

Islam Is a Diverse and Complex Faith

Difference of opinion within my community is a sign of the bounty of Allah.

—The Prophet Muhammad

No religion in recent times has labored under more stereotypes than Islam. Ask a non-Muslim for a description of the “typical” Muslim, and he or she will probably respond with one or more stock characterizations, the most common being a veiled woman, a bearded cleric, a desert dweller, and a suicide bomber. If you were to inquire further and ask for practices with which Islam is associated, the list would undoubtedly include such things as polygamy, amputation of limbs, terrorist activities, and anti-Western demonstrations.

What impact do such images and impressions have on non-Muslims? What influence do they exert on attitudes toward Muslims and their faith? The answer to these questions depends on how familiar one is with Islam and its followers. Those who have some understanding of the

religion will be able to recognize each of the above responses for what it is: just one manifestation or aspect of Islam. Others, especially those with a less firm grasp of the facts, run a certain risk. They need to avoid the temptation to generalize and therefore see the veiled woman or the suicide bomber as representing *the* face of Islam, and terrorism as something all Muslims support.

The first thing non-Muslims should know about Islam is that it is a diverse and complex faith. It can be difficult to recognize this fact because we are often presented with a monochromatic and one-dimensional view of the faith. Most of us rely on the news media to get our information about Islam, but the time and space limitations of news coverage rarely allow for the type of in-depth treatment needed to adequately contextualize a story that is related to this complex faith. A further problem is the issue of media bias. Objective reporting about Islam often falls victim to political and personal agendas that can distort the facts and obscure the truth.

Another factor that should not be underestimated is the role that Hollywood and the entertainment industry sometimes plays in shaping impressions of Islam and its adherents. Television and film portrayals often tap into and perpetuate certain stereotypes about Muslims by making them “come alive.” The experience of seeing one’s archetype Muslim on the screen in living color can often be an affirmation of its authenticity, even if it is based on a cliché or a misperception.

The simple facts argue against the construction of such a

shallow view of Islam. There are currently more than one and one-half billion Muslims in the world—nearly one-quarter of the population of the planet—and they are found in every part of the globe. It would be foolish to believe that all of these people think and behave exactly the same way. While all Muslims share certain beliefs and practices, there is a rich diversity to the faith. Many of these differences are inconsequential, but others have profound implications. This chapter will explore the issue of the diversity of the Islamic community.

EARLY YEARS

The saying, or *ḥadīth*, from the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) found at the beginning of this chapter indicates that difference within the early Islamic community was not only encouraged, but valued as a sign of divine favor. The circumstances of Muhammad’s life made him keenly aware of the presence of difference and the potential it held for both uniting and dividing people. He was born in Mecca, a city in the western portion of modern-day Saudi Arabia that continues to be the center of the Islamic faith. At about the age of forty, he had the first of what he and his followers determined to be a series of revelations from Allah (an Arabic term that translates literally as “the God”). These revelations continued intermittently throughout the remainder of his life and, according to Muslim belief, they are faithfully recorded in Islam’s sacred text, the Qur’an (literally, “the recitation”).

The primary message Muhammad communicated to his contemporaries was a simple one: Allah is the one true God

to whose will all people should submit. It is this idea that gave the religion its name—the Arabic word *islām* means “submission.” This message was not attractive to the people of Mecca, particularly its leaders. Their city was an important religious site that housed the *ka’bah*, a shrine associated with numerous gods that was a destination for the many pilgrims who traveled to Mecca each year. Muslim tradition says 360 different deities were worshipped in Mecca, so Muhammad’s claim that Allah was the one God posed a clear threat to the Meccan religious system. In addition, acceptance of Islam would have had a negative impact on the local economy since the pilgrims who frequented the city were a major source of revenue. Ironically, after the emergence of Islam Mecca continued to thrive as a pilgrimage site despite the concerns of some of Muhammad’s contemporaries. Each year millions of Muslims visit the city to participate in the annual pilgrimage rituals and circumambulate the *ka’bah*, which became a site associated with monotheism during Muhammad’s lifetime.

Despite these obstacles, Muhammad was able to attract a small group of converts from among the Meccans, but the Islamic sources indicate that his appeal to reject polytheism fell mostly on deaf ears. His fortunes turned when he was invited to serve as a judge for the people of Yathrib, a town some 200 miles north of Mecca. In the year 622 Muhammad and a small band of his followers made the trip to Yathrib and began to establish a Muslim presence in that part of the Arabian peninsula. This event, the *hijrah* (an Arabic term meaning “migration”), is considered to be the official

beginning of the Muslim community, and it was of such historic importance that it marked the starting point of the Islamic calendar. Muhammad spent the last ten years of his life in Yathrib, and it quickly became Islam's operational center. His association with the city was so strong that its name was changed to *madīnat al-nabī* ("the city of the prophet"), and it is known as Medina (also spelled Madina) to this day.

