TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF ISLAM

WHAT IS ISLAM?

*Islam, a great monotheistic religion, provides spiritual and moral life,
and cultural and sometimes national identity, to more than a billion people.*

ABDULAZIZ SACHEDINA

In the mass media, Islam and Muslims are frequently depicted as the "other" in global politics and cultural warfare. The Iranian revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978–79, the tragic death of 241 marines near Beirut airport in 1983, and the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993 are among the violent images associated with Muslims. But those images resonate poorly with the majority of Muslims. Most Muslims, like other human beings, are engaged in their day-to-day life in this world, strug-

gling to provide for their usually large extended families, working for peaceful resolution to the conflicts that face them, and committed to honor universal human values of freedom and peace with justice.

Muslims in general take their religion seriously. For many it is the central focus of their spiritual and moral life. For others, less religiously inclined, it remains a source of their cultural and sometimes national identity. So the word *Islam* carries broader ramifications than is usually recognized in the media. As the name of the religion, *Islam* means "submission to God's will." It is also applied to cultures and civilizations that developed under its religious impulse.

Historically as well as psychologically, Islam shares the monotheistic religious genome with Judaism and Christianity. Islamic civilization has acted as the repository of the Hebrew, Persian, Indian, and Hellenistic intellectual traditions and cultures.

Historical Development

Islam was proclaimed by Muhammad (570–632), the Prophet of Islam and the founder of Islamic polity, in Arabia. Seventh-century Arabia was socially and politically ripe for the emergence of new leadership. When Muhammad was growing up in Mecca, by then an important center of flourishing trade between Byzantium and the Indian Ocean, he was aware of the social inequities and injustices that existed in the tribal society dominated by a political oligarchy. Before Islam, religious practices and attitudes were determined by the tribal aristocracy, who also upheld tribal values—bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in revenge, protection of the weak, defiance of the strong, generosity, and hospitality—as part of their moral code. The growth of Mecca as a commercial center had weakened this tribal moral code and concern

for the less fortunate in society, leaving them without any security. It was in the midst of a serious socioeconomic imbalance between the rich and the poor, between extreme forms of individualism and tyrannical tribal solidarity, that Islam came to proclaim an ethical order based on interpersonal justice.

The founder and his community

Muhammad's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six years old. In accordance with Arab tribal norms, he was brought

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Islam: One of the World's Great Religions

Islam was proclaimed by Muhammad (570–632), the Prophet of Islam and the founder of Islamic polity.

After Muhammad's death, the Islamic community divided into the Sunni ("people of tradition") and the Shiites ("partisans").

The Sunni have mostly a quietist and authoritarian stance, while the Shiites tend to be more activist and radical.

The Muslim faith is built on Five Pillars.

Islam today continues to inspire more than a billion people to go beyond a self-centered existence to establish a just society.

up first by his grandfather and then, following his grandfather's death, by his uncle. As a young man he was employed by a wealthy Meccan woman, Khadija, as her trade agent. He was twenty-five when he accepted a marriage offer from Khadija, who was fifteen years his senior. When Muhammad received his prophetic call at the age of forty, Khadija was the first person to become "Muslim" ("believer in Islam").

Meccan leadership resisted Muhammad and persecuted him and his followers, who were drawn mainly from among the poor and disenfranchised. Muhammad decided to emigrate to Medina, an oasis town in the north. This emigration in 622 marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar, as well as the genesis of the first Islamic polity. (Muslims marked their new year, 1418, on May 8, 1997.)

Muhammad as a statesman instituted a series of reforms to create his community, the Umma, on the basis of religious affiliation. This also established a distinctive feature of Islamic faith, which does not admit any separation between the religious and temporal spheres of human activity and has insisted on the ideal unity of civil and moral authority under the divinely ordained legal system, the Shari'ah.

