PART ONE

THE FORMATION OF
THE ISLAMIC
TRADITION
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ISLAM IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The Problem of Defining Islam

If we were to draw a circle and designate the contents of that circle as the complete set of phenomena that fall under the rubric of Islam, how would we decide what would be included within the circle and what must be excluded? Provocative examples are easy to find. Do the actions and motivations of those who fight for the self-designated Islamic State in Syria and northern Iraq or those who destroyed New York’s World Trade Center or the London Underground bombers fall within the circle of Islam? Or should “true” Muslims abhor and repudiate such actions? The problem is not limited to the question of violence, of course. Does the rigorous constraint of women’s rights by IS, the Taliban of Afghanistan, or the present regime of Saudi Arabia belong in the circle? If so, how can the ideas of Muslim feminists like Amina Wadud or Fatima Mernissi also fit alongside them? When Elijah Muhammad, twentieth-century Prophet of the Nation of Islam asserted that the white man is the devil and the black man God, was he representing Islam? Reaching back into Islamic history we can multiply the examples. Do the doctrines of Shi’ite Muslims who taught that ‘Ali was an incarnation of God fall within the circle of Islam? What of the speculations of the Islamic philosophers who held that the universe is eternal and treated revelation as little more than philosophy for the masses? Were the targeted assassinations of the Nizârî Ismâ‘îlis “Islamic”? What of the modern Ahmadiyya
movement, rejected as heretical by many Muslims, but whose members insist they represent the true expression of Islam?

This exercise quickly exposes a common confusion. For the believing Muslim the question is meaningful. It is essential for the believer to determine where the boundaries of his faith community lie and to decide what represents Islam and what does not. But for those, whether believers or not, who seek to understand Islam as a movement of people and ideas in history, this way of thinking will not do. Whether we take an anthropological, historical, or religious studies perspective, all of the phenomena I have listed belong within the realm of the study of Islam.

And this raises a further problem that is central to any attempt to offer an overview of a major religious tradition. If such conflicting movements of people and ideas all belong in the circle of Islam, how is one to go about introducing the whole lot of them? How is it possible to “introduce” such a diverse, indeed contradictory, set of phenomena? One common answer is that the attempt is in itself misleading and fruitless; the idea of “Islam” with an upper-case “I” is a false construct; we should rather speak of many different lower-case “islams” which must be examined as separate phenomena. To paraphrase a political maxim, all religion is local, and to imagine that all these different “islams” have something in common which can be labeled “Islam” is to imagine something that has no reality. Since I have already written several hundreds of pages in which I have tried to introduce Islam with an upper-case “I,” it is too late for me to take this perspective. Nor am I inclined to do so.

My own perspective is best introduced by analogy. When a student sets out to study a language, Arabic for instance, she will soon learn that there are many quite different varieties of Arabic. Yet she will not normally trouble herself with the question of whether such different linguistic phenomena deserve to be called “Arabic.” And she is quite right not to be troubled. Arab grammatical police might worry about demarcating the precise boundaries of true “Arabic,” but from a common-sense perspective it is clear that all of the different dialects and varieties of the Arabic language rightly share the family name. Even if speakers of Moroccan and Palestinian Arabic may sometimes have some difficulty communicating, they all belong within the circle of Arabic speakers. In particular, the dialects they speak share sufficient common roots, sufficient common vocabulary, or a close enough grammatical structure to make it clear that they belong to the same family. It would be perfectly reasonable for a linguist to set out to survey the common structures, lexicon, and heritage of the whole family of dialects that are called Arabic, and so to introduce Arabic.

This analogy may help in another way. A linguist who sets out to write a descriptive survey of a family of dialects is doing something quite different from the language instructor whose job it is to teach a “standard” form of the language. While the goal of the language instructor is to help the student to become immersed in and to actually use the language, the academic linguist has no such ambition or expectation. In a similar way, I have little expectation that a book
like this will be much help to anyone who comes to it hoping to find help in becoming a practicing Muslim.

