The number of Christians worldwide is about 2.1 billion, making Christianity the largest religion. In different parts of the world, the power and influence of Christian churches varies considerably. In Britain and Western Europe, people's identification with churches and attendance at rituals have dropped considerably in the last century. In the U.S., evangelical Protestant churches have grown in numbers and strength each year, as traditional Protestant churches such as the Lutherans and Methodists have lost members. The largest increase in church membership is taking place in the developing world – especially in Africa – where 23,000 people a day join a Christian church.

The largest Christian denomination is Catholicism, with 1.1 billion members – half of all Christians and one-sixth of the world's population. Although usually identified with the "Latin Rite" – the rituals familiar to European and American Catholics – the Catholic Church includes 22 Eastern rites too, such as the Coptic Catholic rite that originated in Egypt.

Unit III Islam

The History and Teachings of Islam

Core Teachings

The history of Islam is, in the Islamic perspective, the history of monotheism. This is a core assumption in Islamic scripture, the Qur'an ("Koran" in archaic spelling). The Qur'an refers to the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, Abraham and the covenant, Moses and the Torah, Jesus and the Gospels, and many other prophets and figures from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, but it does not tell the stories in detail or even in chronological order. Instead, the Qur'an says that it is reminding people of these stories. These stories comprise the background to the messages conveyed in the Qur'an. They are part of the history of the community of those who believe in the one and only God. The term for "god" in Arabic, which is the language of the Qur'an, is *ilah*. The Qur'an refers to God as "*the* god," *al-ilah* or **Allah**, saying repeatedly that "there is no god but God." God created human beings and immediately began communicating with them about how to live successfully and fulfill the purpose for which they were created. All human beings are called upon to submit to the will of God by establishing justice. In doing so, they will be following the **din**, the term used by the Qur'an to summarize the core of the monotheistic tradition.

We have seen that the Hebrew Bible uses the same term. This is not surprising, since Hebrew and Arabic are closely related Semitic languages. What is perhaps surprising, though, is that neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Qur'an uses a term that translates easily into the English term "religion." As we saw in Chapter 1, *din* in both Hebrew and Arabic means "judgment" – in particular, divine judgment.

Human beings will all be judged on the Last Day, the *yom al-din*, "the day of judgment." And all people are called upon to make their own decisions in light of that reality. So *din* is

FIGURE 6.12 Indian Muslims praying. Fredrik Renander/Alamy.

like justice; it is both the goal or purpose of human existence, and the means of achieving it. People are called upon to live in accordance with the "true *din*," the *din* of Abraham and of all prophets. They all lived their lives and made their decisions based upon – in Islamic terminology, "in submission to" – the will of God. The term for "submission [to the will of God]" in Arabic is *islam*. Therefore, the Qur'an says that *islam* is the true *din*. When translated into English, this becomes "Islam is the true religion." (Qur'an 3:19) However, it is important to understand that, from the perspective of the Qur'an, this does not mean that other religions are false. Rather, it conveys the idea that Islam is the culmination of the monotheistic (or Abrahamic) tradition. The message brought in the 7th century CE by Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, confirmed the messages of earlier messengers, corrected some misinterpretations of those earlier messages, and completed or finalized the transmission of messages from God to humanity.

Muslims refer to their prophet as Prophet Muhammad and, in order to show respect, add the blessing "Peace be upon him" (PBUH or, more correctly, "The peace and blessings of God be upon him," in Arabic abbreviated as SAW). However, Muhammad is actually considered the last of the prophets of Islam, not the first. Muslims consider Adam to be the first prophet of true Din. The Qur'an mentions Adam 25 times, referring to human beings as the "children of Adam." Adam is considered a prophet because through him God delivered a message to humanity. Human beings are the creatures of God, created to be stewards, his delegates on the earth. The term used for steward is **khalifah**. (In English this becomes "caliph." This term is later politicized, as imperial rulers take upon themselves the

FIGURE 6.13 A page from a 14th-century Qur'an. Christie's Images Ltd./SuperStock.

