. In contrast, shirk, the act of associating divine powers to anything other than God, is the unforgivable sin.

The extent of God's power and knowledge has been the source of theological debate, primarily relating to free will and predetermination. The Umayyad caliphs, for example, argued for predeterminism, which they believed made them divinely chosen to rule the ummah. By the medieval era, the issue connected with the debate over whether human rationality was sufficient for an understanding of the divine will or whether human reason was subordinate to (and unable to fully comprehend) divine revelation as articulated in the Qur'an and sunna. The rationalist position, represented by the Mutazilites, ultimately fell out of favor in the Sunni

tradition and the Asharite position, which supported revelation over the power of human reason, became more prominent.

While the Qur'an recounts many miracles attributed to earlier prophets and messengers—especially those of Moses—the primary miracle associated with Muhammad is that of the Qur'an. Muhammad consistently refused to perform miracles when challenged to prove that he was truly a prophet. Instead, it was argued, the miracle of the Qur'an lay in the majesty and intricacy of its language: poetic but not poetry, a fitting text for divine revelation.

As divine revelation and divine speech, the Qur'an was considered uncreated and co-eternal with God; the Word of God made text, akin to the Christian idea of the Word of God made flesh in Jesus. Qur'anic verses are considered to have spiritual power even when recited or viewed by people who do not know Arabic, hence the many artistic renderings of Qur'anic verses and the care with which Muslims treat copies of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is only considered divine revelation in the original Arabic. Every translation is considered to be the translator's human interpretation.

Qur'anic interpretation is a specialized activity, with two primary methods. Tafsir, or exegesis, focuses on providing the literal meaning of the text. Ta'wil focuses on providing the allegorical meaning of the text, drawing out its implicit meanings. The Mutazilite, or rationalist interpretation, focused on human reason and on setting the text in its historical context. The Asharite, or traditionalist interpretation, assumes that the meaning of the Qur'an is static and eternal and does not change with historical or social context.

Shari`a, the path to God, was developed by the ulama as a means of assessing the moral value of human action. It places them in one of five categories: one prohibited and four permitted categories that range from disliked to obligatory. Shari`a addresses behavior (external actions) more than internal attitudes. It expresses an ideal state. What many people think of as "shari`a" is actually fiqh (jurisprudence), which reflects religious scholars' interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith in a legal context.

As the Muslim community grew and expanded, questions about the acceptability of particular behaviors grew. Neither the Qur'an nor the sunna were able to provide direct answers. As the ulama emerged as the cadre of experts who could define and explain Islamic belief and practice, they also emerged as the key interpreters of these texts, producing increasingly complex and sophisticated jurisprudence.

Over time, principles of legal interpretation emerged, like qiyas, or reasoning by analogy. Some principles were sect specific: Sunni legal experts accepted the principle of ijma`, that the consensus of scholars made a legal judgment binding, while Shiite clerics found this principle problematic. Schools of legal reasoning also emerged—ultimately, four Sunni and two Shiite—whose methods and legal rulings were mutually recognized with legal scholars often (but not always) referencing those of other schools. The result was to increasingly emphasize right practice as the most important part of Islamic belief and practice, but it also enshrined the principle of internal diversity as represented by the schools of law.

When attempting to develop a legal position on a new situation—whether the drinking of coffee or the use of cell phones—ulama could turn to another legal principle: ijtihad, or the effort of individual scholarly reasoning. While this approach fell officially out of favor in the Sunni world by the late medieval period, it never fully disappeared and has been increasingly central to Islamic jurisprudence in the modern era.

In the modern era, religious scholars have drawn upon the example of naskh, the idea that the Qur'an has abrogated some verses by later ones that clarify or alter earlier statements, as a means of gradually moving the early Muslim community toward accepting the divine message. While Traditionalist ideas about the eternity of Qur'anic interpretation continue to dominate in some communities, an increasing number of religious scholars distinguish between historically specific and eternally valid Qur'anic verses: those that fit the needs of the early Muslim community at the time, like the rules on inheritance, and those that are eternally valid, like the command to care for the poor and vulnerable.

At the same time, the increasing power of modern states has led to calls to incorporate shari`a into state law. Many Muslim-majority states include in their constitutions the statement that shari`a should be a primary source for law-making and Islamists argue that God is the ultimate sovereign of any state. While these statements are often popular, they do not fit with the historical evolution or practice of shari`a in Muslim communities.

chapter 7: in the footsteps of martyrs: from shi`ism to khomeinism

The internal conflict that came to a head in 661 with the battle between Ali and Mu`awiyah continued into the next generation. It culminated in 680 CE with the slaughter of Ali's son Hussein (Husayn), most of his family, and supporters at Karbala, Iraq, at the hands of soldiers under Mu`awiyah's son Yazid, the second Umayyad caliph. This victory ensured the success of the Umayyad dynasty, but also sent a great shock through the early Muslim community. Less than fifty years after Muhammad's death, his family was slaughtered by fellow Muslims with seeming impunity.