It is in that spirit that I have set out to introduce Islam here, and this book might be seen as an attempt to explain the evolution of the common grammar and vocabulary of Islam. Thus the Islamic feminist and the Taliban both belong here, for although they are diametrically opposed in their conclusions, they make use of a common vocabulary and reference a common heritage. Similarly the Muslim pacifist and the suicide bomber, the Nizârî “assassin” and the Sunni religious scholar who condemns him, are responding, albeit in very different ways, to a shared tradition. Indeed, they are contending for control of that tradition.

Mapping the Islamic World

Clearly the set of phenomena to which we apply the label “Islam” is exceedingly varied, and there is enough complexity in the literatures, histories, philosophies, theologies, rituals, and politics of Islamic civilization to engage many lifetimes of study. Oversimplifying will not do. But keeping that danger in mind, we can still attempt to gain some sense of the big picture before our attention is consumed by details. There is a place for the global view that excludes most detail just as there is for the street-level view that includes it all.

A map turns out to be a useful starting point. If we peruse a map of the contemporary Islamic world, what will we notice? We can begin with a simple demographic survey. Map 1 is a graphic depiction of the world’s Muslim population by country. The first thing to notice about this map is that it includes the entire world. The time when we could depict the Muslim world on a single hemisphere is long past, although many cartographers have yet to catch on. The contemporary Muslim community, the umma, is worldwide. Muslims live, work, raise families, and pray everywhere, from China to California, from Chile to Canada; there is almost no place on earth where Muslims have not settled. This simple fact turns out to be both easily forgotten and immensely important to understanding contemporary Islam. The modern Muslim diaspora is shaping the course of Islam, and of the world. Many critical issues facing contemporary Muslims arise precisely because so many influential Muslims are German, French, British, Canadian, Dutch, or Australian. Muslims work throughout the world as scientists and scholars, teachers and doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs, farmers and factory workers. Their responses to this geographical mobility and the pluralism of the varied societies in which they live fuel rapid change in Muslim communities, and significant conflict among Muslims as well as between some Muslims and their non-Muslim neighbors. The experience of Muslims as a truly worldwide community has stimulated new and pressing discussions of the relation of Islam to women’s rights, human rights, bioethics, religious diversity, tolerance, and freedom of expression.
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Controversies over cartoon depictions of Muhammad are a case in point. In 2006 the Danish newspaper *al-Jostens* published cartoon images of Muhammad. Muslim reaction, sometimes violent, led to wide scale republication of the images in the name of freedom of expression. In the following decade similar controversies followed a similar pattern, culminating most recently in 2015 with the deadly attacks on the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*. The publication of the *al-Jostens* and *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons, and the varied Muslim responses, were a product of a Muslim community that spans the globe. The cartoons were published in the first place because the Muslim community in Europe is sizeable enough to motivate fierce debate about the compatibility of Islam with European cultural and political tradition. Authors like the pseudonymous Ba’t Yeor raise the specter of “Eurabia,” a Europe held hostage to Islamic radicalism because Europeans have failed to recognize the threat to freedom and to European tradition posed by Islam. The Muslim response to the cartoons was worldwide, however, and often the fiercest reactions come from outside of Europe.

But while Islam is worldwide, our map also gives rise to a second, paradoxical observation: Muslims are heavily concentrated in Asia and Africa. More

Map 1  Distribution of Muslim population by country
Muslims are concentrated in Asia, but significant numbers of Muslims now live on every continent. This map should be read with caution, however. Russia, for example, has a population of more than 14 million Muslims, but this population is not evenly distributed throughout its vast territory as the map seems to suggest, nor does Alaska have significant numbers of Muslims. China has a large Muslim population, but there is a great deal of uncertainty about its actual size. Population figures used for this map were drawn from the database at adherents.com.
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Map 2  Major languages spoken by Muslims
The map shows something of the linguistic diversity of the Muslim world. For a
catalogue of all of the hundreds of languages spoken by Muslims, see the source from
which the data for this map was drawn, Raymond G. Gordon, Jr., ed., 2005. Ethnologue:
www.ethnologue.com/.

than 50 percent of the world’s Muslims live in just eight countries: Indonesia,
India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt. This list is surprising
for two reasons. First, the majority population of only one of these, Egypt,
is Arabic speaking. The range of cultures and languages for which the most
populous Muslim countries are home is staggering. More than twice as many
Muslims speak Indonesian, Bengali, or Urdu as speak Arabic. Map 2, portraying
the major languages spoken by Muslims, hints at this cultural and linguis-
tic diversity but also grossly understates it by leaving out hundreds of smaller
languages.