responsibility to be divine stewards or viceroys, to be obeyed by everyone else. As a result, the term *khalifah* often is translated as "successor" to Prophet Muhammad, since the caliphs took over leadership of the community after Muhammad died, but this translation is misleading when applied to the Qur'anic use of the term *khalifah*.) Thus, Creation is the beginning point of the history traced in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, the ultimate authority on all issues in Islam, is believed to be the accurate record of the precise words revealed by God to humanity through Prophet Muhammad. It was memorized and parts of it were written down during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (570–632 CE), and it was recorded and canonized (put into official form) within twenty years of Muhammad's death. Muslims are therefore fully confident that it is free of error (inerrant) in its Arabic form – and it is considered to be truly the Qur'an only in Arabic. Prophet Muhammad said and did many things that were not considered to be revelation and are therefore not recorded in the Qur'an. However, they are nonetheless considered important, often complementary to the Qur'an. Reports of these words and deeds are called **hadiths**. The hadith reports circulated among the Muslim community in oral form for two to three centuries but were then recorded, scrutinized for authenticity, and codified. There are several official collections of hadiths, three of which are considered to be quite reliable (two for **Sunni** Muslims and one for **Shi'i** Muslims [see below]). Taken together, the hadith reports comprise the example set by Muhammad to guide Muslims in their efforts to implement the message of the Qur'an. This example is called the **Sunna**. The Qur'an and the Sunna are the foundational sources for Islam.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an's message is meant for all humankind, but it was addressed specifically to the community in the environs of Mecca and Medina in Arabia (now Saudi Arabia) in which it was delivered. That community was organized into tribes – some of which were settled in oasis towns, and some of which were nomadic – and included Jewish tribes, Christian tribes, and tribes devoted to specific lesser gods (gods that were recognized as patrons to their tribes but who were not universal; they were one among many). The people of Mecca and Medina were also familiar with other traditions, such as that of the Sabeans of southern Arabia (now Yemen), known also as Sheba, whose queen is associated with the story of Solomon in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. The Qur'an addresses itself to people who represent all these traditions, acknowledging they have received true revelation, but challenging some of their interpretations as well as their failure to live in accordance with the guidance they have been given.

This multi-religious region provides the context for the Qur'an's unique orientation toward other religious communities. Instead of condemning them, it addresses what it considers their misinterpretations of the revelation they have received from earlier prophets, and offers correctives. The Jews, it says, mistakenly assumed that the Torah was meant for them alone. The Qur'an rejects the notion of a "chosen people" and affirms that the messages received through Abraham, Moses, and the other prophets are meant for all humanity (5:18–19). Muslims also believe that the son involved in the story of Abraham's sacrifice was Ismail (Ishmael), rather than Isaac, but this is not considered a major issue. Both Jews and Christians are criticized for rejecting each other as true believers, even though they both claim to believe in the same God (2:113). The Qur'an also rejects the Christian belief that God procreated and that Jesus was the result. Instead, the Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a great prophet and the Messiah (although it does not specify what that term means), and his mother Mary was miraculously a virgin even in childbirth, but Jesus was human, like all other prophets (5:17). Nor did the Jews crucify Jesus, the Qur'an says, even though it appeared as if he had been crucified (4:157). Likewise, the Qur'an rejects the idea of the Trinity, stressing the importance of recognizing that there is only one god (4:171; 5:73).

The purpose of all these correctives is to guide people in true belief on the assumption that believing the truth and living virtuously are integrally related. In the Qur'anic perspective, the virtuous actions required for reward in the afterlife result from true belief. The Qur'an characteristically mentions good deeds and true belief in tandem. However, at the same time, the Qur'an does not call for a single religious community. The Qur'an says that all people have been given specific laws and rituals (5:48); this is considered part of the divine plan. God created people in different communities so that they could learn from one another. The Qur'an says there can be no compulsion in matters of the Din (2:256). Rather, peoples of various communities should come together in agreement (3:64), and compete with one another in good works (5:48).