Honoring their stance against what mourners considered the oppression and injustice of the Umayyads, a penitent practice of mourning the death of Husayn and his family emerged. Over time, this set of ritual practices helped shape Shiism as a distinct religious movement and emergent sect.

Shiite theology centers on sacrifice as a means of atoning for one's sins or the sins of humanity in general. Ashura has become the primary Shiite holiday: a ten-day commemoration focused on lamentation practices and culminating on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, when Husayn is said to have died. Mourning practices have historically included the performance of passion plays, the readings of stories about Muslim martyrs, and public processions. In the modern era, Shiite Muslims often commemorate Husayn's sacrifice by donating blood and water as a reminder that Yazid's army refused to give water to Husayn's besieged entourage.

Shiites place greater spiritual weight upon the ahl al-bayt or family of Muhammad. They believe that Muhammad's spiritual authority passed through him to his descendants through Ali and Fatima and thus look to other members of his family for additional spiritual guidance. Shiite hadith include the accounts of Muhammad's descendants (and do not include transmissions by Aisha) and Shiites believe that Ali and his descendants will intercede for humans on the Day of Judgment and help determine one's salvation.

Shiites believe that the leader of the Muslim community should be known as Imam, not caliph, and that the authority of the Imam passes directly from one generation to the next. They believe that the line of Imams is no longer visible in the world, but that the Imam will return at the end of time. The majority of the world's Shiites are Twelvers, believing that Muhammad's descendants disappeared or went into occultation with the twelfth generation. Ismaili Muslims, best known today by the figure of the Aga Khan, believe that the line ended with the seventh Imam. A smaller group, the Zaydis, believe that a different descendant counted as the fifth Imam and broke off their lineage with him.

Shiites believe that the Imam's authority to provide spiritual guidance extends to his ability to interpret the Qur'an. They tend to believe that the Qur'an has two sets of meanings: the apparent or generally accessible message, known as the *zahir*, and the secret, hidden message, accessible only to the Imam or trained religious scholars who can explain this message to ordinary believers. Shiite religious scholars have come to follow the *usuli* school of legal interpretation, which stresses the right and the importance of *ijtihad* in Qur'anic interpretation. They tend to have a strong conviction in the power of human reason to understand the divine message.

Shiite religious scholars are more organized than Sunni scholars and follow a hierarchy of scholarly achievement and reputation. Ayatollahs are at the top of this hierarchy and serve as *marja`al-taqlids* for their followers: sources of emulation. Ordinary Shiite Muslims are free to choose any ayatollah as their *marja`*, but, once chosen, must accept his rulings on any issue as binding.

As a small minority—estimated today at no more than 15% of the total Muslim population—Shiites developed a practical practice of political quietism and self-protection in the doctrine of *taqiyya*, which holds that a Muslim may disavow his or her sectarian affiliation or even identity as a Muslim if disclosing his or her true identity would jeopardize his or her safety. Although Twelver Shiism became the state religion of Persia, now Iran, in the early 1500s, Shiite clerics continued to espouse political quietism, particularly after the fall of the Safavids in the 1700s.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was recognized for his Islamic scholarship from a young age and became noted as an activist critiquing the oppression and weakness of Iran's shah. As the shah alienated more and more elements of Iranian society in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, citizens

with nowhere else to turn (the political system had been atomized, or coopted by the shah, and the economic, military, and social spheres faced similar challenges) saw in Khomeini a powerful and upright figure who spoke a language of moral and political righteousness. He spoke in religious metaphors and offered a newly-compelling reworking of the classical Shiite doctrine that the Imam was the only legitimate ruler. God wanted more for people than to merely endure one illegitimate sovereign after another, he argued. In the absence of the Imams, the legitimate ruler was the one most capable of rule: the religious scholar, whose morals and knowledge were unsurpassable. Known as *vilayat i-faqih*, the governance of the jurist, Khomeini's theoretical argument took shape as the new government structure of the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran.