At Muhammad's death, he had brought the whole of Arabia under the Medina government, but he apparently left no explicit instruction regarding succession to his religious-political authority. The early Muslim leaders who succeeded him as caliph (meaning political and spiritual "successor") exercised Muhammad's political authority, making political and military decisions that led to the expansion of their domain beyond Arabia. Within a century Muslim armies had conquered the region from the Nile in North Africa to the Amu Darya in Central Asia east to India.

This phenomenal growth into a vast empire required an Islamic legal system for the administration of the highly developed political systems of the conquered Persian and Byzantine regions. Muslim jurists therefore formulated a comprehensive legal code, using the ethical and legal principles set forth in the Qur'an.

Differences of opinion on certain critical issues emerged as soon as Muhammad died. The question of succession was one of the major issues that divided the community into the Sunni and the Shiites. Those supporting the candidacy of Abu Bakr (ca. 573–634), an elderly associate of the Prophet, as caliph formed the majority of the community and gradually came to be known as the Sunni ("people of tradition"); those who acclaimed 'Ali (ca. 600–661), Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, as the "imam" (religious and political leader) designated by the Prophet formed the minority group, known as the Shiites ("partisans").

The civil strife in Muslim polity gave rise to two distinct, and in some ways contradictory, attitudes among Muslims that can be observed even today: quietist and activist. Those upholding a quietist posture supported an authoritarian stance, to the point of feigning unquestioning and immediate obedience to almost any nominally Muslim political authority. Exponents of an activist posture supported radical politics and taught that under certain circumstances people had the right to revolt against evil Muslim rulers.

Gradually the quietist and authoritarian stance became associated with the majority Sunni Muslims, although every now and then they had their share of radicalism, as seen in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. The activist-radical stance came to be associated with Shiite Islam, represented by Iran today.

The Muslim community has continued to live in the shadow of the idealized history of early Islam, when religious and secular authority was united under pious caliphs. Efforts to actualize this ideal today give rise to radical politics among a number of religious-minded Muslim groups, usually designated pejoratively as "fundamentalists," who regard *jihad* (war) against their corrupt rulers as a legitimate tool for change.

What Do Muslims believe?

Muslims derive their religious beliefs and practices from two sources: the Qur'an, which they regard as the "Book of God," and the Sunna, or the exemplary conduct of the Prophet. The Qur'an consists of the revelations Muhammad received intermittently over the twenty-two years from the time of his calling in 610 until his death. Muslims believe that the Qur'an was directly communicated by God through the archangel Gabriel, and accordingly, it is regarded as inerrant and immutably preserved. It has served as the normative source for deriving principal theological, ethical, and legal doctrines. The Sunna (meaning "trodden path") has functioned as the elaboration of the Qur'anic revelation. It provides details about each and every precept and deed attributed to Muhammad. The narratives that carried such information are known as *hadith*. In the ninth century, Muslim scholars developed an elaborate system for the theological and legal classification of these hadith to derive certain beliefs and practices.

In this connection it is relevant to remember the Rushdie affair of the 1980s. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was directed toward discrediting both the Qur'an and the Prophet as the normative sources for Muslim religiosity, which, understandably, enraged more than a billion Muslims around the world. And while many Muslims may not have endorsed the death sentence passed on Rushdie by the Ayatollah Khomeini, they unanimously condemned the novel for its profanity in connection with the founder of Islam and Muslim scriptures.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The Muslim faith is built upon Five Pillars, as follow:

The First Pillar is the *shahada*, the profession of faith: "There is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God." This is the formula through which a person converts to Islam. Belief in God constitutes the integrity of human existence, individually and as a member of society. The Qur'an speaks about God as the being whose presence is felt in everything that exists; everything that happens is an indicator of the divine. God is the "knower of the Unseen and the Visible; . . . the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, . . . the Sovereign Lord, the All-holy, the Giver of peace, the Keeper of faith, the All-preserver, the All-mighty, the All-powerful, the Most High" (Qur'an, 59:23). Faith in God results in being safe, well integrated, sound, and at peace.