Good works are, therefore, the focus of the Qur'an's teachings. The clearest indicator that communities have failed to implement the teachings of the earlier prophets is the social dysfunction that Muhammad sees all around him: rampant poverty, wealth controlled by a privileged and greedy few, widows and orphans exploited, women treated as property and disrespected to the extent that girls were often killed at birth because they were considered

an economic burden. So the Qur'an continually reminds people of the teachings of the Torah and the Gospels, and places the measure of piety in the treatment of others:

> Goodness does not consist in turning your faces towards the East or West [in prayer]. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer and give charity; who keep promises when they make them; who are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are aware of God. (2:177)

However, the core of Islamic teaching is monotheism. The Arabic term **tawhid** means that there is only one God, and that God is unitary, rather than a Trinity. This emphasis on monotheism is found in what is called the first "pillar" of Islam, the **Shahada**. The Shahada is literally a "bearing witness." It is conveyed in the vow, "I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

The significance of the Shahada goes beyond mere belief or creed. It entails committing oneself to demonstrating one's belief in actions, actions that are intended to carry out (or "submit to") the will of God. The importance of the second half of the Shahada, "…Muhammad is the Messenger of God," is that Muhammad brought the Qur'an, which guides believers in their efforts to carry out the divine will. So the Shahada commits a person to working to establish the kind of community envisioned by the Qur'an.

As we saw, the Qur'an focuses on belief that is demonstrated in actions. In the Qur'an's worldview, the divine origin of all creatures is to be reflected in the way people treat one another. There is only one God, and that God created all human beings. All people are equal in the sight of God, and the human challenge is to create a society that reflects the equality all people share in the eyes of their Creator. This is the reason human beings were created – as we saw, to be "stewards" of God's creation. And this is the basis upon which human beings will be judged.

Two terms are important here: intention and effort. The Qur'an promises reward for those who submit to the divine will, and punishment for those who reject it. However, the Qur'an also stresses that this challenge is not meant to be a burden for human beings. The Qur'an presents God as ultimately compassionate and merciful, always providing guidance and assistance for those who seek it. No individual is expected to single-handedly end poverty and oppression. However, every person must make the intention (*niyyah*) and the effort (*jihad*).

Muslims believe there are two levels of divine judgment, one in history and one at the end of time. Divine judgment in history is reflected in the belief that a just society will be strong and healthy, while an unjust or oppressive society will eventually be destroyed. The Qur'an provides numerous familiar examples, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, the communities warned by Lot to end their evil ways. When they did not, they were destroyed. Individuals will also be judged on the Last Day. At that time, each will stand alone, with conscience laid bare and no one to intercede. Punishment or reward will be earned on the basis of one's intention and effort to contribute to a society that reflects the will of the one God.

MAP 6.3 Spread of Islam in the 1st century.

Jihad

The Most Misunderstood Term

The term **jihad** comes from a verb that means "to exert strenuous effort." The Qur'an repeatedly tells people to "struggle in the way of God," and the way of God is described as "doing good and preventing evil." The Qur'an gives countless examples of how to struggle to do good and prevent evil. These include being truthful and sincere, generous, responsible, and hard-working. In certain circumstances, the struggle may be military. If a community is under attack, military jihad may be called for. The community in question need not be one's own; most Muslim authorities believe that military jihad is not exclusively for self-defense. Defense of another community may require it. However, Islamic law strictly controls military jihad. It may only be called by a duly constituted government, it may only be waged with due warning and after efforts to settle the conflict peacefully, non-combatants must be protected, buildings and natural resources must not be attacked, and if the enemy requests peace it must be declared.

For these reasons, terrorists attacks such as 9/11 have been condemned by virtually every Muslim religious authority, publicly and repeatedly. These condemnations of terror are readily available on the internet, and have been compiled by scholar Charles Kurzman at http://www.unc.edu/~kurzman/terror.htm.

Many Muslims believe there is an interim period, between death and the Last Day, when people undergo a kind of torture or "punishment of the grave" if they have committed grievous offenses. This is based not on the Qur'an, however, but on traditional literature (hadith). There is also widespread speculation about the nature of rewards and punishments. The Qur'an describes the afterlife in graphic detail – hideous torments in hell and luxurious physical comforts in heaven. This includes "pure companions," **houris**. The topic of wild speculation in traditional literature, the houris have entered the folk imagination as 72 voluptuous virgins for deceased martyrs. Scholars stress the metaphorical nature of language about the "pure companions." Some trace it to the ancient Zoroastrian notion of a pure conscience appearing in angelic form. (See Chapter 9.)