The second surprise is that a great many contemporary Muslims live in reli-
giously plural societies. In India, Muslims are, despite their numbers, dwarfed
by the size of the majority population. China, with 40 million or more Mus-
lims, presents a similar case. In both countries the Muslim minority faces real or
perceived threats from the majority. Nigeria, too, is religiously divided. About
50 percent of its population is Muslim, 40 percent Christian, and 10 percent
animist. Communal tensions there are high. Many other nations with signifi-
cant Muslim populations – Sudan, Lebanon, the Balkan nations, Malaysia – are
also multi-ethnic and religiously plural. Consequently a large number of con-
temporary Muslims do not live in Muslim-majority societies. Rather, they live
in societies in which they must live, work, and worship amongst non-Muslim
neighbors.
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Figure 1.1 Linxia, Gansu province, China, Da Gongbei Mosque, mausoleum of Qi Jingyi and a center of the Qadiriyya Sufi order. The Islamic declaration of faith, the Shahada, is rendered in calligraphy above the arch. Source: Roland and Sabrina Michaud / akg-images.

We can add a final observation: among these most populous Muslim countries, most are former European colonies, and all faced significant economic and social upheavals in the twentieth century. During the last fifty years all have contended with high rates of poverty, uneven distribution of wealth, and accompanying political turmoil. In other words, the vast majority of Muslims in the contemporary world live in societies which bore the brunt of colonialism, and which have experienced rapid and disorienting social and economic change in the course of decolonization.

To summarize: the Muslim community – the umma – truly spans the globe, and thus faces all of the challenges of globalization and pluralism; in a great many countries Muslims are a minority community; and, finally, Muslims are demographically concentrated in politically and economically tumultuous regions of the world. Gathered together, these varied facts make for a turbulent picture. We should hardly be surprised if many contemporary Muslims view their community as embattled and besieged. Large numbers of Muslims have
suffered a great deal at the hands of European colonizers, Chinese communists, Hindu zealots, and homegrown tyrants. Many are not free to order their lives as conscience or community norms might dictate, either because they live as minorities in societies dominated by non-Muslims or because, even in Muslim-majority societies, they suffer under repressive regimes.

Arabs and Non-Arabs

But dwelling, as we have, on the diversity of the Islamic world, raises an important question. If the majority of Muslims are Indonesian, Indian, Bengali, Pakistani, Nigerian, or Chinese, then why do we tend to think first of Arabs and Arab culture when we think about Islam? And why do books like this one spend so much space making the obvious point that non-Arab Muslims vastly outnumber Arabs, when we know quite well that much of the book will focus on the Arabic-speaking Middle East? Stereotypes become stereotypes for a reason, and in this case the reasons are fairly simple. Islam originated in Arabia. The Qur’an is in Arabic. The classical intellectual tradition of Islamic civilization was recorded in Arabic. Islamic religious ideas and cultural norms were rooted first of all in Arab culture. For all of these reasons Arabs exert and will continue to exert an influence on Islam disproportionate to their demographic strength. Important as it is, and although nearly 200 million Muslims speak it, Indonesian will never be the classical language of Islam or the lingua franca of Islamic scholarship. Jakarta will never be the worldwide center of pilgrimage. It is too late for that. So long as Muslims continue to read the Qur’an, study Islamic law, and value their heritage, Arabic and the Arabic-speaking world will remain of critical importance. This should be no more surprising than the observation that the Vatican, a tiny city-state in Italy that still publishes documents in Latin, has an outsized influence on the worldwide community of Christians.