Human beings are not born in sin, but they are forgetful. To help them realize their potential God sends prophets to "remind" humanity of their covenant with God (7:172). Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are regarded as "messengers" sent to organize their people on the basis of the guidance revealed by God.

The Second Pillar is daily worship (*salat*), required five times a day: at dawn, midday, afternoon, evening, and night. These prayers are short and require bowing and prostrations. Muslims may worship anywhere, preferably in congregation, facing Mecca. They are re-

Islam and the Arabic Language

By Tamara Sonn

Those are the verses of the glorious book. We have revealed it as an Arabic recitation, so that you will understand. (Qur'an, 12:2)

These words from Islamic scripture, and others like them, reveal the integral relationship between the Arabic language and Islam. Muslims believe that all revelation comes from the same divine source, so there is no need to be concerned that the Jews have their Torah and the Christians have their Gospels, for example. The Qur'an is simply divine revelation sent to speakers of Arabic, according to this sacred book. "Yet before it was the Book of Moses for a model and a mercy; and this is a book confirming in Arabic, to warn the evil-doers and bring good tidings to the good-doers" (46:11–12). The Qur'an, therefore, is essentially Arabic. But that does not mean Islam is only for Arabs.

According to the Qur'an, no one can be forced to convert. "In matters of religion there is no compulsion" (2:256). But those who choose to become Muslim must pray five times a day, reciting from the Qur'an in Arabic. The role of the Arabic language in Islam, therefore, remains central, despite the fact that the vast majority of Muslims are neither Arab nor Arabic speaking.

The majority of Muslims worldwide today "read" Arabic for prayer the way Roman Catholics used to "read" Latin at mass. They can make out the words but know the general ideas represented primarily through vernacular interpretations. Yet there is no movement to substitute the vernacular for the original language, as there was in Catholicism before the Second Vatican Council. On the contrary, emphasis on the importance of studying Arabic is increasing.

Only one country has ever authorized a translation of the Qur'an. Turkey, created after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, stressed the Turkish language in an effort to distinguish itself from the rest of the Muslim world. Even in Turkey, however, prayer continued to be in Arabic, and today there is a strong movement to return to Arabic as the universal language of Islam.

Part of the contemporary stress on Arabic results from the worldwide movement of rebirth (*al-nahda*) in Islam. After centuries of eclipse and Euro-Christian domination, the Muslim world entered the twentieth century with a renewed commitment to its roots as a means of reviving both cultural strength and political independence. Formal independence from colonial control, however, left most of the Muslim world afflicted with severe economic and political underdevelopment. Experiments with European-style social and political models have been judged failures, benefiting only a few. The result has been a populist call for "the Islamic solution," religiously based cultural and political identity. Renewed emphasis on the Qur'an—and with it, Arabic—is an integral part of this "Islamist" movement. As a result, the Arabic language is being studied more widely than ever.

The Islamist stress on Islamic and therefore Arabic studies, however, should not be confused with another modern movement known as Arabism (*'urubah*). Arabism stresses not only the centrality of the Arabic language to Islamic identity but the dominance of Arab culture. Early proponents described Islam as "the highest moment of consciousness" of Arab culture. Therefore, as people become Muslim, they actually become Arab as well, at least to a certain degree. Some see Arabism as simply a religiously oriented version of the Arab nationalist movement.

A controversial movement from the outset, Arabism has declined in popularity with the rise of Islamism, although its echoes can still be heard. In a recent speech, Sadek Jawad Sulaiman, former ambassador of Oman to the United States, stressed the centrality of Arabism to Islam: "Outside its repository of Arabic culture, Islam is left with little form or substance."