Khomeini's doctrine is not universally accepted by Shiites or Shiite religious scholars and remains controversial today. Shiite ayatollahs from Iraq in particular have criticized the push to political activism, suggesting that the Islamic Republic of Iran may not only continue to evolve itself, but is unlikely to serve as a compelling model of governance for other Shiite-majority states.

chapter 8: stain your prayer rug with wine: the sufi way

Sufism refers to the rich and internally diverse tradition of mysticism and spirituality in Islam, with practices that range from the competitive asceticism of the earliest Sufis to a kind of once-a-week, social club *dhikr* (remembrance of God) gathering. It encompasses a range of philosophical beliefs and religious practices and has been criticized for its syncretism and apparent influences from Christianity, Hinduism, and other religions.

The earliest Sufis were known as *zahids* or ascetics and tended to be world-rejecting figures, many of whom wandered as mendicants. By the early medieval period, Sufism was becoming more organized and more domesticated, with fraternal groups of Sufis collecting into what would become formal orders or brotherhoods. They tended to aggregate around particular masters, becoming disciples of one particular teacher and one particular path.

Sufism focused on the inner and hidden meanings of the message of Islam and on a personal relationship with the divine. While understood as in some sense a reaction to normative Islam's focus on ritual behavior and legalistic rulings, many *ulama* were also Sufi practitioners; the latter might better be understood as complementing rather than competing with normative Islam. Sufism pushes the believer to see orthodox and orthopraxic Islam as helpful in pointing the believer toward God, but not as ends in themselves.

At its more radical end, Sufism represented individual believers' efforts to unite with God—whether as in al-Hallaj's formulation becoming God, or in being annihilated in God (*fana*) through an all-encompassing love of the divine. Sober Sufism, which argued for the integration of Sufi practices into ordinary life rather than rejecting that life in favor of super-human but extremist practices, became the more normative and accepted practice, with believers following particular, codified *tariqahs* (literally, paths, but also referring to the organized orders and brotherhoods).

Sufis have faced increasing hostility and persecution in the modern era. Some has stemmed from political concerns. For example, Ataturk banned Sufi orders in Turkey in the 1920s, seeing them as sources of possible opposition to his autocratic rule. Some hostility has stemmed from fundamentalist intolerance. The Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, for example, consider Sufis to be polytheists who deny the unity of God and who practice a perverted form of Islam that includes influences from other religions. But Sufism remains influential in many parts of the world, particularly in West Africa, where almost all Muslims follow at least one Sufi order.

chapter 9: an awakening in the east: the response to colonialism

The importance of colonization as a major impact on Muslim majority and plurality societies, and on Muslims' understandings of Islam, cannot be exaggerated. Every Muslim-majority and -plurality society was colonized by a European power in the 1800s, with the exception of the Ottoman Empire and Persia—and both of those states were under constant pressure from European powers.

Colonization was a political, military, and economic undertaking, but it was also highly ideological, and European denigration of race, religion, and culture were closely intermixed.

Hence, colonized subjects tended to see their foreign overlords through the lens of a hostile religion. The Indian Mutiny of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Rebellion, should be understood as an act of resistance against political, economic, and also religious oppression.

Muslim thinkers looking to throw off or at least contest the colonial yoke looked to Europe to see what intellectual, political, and social models they could incorporate, asking what developments had led to European strength and Middle Eastern, South Asian, African, and Southeast Asian weakness. Described as modernists, they were an internally diverse group. Their overall stance might be understood as stemming from the belief that modernity was a human achievement, rather than essentially related to European culture, Christianity, or the rejection of Islam. They argued that Muslims must embrace science, limited government, and new forms of sociability and that many practices and beliefs understood as part of Islam must be rejected as outdated and as holding Muslim societies back. At the far end of the modernist spectrum, some modernists focused on replacing shari`a governance with civil codes and on reducing religion's role to the private sphere.

Most modernists blamed the ulama for the weakness and what they considered the decline of Muslim societies. They saw Islam's religious scholars as backwards and superstitious. Whether focused on modernizing education for Muslims, like Syed Ahmad Khan in India, or on the political power of a pan-Islamist political ideology, as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani did in the Middle East, they railed against the ulama as a negative force in Islam. As the reputation and influence of the ulama declined, it was men with "modern," secular, state educations who would consider themselves empowered to define Islam for the twentieth century.

Modernist Sunnis also pushed for a new emphasis on ijihad to create new interpretations of the Qur'an and sunna that would produce a modern shari`a. This was best exemplified in the arguments for constitutionalism and limited government which arose in many parts of the Muslim-majority world. The concept of shura or consultation was invoked to argue that Islam was inherently a democratic religion. The concept of mulk was referenced to emphasize that Islam stood against kingship, or absolute monarchy.