The reality, then, is that a relatively small population of Arabs exerts an outsized influence on the religious and intellectual culture of a far larger population of non-Arab Muslims. The result is a dynamic interaction between a centripetal pull toward uniformity and the centrifugal forces of cultural and linguistic diversity. We see this tension in medieval Muslim travel writers like Ibn Battuta. There was no end to the strangeness that Ibn Battuta encountered as he traveled through India, China, and Indonesia. Yet wherever he went he also found himself on familiar ground. Throughout Islamic history, and continuing into the contemporary period, Muslim practice has been constantly shaped by local environments, while local variations of Islam are constantly under pressure to conform to a uniform standard. We will see this pattern especially in the growth of Sufism, which is often adaptive to local practice, in contrast with the spread of various forms of fundamentalism, which favor uniform adherence to an ideal norm.
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Sunnis and Shiʿites

There is more to the diversity of Islam than language, culture, and geography. In fact, a major sectarian fault line splits the Muslim world. Roughly 80 percent of Muslims identify themselves as Sunnis. About 18 percent call themselves Shiʿites. Shiʿites are themselves divided into several communities, and small sects make up the remaining 2 percent. Such a major schism seems to demand explanation, and the short explanation is that Shiʿites and Sunnis are divided over the questions of leadership and authority within the umma. The division is rooted in the early years of Islamic history when Muslims faced the urgent question of who should succeed Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community. Shiʿites supported the leadership of Muhammad’s cousin, ʿAli, and his descendants. They came to see authority, both religious and political, as vested in divinely appointed leaders, beginning with ʿAli. By contrast, Sunnis adopted a pragmatic political stance. The Sunni theory of the caliphate required that the leader of the Muslims be male, a member of the Prophet’s tribe of the Quraysh, and meet certain basic qualifications for fitness. Beyond these broad expectations, it was up to the community to decide. Moreover, although the Sunni caliphs had religious obligations and were expected to guard and defend Islamic values, they did not come to be viewed as sources of religious authority in their own right. Authority, for Sunnis, came to be vested in texts – the Qurʾan and the Sunna – and in the scholars who were the guardians and interpreters of those texts. For Shiʿites, by contrast, religious authority was focused on the family of the Prophet and its descendants, humans especially chosen by God to represent him on earth. Many other differences – in law, ritual, attitudes toward suffering, and eschatology – grew out of this basic difference over leadership and authority. In particular Shiʿites make martyrdom and redemptive suffering central values, and these values are given dramatic shape in annual celebrations during the month of Muḥarram.

These differences between Sunnis and Shiʿites are significant, but they would be easy to overplay. The two groups share more than divides them, and throughout most of Islamic history Shiʿite communities were demographically dispersed amongst the majority Sunni population. It was only after the emergence of the Safavid empire in the sixteenth century that Iran and southern Iraq came to be almost exclusively Shiʿite. Even in the contemporary Islamic world, where conflicts between resurgent Shiʿites and Sunnis are once again becoming important, it is striking how much the two communities have in common, and this raises a broader question: in the face of the stunning diversity among Muslims, what holds Islam together? Is there anything that all Muslims agree on, whether Sunnis or Shiʿites, Arabs or Indonesians, twelfth-century theologians or twentieth-century scientists? A simple reversal of our map exercise will focus the question. When we survey a map, we place ourselves at some imaginary point in space from which we pretend we can see all. And from that vantage point, we cannot help but be struck by the scope and variety of the
Figure 1.2  Indian Shi’ite Muslim devotees sit on a decorated float during a religious procession marking ‘Ashūrā’ in Allahabad November 15, 2013. ‘Ashūrā’ is observed on the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram and commemorates the death of Imam Ḥusayn, a son of ‘Ali and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed by armies of the Yazīd near Karbala in 680 CE. Source: Sanjay Kanojia/AFP/Getty Images.

world of Islam. But suppose we descend from our imaginary lookout and zoom in on one particular place at one particular time – a local mosque at the time of Friday prayers. This is a field trip that most readers will have little difficulty arranging. On such a visit, what will we notice? And in particular, what will we notice that will be more or less the same regardless of geography, ethnicity, or historical era?