The majority of those who stress the importance of Arabic believe they are simply following the Qur'an's own teaching. The Qur'an repeatedly refers to the power and beauty of its language. It tells of Prophet Muhammad being an illiterate (or unlettered) orphan and yet producing a work of such splendor that it challenges his detractors to match it (10:38–9, 11:13–16, 28:49). Even today, non-Muslim Arabic speakers are awed by its beauty. Undoubtedly, the book's inherent beauty and power would suffer in translation. Beyond aesthetic concerns, however, is recognition of the insidious effect of translation on understanding.

Even so, Muslims agree that fluency in Arabic is no guarantee that one will be moved by the Qur'an or be a good Muslim. As the Qur'an teaches, "God summons to the abode of peace and guides whomsoever he will to a straight path" (3:27). Islam enters "through the heart," according to Qur'anic metaphor. It is primarily a turning of the will toward God, an inner transformation. This transformation may or may not be prompted by the power of the Qur'an. The Qur'an counts among the believers anyone—including Jews and Christians—who believes in God and does good deeds. For at its core, Islam is a matter of behavior rather than words: "Woe betide those who pray, yet are neglectful of their prayers—those who pray for show and yet refuse charity" (107:1–7).

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quired to worship as a community on Fridays at midday and on two major religious holidays.

The Third Pillar is the mandatory "alms-levy" (*zakat*). The obligation to share what one possesses with those less fortunate is stressed throughout the Qur'an. The Muslim definition of the virtuous life includes charitable support of widows, wayfarers, orphans, and the needy. Although zakat has for the most part been left to the conscience of Muslims, the obligation to be charitable and contribute to the general welfare of the community continues to be emphasized. In a number of poor Muslim countries this benevolence provided by wealthy individuals has underwritten badly needed social services for those who cannot afford them.

The Fourth Pillar is the fast during the month of Ramadan, observed according to the Muslim lunar calendar, which has been in use since the seventh century. Since the lunar year is some ten days shorter than the solar year, the fasting and all Muslim festivals occur in different seasons. During the fast, which lasts from dawn to dusk, Muslims are required not only to refrain from eating, smoking, and drinking; they are also to refrain from sexual intercourse and acts leading to sensual behavior. The end of the month is marked by a festival, Eid al-Fitr, after which life returns to normal.

The Fifth Pillar is the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, which all Muslims are required to undertake once in their lives, provided they have the financial means. The pilgrimage brings together Muslims of diverse cultures and nationalities to achieve a purity of existence and a communion with God that will exalt the pilgrims for the rest of their lives.
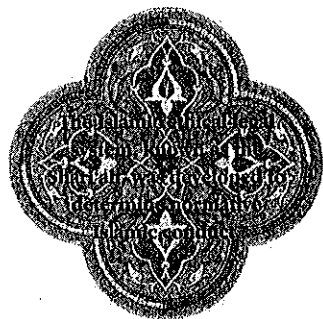
Muslim moral and legal guidance

The Islamic ethical-legal system, known as the Shari'ah, was developed to determine normative Islamic conduct.

The Shari'ah is the divinely ordained blueprint for human conduct, which is inherently and essentially religious. The juridical inquiry in discovering the Shari'ah code was comprehensive because it necessarily dealt with every case of conscience covering God-human relations, as well as the ethical content of interpersonal relations in every possible sphere of human activity. Most of the legal activity, however, went into settling more formal interpersonal activities that affected the morals of the community. These activities dealt with the obligation to do good to Muslims and guard the interests of the community.

Islamic legal theory recognized four sources on the basis of which judicial decisions could be deduced: the Qur'an, the Sunna, consensus of the early community of Muslims, and analogical reasoning, which attempts to discover the unknown from the known precedent. Ash-Shafi'i (767–820), a rigorous legal thinker, systematically and comprehensively linked the four sources to derive the entire legal system covering all possible contingencies. The legal precedents and principles provided by the Qur'an and Sunna were used to develop an elaborate system of rules of jurisprudence. Human conduct was to be determined in terms of how much legal weight was borne by a particular rule that rendered a given practice obligatory or merely recommended.