As more Muslim thinkers and activists looked to independence and to build up their societies, their foci broadened. Some turned from a focus on religion to one of ethnicity, as with the Pan-Arab movement of Saad Zaghloul. Some turned away from modernism and traditionalism both, looking back to the fundament or the earliest days of Islam and rejecting everything after that as a negative innovation. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the reworking of states and societies around the world after World War I, the landscape of Muslim leadership stretched from Kemal Ataturk's autocratic nationalism in Turkey to Hasan al-Banna's grassroots Muslim Brotherhood activism in Egypt.

The Muslim Brotherhood emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in part as a reaction against Christian missionary work in Egypt. Their focus on welfare, social services, community support, and education neatly mirrors the work of Christian missionaries. They argued that what Muslims needed was not to blindly embrace European behaviors but to Islamize society and, in doing so, to Islamize government. A moral society would produce a just state, creating a virtuous cycle. Banna's Islamic social welfare project spread, with branches in numerous other countries, although they seem to have operated largely on a local or national level. The idea that Muslims could self-consciously filter every aspect of their lives through an Islamic lens was distinctly modern and had a distinctly modern appeal.

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian government employee and expert in literary criticism, became increasingly attracted to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1940s and would become its best known voice. A prolific writer, he turned his tafsir of the Qur'an—itsself a profoundly modern reworking of the classical exegetic genre—into the revolutionary work translated into English as *Milestones*. Bearing strong similarity to Lenin's revolutionary stages, he called for an overthrow of all non-Muslim societies after the creation and expansion of a vanguard group. Qutb took the classical Islamic notion of jahiliyya, the pre-Islamic era of ignorance, and brought it into the present. Calling all societies where Islam did not act as the governing principle for all activity "jahili" societies, Qutb essentially argued that there was no Islamic society on earth and that all Muslims were effectively non-believers unless working to bring about a state and society in which God and only God was sovereign.

Qutb was given a show trial by the Egyptian state and put to death for treason, with *Milestones* read out in court as evidence. The Muslim Brotherhood never disavowed him, but moved quickly

to emphasize that its efforts were peaceful and evolutionary. Qutb's writings, however, have proven to be consistently popular with Sunni extremists.

The turn to Islam was not limited to the twentieth century, nor was it always inspired by colonial conquest. Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab, a religious scholar from a family of religious scholars, began what would become Wahhabism as a reform movement in the 1700s in the Arabian Peninsula. Railing against polytheistic and animist practices, he emphasized that tawhid, the doctrine of the oneness of God, had two parts. It was not enough to proclaim that God was one. This was the positive part of tawhid. To be Muslim, a believer must also constantly reject and be on guard against shirk in any form—whether a major sin like visiting the grave of a Sufi master or celebrating the birthday of a child (or of Muhammad). Considered a marginal heresy by the Ottoman government, Wahhabism—which had become the official stance of the Al Saudi clan—might have died out had it not been for the discovery of oil and the concomitant support of the nascent Saudi state by Britain and the United States. State sovereignty and a growing revenue stream gave the Saudis and their allied Wahhabi ulama the opportunity to establish Wahhabism across Saudi Arabia and to support its expansion by funding book distribution, school construction, and teachers to poor Muslim communities around the world.

The 1960s saw a number of previously compelling ideologies lose their power across the Middle East, Arab socialism notable among them. Muslims in the Middle East and around the world took part in the 1970s in a global turn to religion, known here as the *sahwa* or Islamic revival. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a client state, in 1979, defeating the godless Communists became a popular cause and the mujahideen—guerilla forces fighting the Soviets—drew fighters from many locations. Hardened by the war and with attitudes hardened by the echo chamber of religious fundamentalism, they became some of the key transmitters of a new, late twentieth century form of extremism: jihadism, or the reworking of the classical doctrine of jihad as an unending fight, often with apocalyptic overtones.

Al-Qaeda became the best known example of this new movement and Osama bin Laden its charismatic leader. Well known in the Arab world because of its turn against the Saudi government after the first Gulf War, al-Qaeda was little known to Europeans and North Americans until the attacks of September 11, 2001. Largely contained by the late 2000s, al-Qaeda's appeal has diminished, as has its influence. It remains an important reminder, however, that extremist groups, like other organizations and movements, are not static. They evolve over time and extremism itself is an internally diverse category.

chapter 10: slouching toward medina: the quest for islamic democracy

Post-revolutionary Iran's constitution was understood both as a restoration of the democratic principles enshrined in the 1906 constitution and the installation of a new order. It established a two-tiered government: one, with an elected parliament and president, looking much like parliamentary democracies elsewhere. The other, a system of appointed councils and a supreme head of state, chosen by the consensus of the states' most senior religious scholars. The result was a restricted but functioning democratic system, in which candidates for elected positions were vetted by religious clerics, but had much more space for meaningful governance than in most states around the region.