**Islamic Ritual**

The first thing we are likely to notice, often before even arriving at the mosque, will be heard not seen. The voicing of the call to prayer, the adhān, whether by the unaided human voice or broadcast over loudspeakers, is part of the universal experience of Muslims. These are the first words whispered into the ears of most infants born to Muslim families. The words of the call (although not its intonation) are always the same, and always in Arabic. The founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, tried to change this, imposing a call to prayer in Turkish in the early part of the twentieth century. The innovation was deeply unpopular, however, and only an iron hand could successfully enforce it. After 1950 democracy undid the change. Now, five times each day, should
they choose to listen, Turks, along with Bengalis, Malays, and Canadians, are summoned to worship with the same Arabic words that Muslims throughout history have heard:

- **Allâhu akbar**
  - God is great (repeated four times)

- **ashhadu anna lâ ilâhâ illa Allâh**
  - I testify that there is no god but God (repeated twice)

- **ashhadu anna Muḥammadan rasūl Allâh**
  - I testify that Muhammad is the Prophet of God

- **ḥayya `ala al-ṣalāt**
  - Hasten to prayer (repeated twice)

- **ḥayya `ala al-falāḥ**
  - Hasten to success (repeated twice)

- **[ṣ-ṣalāt khayrun min an-nawm]**
  - [Prayer is better than sleep] (Sunnis; morning only)

- **[ḥayya `ala khayr al-`amal]**
  - [Hasten to the best of works] (Shiʿites only)

- **Allâhu akbar**
  - God is great (repeated twice)

- **lâ ilâhâ illa Allâh**
  - There is no God but God (Sunnis once, Shiʿites twice)

It is worth noting the subtle differences between Sunni and Shiʿite practice. These differences are sufficient to mark out a separate communal identity without, however, negating the essential unity of Muslim experience. It is also worth noting that the call to prayer incorporates the most elemental of Muslim credal statements, the Shahāda, or confession of faith. With the call to prayer we would seem to encounter the Islamic belief system at its most basic, stripped of commentary or controversy: God is One and without rival, the messenger of the One God is Muhammad, and worship is God’s most basic requirement of his creatures. We will have plenty of opportunity to complicate this picture as we proceed, but at this point it may be worth pausing to admire the simplicity and directness of this message. A person who takes this message to heart is bound to live with a certain seriousness and focus.

If the visitor heeds the summons of the adhān to come to prayer, he will arrive at the mosque to be greeted at the entrance by a collection of shoes. Here is an image with universality that extends well beyond even the Muslim community. The removal of shoes marks the borderline between sacred and profane space. As we enter the mosque the shoes remind us that we are leaving the marketplace and the mundane world behind, entering what Mircea Eliade calls sacred space and sacred time.

The mosque itself has few universal features. It may or may not have a dome, minarets, a pulpit, a source of flowing water for ritual ablutions, or a niche, the miḥrāb, indicating the direction of prayer. The mosque, at its most basic, is simply a place of worship as its Arabic designation, masjid, communicates. Any space can be transformed into a masjid, whether a rectangle marked out in the sand, an empty office, or a rented church basement. Mosque architecture has been remarkably varied through Islamic history, although modern times and Saudi Arabian money have brought increasing pressure toward uniformity.
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Figure 1.3  A Muslim father whispers the call to prayer to his newborn child. Ideally, the words of the adhán are the first words heard by a Muslim infant, and will be heard at the start of every act of worship throughout his life. Photo: World Religions Photo Library/Alamy

What goes on once the worshiper enters the sacred space and joins other worshippers for prayer is also remarkably uniform, and like the call to prayer, is part of the universal experience of Muslims. We will have occasion to describe the detailed requirements of Muslim prayer in chapter 10. For now it is sufficient to note that believers face the same direction, toward Mecca, they recite the same passages of the Qur’an that generations of Muslims have recited, and they follow a prescribed pattern of movements and prostrations that has remained uniform for centuries. The ritual prayer, in other words, is a universal aspect of Muslim experience, even for those Muslims who may have abandoned it. It is a ritual that any Muslim, whether Sunni or Shi‘ite, whether from the tenth century or the twenty-first, will immediately find familiar not just in broad outlines, but in specific detail.
The uniformity of practice demonstrated in the ritual prayer is mirrored in other aspects of Muslim religious practice. The rites followed by pilgrims to Mecca when they perform the Hajj and the rules followed by Muslims when they fast during the month of Ramadan, are all remarkably uniform. So too is the value placed on charitable giving, zakat. Indeed, it is with good reason that every introduction to Islam begins by outlining these so-called pillars of Islam. Like pillars in a mosque, the words of the Shahâda, the practice of ṣalât, the rules for fasting, the rites of pilgrimage, and the value of generosity enshrined in the notion of zakat seem to remain fixed, solid, and unchanging. In contrast with many other aspects of Muslim experience, essential Muslim religious duties have remained remarkably stable over time and across cultures.