As Islamic law became a highly technical process, disputes about method and judicial opinions crystallized into legal schools designated by the names of prominent jurists. The legal school that followed the Iraqi tradition was called "Hanafi," after Abu Hanafi (669–767), the great imam in Iraq. Those who adhered to the rulings of Malik ibn Anas (ca. 715–795), in Arabia and elsewhere, were known as "Malikis." Ash-Shafi'i founded a legal school in Egypt whose influence spread widely to other regions of the Muslim world. His followers were known as Shafi'is. Another school was associated with Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), who compiled a work on traditions that became the source for juridical decisions for Hanbalis.

The Shiites developed their own legal school, whose leading authority was Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad (ca. 702–765). Normally, Muslims accept one of the legal schools prevalent in their region. Most of the Sunni follow Hanifah or Shafi'i, whereas the Shiites follow the Ja'fari school. In the absence of an organized "church" and ordained "clergy" in Islam, determination of valid religious

practice is left to the qualified scholar of religious law known as a *mufti* (the one who issues a *fatwa*, or decree).

Muslim family law

In Islamic family law, the rights of women, children, and other dependents are protected against the male head of the family, who, on the average, is stronger than a woman and more independent, since he is free of pregnancy and immediate care of children. Islamic marital rules encourage individual responsibility by strengthening the nuclear family. The Shari'ah protects male prerogative as the one who is required to support the household, whereas a woman is protected primarily by her family. All schools give a husband one-sided divorce privileges, because for a woman to divorce a man would mean to unsettle her husband's economic investment. Under these rules a husband could divorce a wife almost at will, but a wife who wished to leave her husband had to show good reason. The main legal check upon the man in divorce is essentially financial and a matter of contract between equal parties that includes a provision about the bridal gift. The man pays part of the gift, which might be substantial, at the time of marriage; if he divorces her without special reason, he has to pay her the rest.

The Muslim woman can own property, and it cannot be touched by any male relative, including her husband, who is required to support her from his own funds. Moreover, she has a personal status that might allow her to go into business on her own. However, this potential feminine independence was curbed primarily by cultural means, keeping marriages within the extended family, so that family property would not leave the family through women marrying out.

All schools of Islam, although tending to give men an extensive prerogative, presupposed a considerable social role for women. The Qur'anic injunction to propriety was stretched by means of the Sunna to impose seclusion. The veil for women was presented simply in terms of personal modesty, the female apartments in terms of family privacy.

In the patriarchal family structures, and not necessarily in the Shari'ah, women were assigned a subordinate role in the household and community. Here, the term *Islam* is being used in the sense of culture or local tradition. And it is precisely in the confusion between normative Islam and cultural practices that
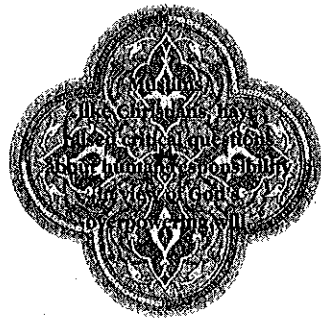
we find tension in ethical and legal formulations among Muslims.

In some parts of the Muslim world women are victims of traditional practices that are often harmful to them and to their children's well-being. One controversial and persistent practice is female circumcision (*khafd or khifad*), without which it is believed that girls could not attain the status of womanhood. Islamic views of female circumcision are ambiguous. The operation was performed long before the rise of Islam, and it is not a practice in many Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Iran, and Turkey. There is nothing in the Qur'an that sanctions female circumcision, especially its most severe form, infibulation. The Prophet opposed the custom, found among pre-Islamic Arabs, since he considered it harmful to women's sexual well-being. Yet the official position adopted by a majority of Sunni jurists is that female circumcision is sanctioned by the tradition. They concede, however, that the Shari'ah does not regard it as an obligatory requirement.

Are humans free agents of God?