Islam's moral teachings revolve around the Qur'an's commitment to justice. This commitment is comprehensive, beginning within the family and extending to society at large. The family is the core social unit, so the Qur'an teaches that families must be based on loving concern between spouses. Sex is restricted to married couples, in order to protect the family unit. Modesty is required of females and males, and extra-marital sex is severely punished. (False allegations of extra-marital sex are also severely punished; according to Islamic law, four adult male Muslim witnesses must be produced in order to prove an allegation of adultery. Otherwise, the person who makes the allegation is punished.)

Marriage is a solemn commitment in Islam. Among the many reforms instituted by the Qur'an was a prohibition of buying and selling wives; the "bride price" or dowry is required to be given to the bride herself, rather than to her family. The unlimited polygyny (multiple wives) of pre-Islamic times is limited. The Qur'an advises that marrying one woman is best, but allows men to marry up to four, if that is necessary in order to protect orphans and provided the wives are treated equitably. Divorce is discouraged, and the Qur'an recommends reconciliation efforts in troubled marriages. However, if reconciliation efforts fail, then divorce is permitted and men are advised to provide what support they can for the divorced wife. Men are responsible for the support of their offspring. Women are required to wait to make sure they are not pregnant before remarrying, again, for the sake of protecting offspring. Children and spouses – including females – are guaranteed inheritance shares.

As noted above, Islamic values are worked out in greatest detail in Islamic law, **Sharia**. Sharia is like Judaic law, in that it attempts to guide every aspect of life through the ages. As such, it includes the requirements and prohibitions found in the Qur'an, but it also includes human efforts to interpret Qur'anic values for circumstances not specifically covered in the Qur'an. While Shariah in general is considered sacred, divinely inspired law and therefore perfect and unchanging, the human interpretations of Sharia are subject to ongoing discussion and revision. This discussion is carried on by highly trained scholars, who are guided by the **maqasid** or goals of Sharia. There is a great deal of disagreement among scholars about many of the details of human interpretations of Sharia. However, all agree that the goals of Sharia are the preservation and protection of life, religion, family, property, and reason (or human dignity). These *maqasid* guide interpretations of specific manifestations of Islamic moral teaching in diverse contexts.

Early History: The Life of Muhammad and the Rashidun Caliphs

Prophet Muhammad was an orphan by age six. He was taken in by relatives and became a skilled and successful trader. At around age 40 he felt the religious call and began to preach to the people of Mecca. His message immediately resonated with the impoverished masses and even with a few of the wealthy people. However, most of the wealthy people felt threatened by his call for social justice. They therefore boycotted and persecuted the Prophet and his followers. However, the popularity of the message continued to spread.

In 622 CE Muhammad was inspired to accept an invitation to move to Medina, a city some 200 miles north of Mecca. This emigration (**hijra**) became the turning point in the young community's life, so much so that it marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It marks the transition from preaching the importance of submitting to the will of God (*islam*) to actually establishing institutions designed to promote and protect social justice. The Prophet immediately established a constitution whereby all the clans and tribes of Medina and the newcomers would form a single community. Each would retain authority to deal with internal matters, but all would join in mutual defense if the town were attacked. Significantly, the constitution identified Muslim, Jewish, and polytheistic clans as signatories to the agreement, and guaranteed religious freedom for all. Any disputes between groups would be referred to Muhammad who, with divine guidance, would settle them.

Muslims and Jews

Some of the people who collaborated with the Meccans against Muhammad's community in Medina were members of Jewish tribes. As a result of the collaboration, these tribes were evicted from Medina. In one case, the men of the tribe were executed and the women and children were made slaves. Despite the fact that other Jewish tribes continued to live in peace among Muslims, some people have interpreted these early battles as evidence of anti-Semitism in Islam.