How can we account for this picture, at once so diverse and so valuing of uniformity? On the one hand, the Islamic world is dizzyingly varied, and one cannot presume to know what any given Muslim values or believes without first asking. Indeed, the most practical nugget of advice I usually offer newcomers to the study of Islam is not to assume that one’s textbook will be reflected in reality. A new Muslim acquaintance may, in the modern world, be influenced quite as much by Marx as by Muhammad. Yet in the face of all of the diversity of the Muslim community Islam still offers Muslims a remarkably stable set of core practices – what I called earlier in this chapter a common vocabulary and grammar of Islam – that would be recognizable as in some sense “Islamic” by any Muslim of any cultural origin or any historical period.

What to Expect from This Book

How this came about – how Islam came to be what it is today in all of its variety and its paradoxical unity – is the story I have set out to tell in this book. It is a story that is first of all rooted in history, and to begin to explore that history we begin well before the rise of Islam. Part I explores the historical and religious context of the rise of Islam, and surveys the central elements of the Islamic tradition. We begin with pre-Islamic Arabia, and are immediately faced with a critical question: how significant is the Arab background for understanding the rise of Islam? Is sixth-century Arabia a credible context for the rise of a new, vigorous monotheistic faith and a vibrant civilization? And, if not, where should we look for the “cradle” of Islam? These questions will lead us, in chapter 3, on an exploration of the civilizations and religions of the Near East before the rise of Islam.

With chapter 4 we begin to examine the sacred history of Islam, beginning with the key narrative in that history, the life of Muhammad. The story of Muhammad, we will find, is far more colorful and fantastic than many modern treatments of his life allow and it is rooted squarely in the religious context of the Near East. Chapters 5 and 6 take on the two thorniest questions in the field
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of Islamic Studies – how the Qur'an came into its present form, and the authenticity of the hadith literature on which the traditional story of Islamic origins, including the life of Muhammad, is based. It is in these chapters that we will have to contend with two centuries of critical scholarship that has increasingly brought into question the traditional account of how Islam came into being.

In part II we turn from sacred history and the formative elements of Islam to the complex historical context in which Islamic civilization grew to maturity. We begin with the Arab conquests. These conquests stand as one of the great turning points of world history, but how much really changed in the Near East? Less, it turns out, than we sometimes imagine. Chapter 8 examines the worldview of the early Arab rulers. In this formative phase in the shaping of Islamic identity, what did these new rulers of the world believe, what motivated them, and how do we know? Finally, in chapter 9, we follow the story forward to the rise of the ’Abbasid caliphate, the maturing of Islamic political thought, and the emergence of the major schisms in Islam.

Part III surveys the great institutions of Islamic civilization in its maturity, beginning with Islamic law in chapter 10. The elucidation of God’s law occupied the greatest minds of the Islamic world, and the resulting system was a signature achievement of Islamic civilization. The ideals of Islamic law continued to give the world of Islam unity and coherence long after it had fragmented politically. By comparison with the law, and in contrast with its status as the queen of sciences for Christians, Islamic theology was a lowly stepchild. But it is in the field of theology that we most clearly see the articulation of a distinct Sunni worldview. Finally, in chapter 12 we turn to the spiritual center of Islam, Sufism. These three great institutions – the law, theology, and Sufism – are the defining features of Islam in its maturity. In combination they gave it the coherence, the brilliance, and the resiliency that marked Islamic civilization at its height.