Muslims, like Christians, have raised critical questions about human responsibility in view of God's overpowering will. In the first half of the eighth century, the rudiments of the earliest systematic theology were developed by a group called the Mu'tazilites. Before them, some Muslim thinkers had developed theological arguments, including a doctrine of God and human responsibility. The Mu'tazilites undertook to show that there was nothing repugnant to reason in the Islamic revelation. Their theological system was worked out under five headings: (1) belief in God's unity, which rejected anything that smacked of anthropomorphism; (2) the justice of God, which denied any ascriptions of injustice to God's judgment of human beings, with the consequence that humans alone were responsible for all their acts and thus punishable for evil actions; (3)

the impending judgment, which underscored the importance of daily righteousness and rejected laxity in matters of faith; (4) the middle position of the Muslim sinner, who, because of disobeying God's commandments was neither condemned to hell nor rewarded with paradise; and (5) the duty to command the good and forbid evil to ensure an ethical social order.

The traditionalist Ash'arites, reacting to Mu'tazilite rationalism, limited speculative theology to a defense of the doctrines given in the hadith, which were regarded as more reliable than abstract reason in deriving individual doctrines. The Ash'arites emphasized the absolute will and power of God and denied nature and humankind any decisive role. In their effort to maintain the effectiveness of a God who could and did intervene in human affairs, they maintained that good and evil are what God decrees them to be. Accordingly, good and evil cannot be known from nature but must be discovered in the Qur'an and the tradition. Ash'arite theological views have remained dominant throughout Islamic history, well into modern times, and had a profound effect upon scientific theory and practice among the Sunni.

The attitude of resignation, a by-product of belief in predestination, is summed up in the Sunni creedal confession: "What reaches you could not possibly have missed you; and what misses you could not possibly have reached you" (*Fiqh akbar*, Article 3).

The Shiite Muslims, on the other hand, have developed a rational theology and ethical doctrines resembling those of the Mu'tazilites. Hence, they believe that humans are free agents of God who are responsible for their own actions. Moreover, the justice of God requires that God provide a constant source of guidance through reason and exemplary leaders, known as imams, for human advancement toward perfection. This belief is the source of the emergence of Khomeini-like leadership in Shitte Iran today.

Mystical dimension of Islam

From the early days of the Islamic empire (eighth century) the ascetic reaction to growing worldliness in the Muslim community took the form of mysticism of personality in Islam, whose goal was spiritual and moral perfection of an individual. Sufism, as Islamic mysticism came to be known, aimed to internalize the ritual acts by emphasizing rigorous self-assessment and self-discipline. In its

early form Sufism was mainly a form of ascetic piety that involved ridding oneself of any dependence on satisfying one's desire, in order to devote oneself entirely to God. Mystical practices developed by the Sufi masters comprised a moral process to gain the relative personal clarity that comes at moments of retreat and reflection.

From daily moments of reflection the mystic experienced more intense levels of awareness, which could take ecstatic forms, including ecstatic love of God. This aspect of Sufism brought the mystics into direct conflict with the traditionalist Muslims, who emphasized active obedience to God as the highest goal of religious meaning and purpose.

By the eleventh century, the Sufi masters had developed a new form of religious orientation that brought about the acceptance of Sufism by the ordinary people in many places. Near the end of the twelfth century, the Sufi organized several formal brotherhoods or orders (*tariqa*) in which women also participated. Each order taught a pattern of invocation and meditation that used devotional practices to organize a group of novices under a master. Through special control of breath and bodily posture accompanied by invocative words or syllables, they developed more intense concentration.