In the late 1990s, twenty years after the Islamic revolution, a reformist cleric named Muhammad Khatami was elected president. Observers cited his example as a sign that Iranians still valued pluralism and argued that in a state with a religious outlook, the greatest opportunities for reform might come from religious scholars rather than secularists. Iran's example serves as a broader reminder: Islam today must be seen as supporting democratic governance, not used to support autocracy.

Linking Islam and democratic governance requires moving beyond the colonial era and Cold War idea that democracy must always resemble European and American forms. Democratic governance must develop in ways appropriate to each local context, including religious. The Median ideal of an Islamic polity could, in the contemporary context, be understood as realized through representative democracy.

One key technique of colonial rule was dividing populations according to ethnic and religious lines. A divided population was less likely to organize resistance against the colonial power. While colonialism does not explain all the tensions today between India and Pakistan, for example, it does help elucidate the zero-sum game perspective of different communities in

post-colonial states, particularly the fear that another community would control the political, economic, or military system.

Democratic governance, understood as the contemporary expression of the early Islamic principles of shura (consultation, or popular representation), ijma` (consensus, or political participation), and bay`ah (allegiance, or the popular certification of an elected leader), is popular among Muslims around the world. But European and American insistence that democracy requires the separation of church and state (which does not happen in Ireland or Austria, for example) is alienating. It misses the understanding of many Muslims that Islam is an identity, which makes secular democracy alienating.

Democracy must be understood as separable from secularism. Pluralism is the foundation of democratic governance. There is Qur'anic support for the argument that Islam supports pluralism, although its willingness to treat polytheistic religions pluralistically is more tendentious. Pluralism offers the additional benefit of helping articulate effective human rights support in Muslim-majority states.

What Muslims and non-Muslims need to understand is that articulating Islamic forms of democracy, including defining the boundaries of human and divine sovereignty, is a process for Muslims. This is not a battle between "Islam" and "the West." It is a discussion for Muslims to have, in multiple sites around the world. This discussion builds upon fourteen centuries of discussion and debate over how to interpret the divine revelation in ways that speak to and are appropriate for Muslim communities in different times and places.

chapter 11: welcome to the islamic reformation: the future of islam

The mosque and university complex of al-Azhar in Cairo stands as a reminder of the complexity of Islam. Founded in the 900s by an Ismaili Shiite caliph, it developed over the centuries into one of the Sunni world's most revered institutions of religious education. Even today, after the Egyptian state seized control of most Islamic institutions and took away their schools' independence by making them part of the state university system, Al Azhar retains a degree of independence, speaking with its own authority on issues of belief and practice.

But there is another wildly popular stream of religious influence in Egypt and around the Muslim world: that of educated lay Muslims who identify themselves as preachers or callers to Islam, rather than trained scholars. Amr Khaled, who hosts television talk shows and is active on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, is one of the most important Sunni influencers of Islam. He tends to avoid both politics and a legalistic focus, instead encouraging Muslims to become more pious, to focus on the morality of their actions, and to treat others and the world around them kindly. His focus on youth encourages volunteering to help those in need, while his environmental campaign invokes human responsibility to tend God's creation.

Figures like Amr Khaled are a visceral reminder that for Sunni Muslims in particular, the traditional locus of authority around the ulama has eroded. While many Muslims still turn to religious scholars for questions of right behavior or practice—legalistic questions requiring fiqh training—they also turn to lay Muslims for advice on living a Muslim life. And they increasingly turn to the idea that understanding Islam today requires cutting through the centuries of history and traditional interpretations to see the texts and the example of the early Muslim community anew.

Increasing literacy has been one of the hallmarks of the modern world, including Muslim-majority societies. Literacy, particularly in Arabic, has allowed many more Muslims than in previous centuries to read the Qur'an and the hadith, supporting the belief in Islam that there should be no mediator standing between the individual and God.

As with Protestantism, opening up the power of interpretation to every believer means that some will develop progressive interpretations, like Pakistani-American scholar Asma Barlas, and some regressive ones, like Osama bin Laden. This is the promise and the challenge of Islam in the contemporary era. It is reinforced by the Internet, whether with online fatwa sites like IslamQA.com or online forums like ahlalhddeeth.com, which often operate in multiple languages to reach a diverse audience. These profound shifts in authority and medium of communication are a reminder that Islam today is going through a new reformation, one with revolutionary potential.