This resiliency would be severely tested in history, however, especially in the modern period. Part IV examines Muslim responses to the challenge of history and patterns of renewal and reform in Islam. The ways in which Muslims met the challenges of the Crusades and the Mongol invasions are both of intrinsic interest and illuminating for our understanding of what would follow. What did follow was first of all a florescence of great Islamic empires on the eve of modernity. The great “gunpowder empires” – Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal – arose simultaneous with the first foreshadowing of Western power, and the religious environment in these empires had a profound effect on Islamic responses to Western imperialism. From the eighteenth century on, the power and pervasiveness of Western civilization has proven to be a challenge unlike any in Islamic history. The heart of the final section is an examination of the varied responses of Muslims to the West, and the effects that the encounter with the West has had on developments in Islamic law, theology, and worldview. The concluding chapters focus on the challenges of globalization and pluralism, tracing the rise of global Salafism on the one hand and the emergence of Islamic liberalism and feminism on the other.
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**Essential Resources for the Study of Islam**

The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (*EI*) will be the student’s best friend in any serious study of topics related to Islam. This massive work is difficult to get to know, but will abundantly repay the effort. *EI* comes in two editions. The second, recognizable by its oversized green volumes, is naturally preferred but the first edition remains a monumental scholarly production. A third electronic edition is also underway. Many libraries will now offer electronic access, and an electronic version is now available from the publisher, E. J. Brill. An abbreviated volume of excerpts from the first edition is available in *The Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

So much for the good news. The bad news for the newcomer to the field is that headwords in *EI* are given in transliterated Arabic. Thus if one is interested in Islamic mysticism, one must know to look under *Taṣawwuf* rather than *Sufism*. Consequently, non-specialists will need to make frequent use of the subject index. The *EI* also has other peculiarities. The system for transliterating the languages of the Islamic world, for instance, follows a German tradition of transliteration, using “dj” rather than the now more common “j,” and “k” rather than “q.” Once these hurdles are overcome and the desired entry found, the articles themselves will prove dense and daunting. They are written by specialists for specialists. Still, many of the entries represent the definitive word, sometimes the only word, on their particular topic and all of the articles supply extensive bibliographies.

Serious research on Islam is unimaginable without *EI*. But in addition to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, there has recently been a frenzied rush to publish other encyclopedias with relevance to Islam; some of them are quite good and draw more heavily on the work of younger scholars than the staid and ponderous *EI*. Among these John Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* (1995) and the *Encyclopaedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (2004) are worthy of mention. A number of reference works, while not specifically focused on Islam, provide excellent coverage of topics related to Islam, sometimes in a much more accessible manner than *EI*. Among these Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, and André Vauchez (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages*, stand out, often providing a convenient starting point for many topics.

Stephen Humphries provides an excellent bibliographical introduction to the field of Islamic history, geared toward graduate students, in his *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (1991). Older bibliographical guides include Derek Hopwood and Diana Grimwood-Jones’s *The Middle East and Islam* (1972), Jean Sauvaget’s *Introduction to the History of the Muslim East* (1965), and George Atiyeh’s *The Contemporary Middle East 1943–1973* (1975). It will not be long, however, before most serious students of Islam will have to face J. D. Pearson’s *Index Islamicus, 1906–1955* (1958) and its many supplements. *Index Islamicus* lists just about every article written about Islam in a European language. The trick is to decipher its idiosyncratic organization. The index is arranged topically, with
the list of topics given at the front of each volume, and because there are many separate volumes without a comprehensive index the print edition is laborious to use. An electronic version is now available, making bibliographic research in Islamic Studies a great deal easier.


If this list seems rather daunting for the beginner, it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that the development of Islam spans fourteen centuries, that the Islamic world encompasses a vast range of languages and cultures which now span the globe from China to North America, that about one-fifth of the world’s people call themselves Muslims, and that many of those billion-plus people disagree vehemently with one another on the most basic matters of faith and practice. One cannot begin to study such a subject without some effort. Those who shy away from complexity had better stop here.

**Questions for Study and Discussion**

1. Why is it important to highlight both the varied and universal features of modern Islam?
2. What are the dangers and benefits of approaching the big picture of Islam with a capital “I”?
3. What are the dangers and benefits of focusing on “islams” with a lower-case “i”?