Muslims reject this claim, demonstrating that throughout history Islamic law has guaranteed religious freedom and Jews have lived in Muslim lands in peace and security. Yet current political conflicts in the Middle East have indeed led some Muslims to express anti-Jewish views. The best known is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has publicly denied the Holocaust. Many Muslim leaders therefore struggle to reaffirm Islam's commitment to religious pluralism. Eboo Patel, Muslim community leader and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, says that anti-Jewish statements "blacken the heart of anyone who says or thinks or feels them, and I want my religious community to have nothing to do with those sick attitudes." Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, one of the most prominent young American Muslim leaders, believes that Holocaust denial undermines Islam. Patel reports that the voices of people such as Shaykh Hamza "are having an increasing influence within the American Muslim community for a very simple reason – they reflect the attitude of the majority of American Muslims, who have felt both sickened and silenced by the minority of Muslims who speak of anti-Semitism as if it were a core tenet of Islam." (http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/eboo_patel/2007/09/on_muslim_antisemitism.html)

The **Constitution of Medina** proved to be effective in resolving the disputes that had plagued the city for some time. It also became an attractive model to other communities in the region, and a number of local tribes established agreements with the Prophet. The Medinan community prospered, but the Meccans continued their hostilities. There were instances of collaboration between the Meccans and members of three Medinan tribes, and a number of battles. However, by 628 the two cities established a truce, and in 630, the ruling tribe of Mecca relinquished its claim and accepted the leadership of Muhammad. Muhammad entered the city, rededicated the ancient sanctuary at its center, the **Kaaba**, to Allah, and from then on Mecca was the religious center of the Muslim world.

Medina continued to be the political capital briefly, but disputes over leadership after Prophet Muhammad died in 632 led to political changes. Muslims consider Muhammad the final prophet, but some members of the community believed leadership of the community should remain in the Prophet's family. Muhammad died leaving no sons; the closest male relative was his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. The majority of Muslims favored

Muhammad's elder companions Abu Bakr, Umar, and then Uthman. Each of them governed the community in turn, but not without conflict. Abu Bakr had to contend with tribes that refused to pay their taxes once Muhammad died. Umar was highly respected and effective, and led the expansion of Islamic sovereignty into areas previously controlled by the Roman and Persian empires. However, he was attacked and killed by a slave. Uthman continued the expansion of Islamic sovereignty, but he was criticized for excessive control over the provinces, and assassinated by disgruntled Egyptians in 656. The community then chose Ali to be their leader, as his supporters (*shi'ah*) believed he should rightfully have been all along. However, Ali, too, was killed in a battle with the governor of Syria, in 661, who declared himself successor to the Prophet.

The Dynastic Caliphates

The death of Ali marks the end of period when the Muslim community was led by "rightly guided" successors to Prophet Muhammad (**Rashidun**). The Syrian governor's family, the **Umayyads**, then established Damascus as the political capital of the Muslim world and maintained leadership of the Muslim community, dynastic-style, for nearly 90 years. The Umayyads were highly successful in expanding their sovereignty, all the way to Spain in the West and Central Asia, and northwest India in the East. However, by this time, the rulers were no longer considered or even expected to be pious. In fact, they alienated enough of their subjects that they were overthrown in a revolution in 750, which brought in another dynastic caliphate, the **Abbasids**.

The Abbasids built Baghdad as their capital and maintained at least nominal sovereignty until 1258. However, Spain remained autonomous, and many other provinces were virtually independent of the capital. Nevertheless, the dynastic caliphates amassed enormous wealth and maintained relative stability over vast expanses of territory. This wealth and stability allowed the flowering of a magnificent culture that brought together the greatest scholars and artists from across the globe. Building upon the heritage of classical Greek, Roman, African, Persian, Indian, and Chinese cultures, they developed the highest levels of mathematical and scientific knowledge the world had known, and a material culture that was the envy of their contemporaries. Even Charlemagne, crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800, corresponded with the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809) in Baghdad, requesting an alliance. Harun rejected the idea but did maintain friendly relations with the European ruler. He sent him magnificent gifts – including carved ivory, a pitcher and tray made of gold, perfumes, beautiful fabric, a robe embroidered with "There is no god but God" in Arabic, and an ornate water clock with twelve carved figures that came out of little windows and brass balls that fell on cymbals to mark the hours. Some of these gifts are on display in European museums. Perhaps the most stunning gift – the elephant that Charlemagne requested – is not; it died after several cold winters in Charlemagne's Germanic capital.