• suggested reading timeline

Advanced high school/undergraduate students: Chapters 1–2; Chapters 3–4; Chapters 5–6; Chapters 7–8; Chapters 9–11

Advanced undergraduate/graduate students: Chapters 1–6; Chapters 7–11

• pre-reading assignments

1. Muslims make up a tiny minority of the U.S. population—just over 1%—but every state has at least one Muslim community. Use the Hartford Institute for Religion Research’s database of mosques (hrr.hartsem.edu/mosque/database.html) or Salatomic’s (the name is a mashup of “salat” [which means “prayer” in Arabic] and “automatic”) database for mosques, restaurants, prayer spaces, and Islamic schools (www.salatomic.com) to see how many mosques and other Muslim community institutions there are in your state. What can you learn about these communities from mosque websites and Facebook pages? Write a one-page description of the communities in your state: current activities, history, sectarian affiliation, inter-religious work, etc.
2. Muslims generally consider the Qur’an to be the direct word of God, revealed to Muhammad in Arabic via the Angel Gabriel. Take a look at various translations of the Qur’an at altafsir.com: tiny.cc/fatiha. How do the different translations of the Fatiha (Sura 1) change the tone and substance of the text? How do they affect your response to and interpretation of the text?

• guided reading and discussion questions (comprehension, analysis, thought)

1. Aslan describes Muhammad’s preaching in his prologue as “a revolutionary message of moral accountability and social egalitarianism” (xxv). What does this description tell you about Islam? What does moral accountability mean here? What does social egalitarianism or societal equity mean?
2. Muslims describe the time before Islam as the jahiliyyah, or Time of Ignorance. What do they mean by this? What kinds of “ignorance” characterized pre-Islamic Arabia? What does it mean to think of Islam as knowledge or enlightenment? How does describing pre-Islamic Arabs as ignorant rather than damned, for example, show a positive view of humanity?
3. While traditional Islamic narratives portray pre-Islamic Arabia as characterized by polytheism, it seems more accurate to see most Arabs as practicing henotheism: worship of one divine being, while accepting that other peoples might worship different deities. Christians, Jews, and other monotheists were also deeply rooted presences in Arabia. How are henotheism and monotheism related to one another? How might a henotheistic religious background have influenced pre-Islamic Arabs’ response to the message of Islam?
4. Muhammad’s life story is important to Muslims, who see signs of his future importance in his early days and see his adult life as a model to follow. What kinds of life events and behaviors distinguished Muhammad? What impression do you have of his character and personality?
5. Mecca’s importance in pre-Islamic Arabia has been debated by scholars. However, it seems to have been important at least as a regional locus for pilgrimage. How did pilgrimage help strengthen the Meccan economy? How did it help to create economic gaps between the wealthy and the poor? What impact did this have on traditional tribal practices of community support?
6. Tribal societies help ensure that people are protected from harm, have decent job and marriage prospects, and enjoy community support in sickness and old age. In pre-Islamic Arabia, tribal governance focused on merit-based selection for the key leadership positions of shaykh, qa’id, kahin, and hakam. How might tribal structures have helped support someone who was an orphan, like Muhammad, or a widow, like his mother Amina? How might the distribution of authority make tribes less autocratic than monarchic governments?

7. Islamic tradition describes Muhammad's first experience of revelation as terrifying and destabilizing. He feared that he had been visited by a demon or that he was becoming a *kahin*. How do you think you would have responded if you were in Muhammad's situation? Muhammad turned to his wife Khadija for support. Who would you have turned to?
8. Muslims divide the Qur'an's revelations into two periods: the Meccan, or early period, and the Medinan, when Muhammad was shaykh of the town of Yathrib. How would you characterize the focus of the Meccan revelations? How do they compare with the themes of the Medinan revelations?
9. Muhammad's preaching initially aroused no opposition among the Quraysh leadership. At what point and for what reasons did his preaching become a threat to the Meccan authorities?
10. The hijra marked a turning point for the early Muslim community: the moment when they put bonds of faith above bonds of blood and kin. The hijra also marks the first year of the Islamic calendar. What would it be like for you to give up your family ties and your homeland? How does the story of the hijra illustrate the power of the message of Islam?
11. Aslan describes several ways in which the message of Islam improved women's status and position, in religion and in society. What were some of these improvements and what impact might they have had? In modern times, Muslims have debated whether these provisions should be taken literally and left as stated in the Qur'an, or whether the principle of equity behind them should guide society. What arguments can you make for each case?
12. Muslims understand themselves to have five key ritual obligations, known as the five pillars of Islam. What are they, and what role does each one play? Are some more important than others, in your view?
13. Muslim women's dress has become a fixation for non-Muslims (and some Muslims) since the colonial period. What are the Qur'anic verses that discuss clothing and behavior for men and women? What roles do hijab and the concept of modesty play for Muslims today?
14. Aslan points out that Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of *vilayet i-faqih*, or governance by Islamic jurists, is not universally accepted among Shiite thinkers. What other viewpoints can you find among Shiite clerics, for example, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq?
15. While Muslims have long histories living as minorities in various countries—India, China—Muslims are new minorities in countries like France and Germany, with histories that stretch back only a century or so. What challenges do French and German Muslims face today? How does each country define religious and national identity?
16. American Muslims make up only 1% of the U.S. population but have arguably the most diverse Muslim population on earth, with a wide variety of sectarian, cultural, and other influences, as well as a large number of converts. What kinds of influences are American Muslims having on the global Muslim community, e.g., on the issue of women leading community prayers?