One of the most interesting things about Yathrib was the relatively large number of Jewish people living in the area. This was different from the situation in Mecca, where there was less Jewish or Christian presence. In Yathrib, several of the most prominent tribes for whom Muhammad served as a judge were predominantly Jewish and therefore already monotheists. Consequently, they enjoyed a special relationship with the Muslim community that was not possible for the polytheists of Yathrib. This distinction comes out clearly in a document known as the "Constitution of Medina," which goes back to Muhammad's time and lays down the rules for how the various groups in the area should relate among themselves. The Constitution of Medina makes it clear that the Jews of Yathrib were allowed to maintain their religious identity and that they would be protected by Muhammad's followers. One section reads, "Believers are allies to each other to the exclusion of other people. Help and equality shall be given to the Jews who follow us. They shall not suffer injustice nor shall their enemies be aided." Jews were not the only monotheists who enjoyed a special relationship with Muslims during the early days of Islam. In 630, about two years before his death, Muhammad established

a pact with the Christians of Najran, an important center of Christianity in southern Arabia, that guaranteed them protection and freedom of worship.

The issue of the relationship between Islam and the other monotheistic religions will be treated in a later chapter. For now, it is important to note that Muhammad understood himself to be somehow aligned with those earlier faiths while correcting the errors that had crept into them. This means he made efforts to do all he could to attract his fellow monotheists to Islam and invite them to join his growing community. This concern is seen in a number of ways. While all Muslims today turn toward Mecca to pray five times a day, Muhammad originally had his followers turn toward Jerusalem, just as the Jews of Arabia did when they prayed. According to some traditions, he also encouraged the early Muslims to fast during the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur. Similarly, many of the practices of Islam, like prayer, fasting, professing one's faith, and pilgrimage had equivalents within the other monotheistic faiths. Islam therefore had an air of familiarity that would have been attractive to those whose faiths shared similar aspects. The presence of stories in the Qur'an that have clear biblical parallels (a phenomenon discussed below) also functioned in the same way.

Muhammad enjoyed some success in convincing Jews and others in Medina to embrace Islam, but there were problems. Soon after he arrived in Yathrib, tensions between the Jewish tribes and the newly arrived Muslims began to surface and they occasionally reached the boiling point. According to his biography, on several occasions Muhammad felt he had

been betrayed by the Jews, and there were several armed conflicts between his followers and Jewish forces. Beyond this was the question of Mecca and how to incorporate it into the Muslim fold. A number of military encounters and raids that pitted the early Muslim community against Meccans figure prominently in Islamic sources, and several of them are mentioned in the Qur'an. While each side had its share of victories and defeats, these experiences helped to bolster the confidence of the nascent Muslim nation.

The early Islamic community sometimes had to resort to violence, but this should not be taken by non-Muslims as an indication that Islam is by nature a violent and aggressive faith. Muhammad and his first followers occasionally found themselves in precarious situations that required them to take the offensive in order to survive. At times, powerful factions and groups were pitted against them, and the Muslims could only rely on each other and their own wits to overcome these obstacles. In their early stages, small and vulnerable movements often have to respond aggressively to perceived threats, and that was the case for Muhammad and his followers at the outset. Once Islam became an established faith it was no longer necessary to adopt such measures to ensure its survival and growth.

Toward the end of his life, Muhammad attempted to win over Mecca to Islam, and he was ultimately successful with a peaceful takeover of the city in the year 630. The description of his triumphant reentry into his hometown and his destruction of the idols contained in the *ka'bah* is one of the most celebrated events of his life for Muslims. At the time of

his death two years later, virtually all of the western section of the Arabian peninsula had been converted to Islam.

This brief summary of the founding of Islam shows that the Muslim community was a diverse and complex one from the very beginning. The population from which the first Muslims were drawn was anything but a monolithic or homogeneous entity. Some, like Muhammad himself, were born and raised as polytheists who followed the form of religion prevalent in that time and area. Joining Islam required that they reject the faith of their ancestors and contemporaries, leave behind their familiar gods and goddesses, and become monotheists. Some of them undoubtedly paid a high personal cost in doing so since it meant they would be cut off and ostracized from their families and friends. Others, like the Jews of Medina, were asked to make a shift of a different sort. They were called to leave behind their previous understanding of monotheism and embrace a new one being preached by a man whose message was both similar to and different from the one to which they had grown accustomed.

Those who accepted the invitation could not leave their backgrounds behind. They brought their previous experiences and ideas with them when they entered the Islamic community. Former Jews and former polytheists now prayed side-by-side, and their prior religious lives helped to shape how they understood their present situation as fellow Muslims. In other words, many different people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives had a hand in creating and shaping the community that gathered around

Muhammad. This was how Islam started, and it was a sign of things to come.

EXPANSION AND GROWTH

Soon after Muhammad's death in 632, Islam began to spread throughout the world, and this process has continued into the present day. Like Christianity, Islam is expansionist by nature as it seeks to attract and invite new members into its ranks. Consequently, people from many different backgrounds and cultures have joined the faith since its inception. This has enriched the community enormously by adding to its complexity and diversity.

We can get a sense of this by considering where Muslims are found today. Many people are surprised to learn that the Arabic-speaking world contains less than one-fifth of the entire Muslim population. Put another way, approximately four out of every five Muslims alive today reside in a place whose language, history, and culture have nothing in common with that of the Prophet Muhammad. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the following ten countries had the largest number of Muslims in 2010:

1. Indonesia (209 million)
2. India (176 million)
3. Pakistan (167 million)
4. Bangladesh (134 million)
5. Nigeria (77 million)
6. Egypt (76 million)
7. Iran (73 million)