However, Harun's and Charlemagne's successors would eventually become mortal enemies. By the end of the 11th century, Europe was feeling threatened by the expansive Muslim regime. Pope Urban II called for a volunteer army to take the "Holy Land" of Jerusalem back from the Muslims, who were declared infidels. This was the beginning of the

Culture in Islamic Spain

"Commanded by the [Qur'an] to seek knowledge and read nature for signs of the Creator, and inspired by a treasure trove of ancient Greek learning, Muslims created a society that in the Middle Ages was the scientific center of the world. The Arabic language was synonymous with learning and science for 500 years, a golden age that can count among its credits the precursors to modern universities, algebra, the names of the stars and even the notion of science as an empirical inquiry." This is how *New York Times* Science Editor Dennis Overbye characterized the culture of Islam in the Middle Ages. Among its hallmarks were the introduction of Plato and Aristotle to Europe, along with the newly developed algebra (from the Arabic *al-jabr*) and trigonometric algorithms (from the Arabic al-Khwaridhmi, the man who developed it), technical development such as telescopes and microscopes, and new agricultural products such as oranges (from the Arabic *naranj*), lemons (from the Arabic *laimon*), artichokes (from the Arabic *ardi shoki*), cotton (from the Arabic, *qutun*), and sugar cane (from the Arabic *sukkar*). Muslim scientists were cited by Copernicus, and the great historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) continues to be quoted on such issues as tribal solidarity and the relationship between tax cuts and inflation. Historian Arnold Toynbee called Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* ("Introduction") "the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind."

Crusades, a series of battles over the next two centuries that would pit Christian Europe against the Muslim Middle East. Ultimately unsuccessful in their original goal, the Crusades did have serious impact in the region. They exacerbated tensions among regional rulers, some of whom allied with the Europeans, and weakened the already over-extended Abbasid regime. The Crusades overlapped with the onslaught from the East of the Mongols, headed by the successors of the fearsome Genghis Khan. The Mongols captured and destroyed Baghdad in 1258, effectively ending the Abbasid caliphate.

The destruction of Baghdad marked the end of any semblance of political unity in the Muslim world. However, the momentum of the culture that had developed under the Umayyads and Abbasids was sufficient to survive a massive reordering of the Islamic world. Within a few centuries, the Ottoman Empire was established and ruled North Africa and the Arab Middle East from its base in Turkey. The Saffavid dynasty ruled over Persian lands with their capital in modern Iran. And the Mughal Empire ruled the Indian subcontinent. All three regimes were highly effective during Europe's Middle Ages and the "Age of Religious Wars" that accompanied the Protestant Reformation. However, by the time European Christians settled their religious differences (if not their differences with Jews), the Muslim empires were seriously weakened. The newly organized European states capitalized on their earlier explorations into Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, and effectively took control of most of the Muslim world by the end of the 19th century.

Taqwa, Spirituality, and Sufism

Muslims believe that sincere belief will be manifested outwardly in righteous actions. However, the core of those actions is still internal. Pious actions result from giving oneself to the divine will, and in so doing committing oneself to do what one can to achieve the divine will. This combination of acceptance and commitment is expressed in the Qur'an as the virtue *taqwa*. The Qur'an never defines the term, in the sense of limiting it to some specific action or actions. Instead, it gives examples of the kind of behavior that stems from a well formed conscience. For example, the Qur'an tells people not to allow other people's unjust actions to lead them to unfair behavior. "So long as [the polytheists] stay true to you, stay true to them. Indeed, God loves those with taqwa." (9:7) *Taqwa* may be described as the willing choice to allow one's conscience to be guided by God, expressed externally through goodness and charity.

Scholars and lawyers can help guide understanding and actions. However, making God's will your own requires spiritual practice. This inward, spiritual aspect of Islamic practice, Sufism, is often called "interior Islam." It can also be described as mature Islam. Whereas a child is motivated to do good and avoid evil based on the promise of reward and the threat of punishment, a mature believer takes personal gratification in virtuous deeds and finds evil deeds personally repugnant. Sufi teachings and practice grew in Islam as a way to help people develop this ability to take joy in virtue.