— topics for further discussion

1. Find a copy of the Constitution of Medina online and read it. What do you see in it that maintains tribal styles of governance? What do you see that might serve as a model for imperial state governance, with the governed population defined by their religious or ethnic community? Could it have any relevance in today's world?
2. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the word jihad and the neologism "jihadi" dominated media and political discourse about Islam. What extremist groups today still focus on jihad as their primary activity? Are there any Islamist (political Islam) groups that do? What about the majority of Muslims? What statements about jihad and its meaning or role in Islam can you find and what do they say?
3. Aslan notes that in the modern era, some have questioned whether Islam and democracy are compatible. Take a look at this Al Jazeera English clip featuring Mehdi Hasan, who points out that most Muslims live in flawed but functioning democracies: www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2016/09/reality-check-islam-compatible-democracy-160923193103650.html. Why does it seem that Islam and democracy might

be at odds? How can we better understand the ways in which Islam and democracy work together in countries around the world?

4. The ulama, or religious experts of Islam, have been blamed in the modern era for holding Islam and Muslims back from technological, intellectual, and cultural developments. Some of that criticism was justified, but not all. What role do you see Sunni ulama (sometimes more specifically called faqihs, imams, or muftis) playing today in Muslim-majority spaces like Egypt and Pakistan, Muslim-plurality spaces like Bosnia and Lebanon, and Muslim-minority spaces like the United States and Great Britain?
5. Islam is often thought by non-Muslims to be the reason for gender-based inequities in Muslim-majority and Muslim-plurality countries. Where do you see gender inequities being supported by religious arguments today? Where do you see Muslims using religion to argue for gender equity and women's rights? How do other factors—authoritarian states, weak economies, etc.—influence gender equity in Muslim-majority countries?
6. Sufism, which advocates for a more spiritual relationship with God, has been understood as everything from a meditation practice for American hippies to heretical polytheism and described as either peaceful and otherworldly or radical and militant. What might make Sufism appealing in today's world to Muslims and non-Muslims? What might make it controversial among more conservative Muslims (like Saudi's Wahhabi population)?
7. Iran is often in the news in the United States and the news is often controversial. What are the key political issues for the U.S. and Iran today? How much of this has to do with religion and what other factors influence the U.S.-Iran relationship? How do you think the relationship will evolve in the future, after the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (b. 1939), who is elderly, steps down from his position?
8. Aslan argues that Muslims around the world are already engaging in a major reformation process and have been for some time. He points out that this process is an internal one and has different aspects and foci in different communities. Where do you see signs of this reformation process happening in North America, the Middle East, Europe, etc.? What seem to be the easiest areas in which to push reform: societal, political, economic, etc.? What seem to be the sticking points and why do you think these areas or issues are encountering more resistance?
9. What do you see as the common challenges of Muslims in Muslim-majority societies and Muslim-minority ones? What do you consider to be challenges specific to Muslims in Muslim-minority societies? What do you see as advantages for Muslims living as minorities?