These brotherhoods, however, degenerated into antisocial groups that caused much damage to the teachings of Islam about societal and familial obligations. Moreover, because of their unquestioning devotion to the Sufi masters, both living and dead, a shrine culture leading to almost saint worship took deep roots among ordinary peoples attracted to this folk Islam. This condition elicited a strong reaction against Sufism in the Muslim world in modern times. Both the traditionalist reformers, like the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, and the champions of secularist modernism, like the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), disbanded Sufism as being totally un-Islamic.
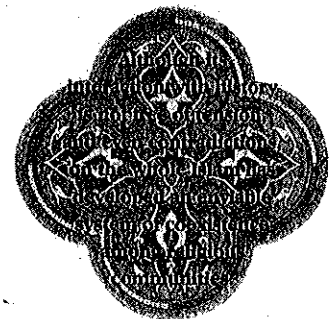
Nevertheless, the formal approval of Sufism as a genuine form of Islamic piety by the great scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazal (1058–1111), who taught Islamic law and theology in Baghdad, has been revived in many countries. There sufism continues to thrive as a bastion of religious tolerance and free-spirited religiosity.

Islam today

Islam as a religion, culture, and civilization continues to inspire a billion people worldwide to take up the challenge to go beyond one's self-centered existence to establish a just society that will reflect "submission to God's will." As an Abrahamic faith, Islam has accepted the pluralism of human responses to spiritual guidance as a divine mystery. And although its interaction with history is not free of tension, and even contradictions, on the whole Islam has developed an enviable system of coexistence among religious communities. Its vision of a global community working toward the common good of humanity has been overshadowed by political upheavals in the postcolonial Muslim world. Unless the violated justice of the ordinary people is restored, like its other Abrahamic forebears Islam will continue to inspire activist response to social and political injustices in the Muslim world.

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Islamic and Western Values

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DEMOCRACY AND THE HUMANE LIFE

WESTERNERS TEND to think of Islamic societies as backward-looking, oppressed by religion, and inhumanely governed, comparing them to their own enlightened, secular democracies. But measurement of the cultural distance between the West and Islam is a complex undertaking, and that distance is narrower than they assume. Islam is not just a religion, and certainly not just a fundamentalist political movement. It is a civilization, and a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another but is animated by a common spirit far more humane than most Westerners realize. Nor do those in the West always recognize how their own societies have failed to live up to their liberal mythology.

Moreover, aspects of Islamic culture that Westerners regard as medieval may have prevailed in their own culture until fairly recently; in many cases, Islamic societies may be only a few decades behind socially and technologically advanced Western ones. In the end, the question is what path leads to the highest quality of life for the average citizen, while avoiding the worst abuses. The path of the West does not provide all the answers; Islamic values deserve serious consideration.

THE WAY IT RECENTLY WAS

MORES AND values have changed rapidly in the West in the last several decades as revolutions in technology and society progressed. Islamic countries, which are now experiencing many of the same changes, may well follow suit. Premarital sex, for example, was strongly disapproved of in the West until after World War II. There were laws against sex outside marriage, some of which are still on the books, if rarely enforced. Today sex before marriage, with parental consent, is common.

Homosexual acts between males were a crime in Great Britain until the 1960s (although lesbianism was not outlawed). Now such acts between consenting adults, male or female, are legal in much of the West, although they remain illegal in most other countries.

Half the Western world, in fact, would say that laws against homosexual sex are a violation of gays' and lesbians' human rights.

Even within the West, one sees cultural lag. Although capital punishment has been abolished almost everywhere in the Western world, the United States is currently increasing the number of capital offenses and executing more death row inmates than it has in years. But death penalty opponents, including Human Rights Watch and the Roman Catholic Church, continue to protest the practice in the United States, and one day capital punishment will almost certainly be regarded in America as a violation of human rights.

Westerners regard Muslim societies as unenlightened when it comes to the status of women, and it is true that the gender question is still troublesome in Muslim countries. Islamic rules on sexual modesty have often resulted in excessive segregation of the sexes in public places, sometimes bringing about the marginalization of women in public affairs more generally. British women, however, were granted the right to own property independent of their husbands only in 1870, while Muslim women have always had that right. Indeed, Islam is the only world religion founded by a businessman in a commercial partnership with his wife. While in many Western cultures daughters could not inherit