FIGURE 6.14 Mevlevis, known as Whirling Dervishes for their spinning spiritual dance, are followers of Rumi.

Over the centuries Muslims have developed many ways to cultivate spirituality. Religious poetry remains among the most popular, and the 13th century Afghan Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi is perhaps the most popular poet of all time. Translations of his works by Coleman Barks are best sellers in America today. His poetry expresses the yearning for spiritual freedom that characterizes much of Sufism. It is a desire to be released from the bonds of selfishness, desire, and greed, to be completely absorbed in divine goodness and beauty. The key to spiritual awareness, he says, will not be found in books:

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

Barks and Barks 1984

The Modern Period: Reform and Recovery

By the time European powers had established control over most Muslim lands, Muslim intellectuals were well aware that the time was ripe for reform. This became clear to some thinkers as early as the Crusades. Legal authority Ibn Taymiyya of Damascus (d. 1328) warned of the need for vigilance and intellectual rigor. The great historian Ibn Khaldun of Islamic Spain (d. 1406) cautioned of the dangers of governments overly concerned with their own power and called for recommitment to justice as the basis of social solidarity and political strength. In the 16th and 17th centuries, reformers such as Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) struggled to refocus the energies of the Indian Muslim community, and in Arabia Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab called for renewed commitment to Islam's core values. However, the warnings of these reformers had been insufficient to motivate the broad reforms that would have been necessary to stop the onslaught of the modernized Europeans.

The 19th century therefore saw both the consolidation of European colonial power and the exponential growth of reform efforts in the Muslim world. Only now the reformers had to struggle on multiple fronts. Added to the issues the medieval reformers had to contend with were the colonial regimes: Britain (Egypt, India), France (Algeria, Tunisia, Syria), later Holland (Southeast Asia), and in the case of Libya, even Italy. What issues to tackle first? Should they try to reform society and then get rid of foreign control, or vice versa? And when they struggle against the foreigners, should they take them all on at once, or work with France against Britain, or Britain against France?

As it happened, the Muslim countries gained independence only in the past half century, and then only one country at a time. France was defeated in a brutal war of independence in Algeria, for example, in 1962. Libya's Italian overlords were defeated in World War II but the country was then placed under international control until 1951. Egypt evicted the British in a military coup in 1952. Syria – which traditionally included the current countries of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories – gained independence piecemeal, as European powers competed over it; this is how it was

divided up into several countries, in fact. And that situation was made more complex by the influx of European Jews attempting to escape European persecution. The eventual declaration of the state of Israel in 1948 then displaced hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish (both Muslim and Christian) Palestinians; their numbers have increased so that today the number of stateless Palestinians is estimated at over 6 million. India gained independence from Britain in 1947 but Britain partitioned the country into Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority countries, leaving the status of Kashmir (which was Hindu ruled but with a Muslim majority) unresolved, as it remains today. Indonesia – the most populous Muslim country in the world today – gained independence from the Dutch in 1949, and the state of Malaysia came into being in 1963, after more than a century as a set of disparate British colonies.

In most Muslim countries, independence was achieved through armed struggle, leaving the military dominant, as in many other parts of the formerly colonized world. The rise of military and other forms of non-popular governments in the context of anti-colonial struggles adds yet another layer of complexity to the challenges of modern Islam.

The combination of economic and political challenges facing Muslim societies has given rise to a variety of specifically modern movements. Early 20th-century reformers tended to be secularist, seeking independence and development based on models adopted from Western Europe. The ostensible failure of these models to produce results led to the brief popularity of socialist models in the mid-20th century. At the grassroots level, the most popular approach to reform has been through politicized Islam, known as **Islamism**, and rejection of secularist models. Continued frustration of people's hopes for economic and political development led, in the late 20th century, to militant radicalization in some sectors. The groups that engaged in terrorist activities in the name of Islam have added yet another set of challenges to those already facing the formerly colonized Muslim world: the need to overcome terrorism as well as the widespread misperception of Islam as a violent religion.