• activities

1. Muslims consider the Qur'an the unmediated word of God, so all efforts to integrate Islam in the modern world involve connecting the Qur'an to contemporary issues. Read Dr. Zainab Alwani's explanation of the history and process of Qur'an interpretation: www.themosqueinmorgantown.com/forum/tag/interpreting-the-quran. She helps pinpoint an important issue: the relative weight of individual, personal interpretations of the Qur'an as compared with religious scholars' interpretation. Imam Asim Khan has a slightly different take: www.islam21c.com/islamic-thought/who-has-the-right-to-interpret-the-quran. How do these two texts help us understand the critical importance of Qur'an interpretation and the diversity of interpretations that characterize Islam?
2. Amr Khaled is one of the most influential figures operating in the Sunni world today. Watch this 2011 interview with Al Jazeera's Riz Khan (in English): tiny.cc/rizkhan. Explain how Khaled talks about Islam and the challenges facing the contemporary Muslim world.
3. Egypt's al-Azhar University has been one of the most important institutions of religious higher education in Sunni Islam. After the 2011 revolution, it faced additional pressures from the post-revolution military government. Read Mariam Ghanem and Nathan Brown's "The Battle over Al-Azhar" (www.thecaireview.com/tahrir-forum/the-battle-over-al-azhar) for an analysis of al-Azhar's position six years after the revolution. Identify the key players in the efforts to control al-Azhar and explain the evolving relationship between al-Azhar and the Egyptian state, as well as al-Azhar's standing with Egyptian Muslims.

4. In 2007, nearly 140 Islamic religious scholars from all over the world signed an open letter titled "A Common Word," which was intended to spark a new movement toward global peace, based on harmony between Muslims and Christians. Read the letter (www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document) and research what impact the movement has had.
5. Research the history of Muslim communities in the U.S. state of your choice. Were the first Muslims converts or immigrants? When was the first mosque formed? What other community institutions have there been (businesses, schools, etc.)? How large is the community today and what does it look like in terms of ethnicity, sect, and other demographic details?
6. Many American mosques hold monthly open houses and generally welcome visitors to attend daily or Friday communal prayer services. Find a mosque in your community and visit it, perhaps with a friend. What do you see and hear? How diverse does the community appear to be? What kinds of other activities happen in the mosque building? Children's classes? Qur'an study? A food pantry? Charitable activities? What new light does your visit shed on your understanding of American Muslims?
7. Dr. Amina Wadud is one of the most important scholars working on women's status in Islam. Read her chapter on gender-inclusive Qur'anic analysis (www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Wanted-AW-EN.pdf), which is aimed at a Muslim audience, and take a look at this summary of the most important points: www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Wanted-AW-Summary.pdf. She doesn't focus on the veil or whether Saudi women can drive. She goes to the heart of Islam by focusing on the Qur'an. How might her argument about Qur'an interpretation promote gender equality? What are its limitations?

• online resources

rezaaslan.com – Featuring information about Reza Aslan, other published writing, press coverage, and upcoming author events

"No god but God": The War Within Islam" – *The New York Times* book review of *No god but God*: www.nytimes.com/2005/05/29/books/review/no-god-but-god-the-war-within-islam.html

"Writer Reza Aslan, 'No god but God,'" National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* interview, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4557220

Reza Aslan argues that the voice of violence is not the mainstream voice of Islam, OWN interview with Oprah Winfrey, www.mediamatters.org/video/2016/04/17/own-reza-aslan-explains-what-s-wrong-asking-where-voice-moderate-islam-speaking-out-against-violence/209957

"Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World," Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/26/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world

Projected country populations, by religion: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table>

"U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream," www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims 7.26.17

quran.com – user-friendly Qur'an translation with verse-by-verse translation and recitation, as well as explanatory mini-lectures

www.musawah.org – an international movement promoting equality and justice within Muslim families and focusing on issues of women's equity

www.mpac.org – the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a U.S. nonprofit that focuses on promoting civic engagement among American Muslims

www.islamicity.org – a comprehensive Islamic community website, with everything from basic information on rituals to news articles on Muslims around the world

www.ispu.org – website of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, the only U.S. think tank to focus exclusively on issues relating to Islam and Muslims, with a focus on American Muslims

• other titles of interest

Another overview of the religion:

Islam: A Short History, by Karen Armstrong

On the life of Muhammad:

The Story of Muhammad, by Lesley Hazleton

On contemporary Iran:

The Ayatollah Begs to Differ, by Hooman Majd

On being an American Muslim:

How to Be a Muslim, by Haroon Moghul; *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak*, edited by Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur

On gender in Islam:

Salaam, Love: American Muslim Men on Love, Sex, and Intimacy, edited by Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi

On Islamophobia and Western government surveillance of Muslims:

The Muslims are Coming!, by Arun Kundnani

On global culture and contemporary Islam:

Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam, by Mark LeVine

On the evolution of Sunni extremism:

The Terror Years: From al-Qaeda to the Islamic State, by Lawrence Wright

• about this guide's writer

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• notes



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