Islamic Rituals

Islamic rituals are relatively simple, compared with those in the other monotheistic traditions. They are usually summarized as the five **Pillars of Islam**. The first pillar, as mentioned above, is the Shahada. While it is far more than a ritual, requiring commitment to sustained effort to live in accordance with Islamic values in daily life, it does have certain ritual expressions. It is part of the call to prayer (*adhan*; see below), which is whispered into the right ear of a newborn baby, and, ideally, it is the last thing said by a dying person. It is formally declared before witnesses by those converting to Islam.

The second pillar is prayer, Salat. Muslims pray five times daily, at times marked by the position of the sun: just before dawn, noon, late afternoon, just after sunset, and then before retiring. Prayers can be performed anywhere, but many people prefer to pray in a **mosque** when that is possible. There is no Sabbath in Islam, but Muslims are supposed to gather for the noon prayer on Friday in a mosque. Prayers are preceded by expressing the intention to pray mindfully – by reciting the **Bismallah**: "In the name of God the most

merciful and compassionate." Then Muslims perform a ritual purification by washing (*wudu*) the hands; rinsing the mouth, nose, and head, feet, teeth, and limbs with water. If no water is available, the wudu can be performed symbolically. In cases of "greater impurity" (if the person has had sex, sexual discharge, menstrual period, or has given birth), full ablution (*ghusl*) is required – a complete cleansing including the hair. Prayers are performed in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca. Because Muslims are supposed to pray in a clean environment, it is common for them to pray on a small "prayer rug" (*sajada*). If none is available, any other material, even cardboard, is acceptable. Prayers consist of recitation of specific passages from the Qur'an, repeated in a specified order, and accompanied by specified postures, including bowing, kneeling, and prostrating (touching the forehead to the floor from a kneeling position). The term "mosque" comes from the Arabic *masjid*, meaning "place of prostration."

The third pillar of Islam is charity, Zakat. Although not technically a ritual, the giving of charity has been regularized to an annual donation of 2.5% of the wealth people have held for a year, not counting the person's house. Many Muslims commonly give more charity than Zakat requires, endowing institutions that serve the community, such as schools and hospitals.

The fourth pillar is fasting (Sawm) from food, drink, smoking, and sexual activity sunrise to sunset during the ninth month of Islam's lunar calendar, **Ramadan**. Families commonly break the fast together after sunset during Ramadan. Breaking the fast on the last day of Ramadan is the beginning of a happy three-day communal celebration (*Eid al-Fitr*), when families exchange visits and gifts.

The fifth pillar of Islam is the pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, the Hajj. The Hajj is performed every year during the first half of the Month of Hajj (the last month of Islam's lunar calendar), but Muslims are only required to make the Hajj pilgrimage once in their lifetimes, and then only if they are physically and financially able. However, many Muslims try to make the Hajj as often as possible, finding it an enormously fulfilling spiritual exercise. Muslims may make the pilgrimage to Mecca at any other time of the year, as well, but it does not fulfill the Hajj obligation. On the tenth day of the Month of Hajj, Muslims celebrate the most solemn holiday in their calendar, the **Eid al-Adha**, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to fulfill the will of God.

Like Jews, Muslims practice certain dietary restrictions. They are prohibited from eating pork, and may eat only meat that has been properly slaughtered and dedicated to God. (This is called halal – "permitted" – meat; kosher meat is also halal.) As we saw in Chapter 4, Mary Douglas interprets the negative attitude toward pork among Jews and Muslims, as well as shellfish among some Jews and Muslims, as a result of their "crossed categories." Neither pigs nor shellfish are accounted for in the monotheistic creation story so there must be something really wrong with them; they are "impure." Unlike Jews and Christians, Muslims are also supposed to refrain from consuming alcoholic beverages. This prohibition is not a function of purity regulations, however. Its purpose is to preserve people's clear reasoning and prevent the bad behavior that can accompany drunkenness. And like Judaism, Islam calls for circumcision of males, although this is not in the Qur'an. While for Jews circumcision is considered a symbol of belonging to the community, for Muslims it is considered a function of purity. (Some communities, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa,

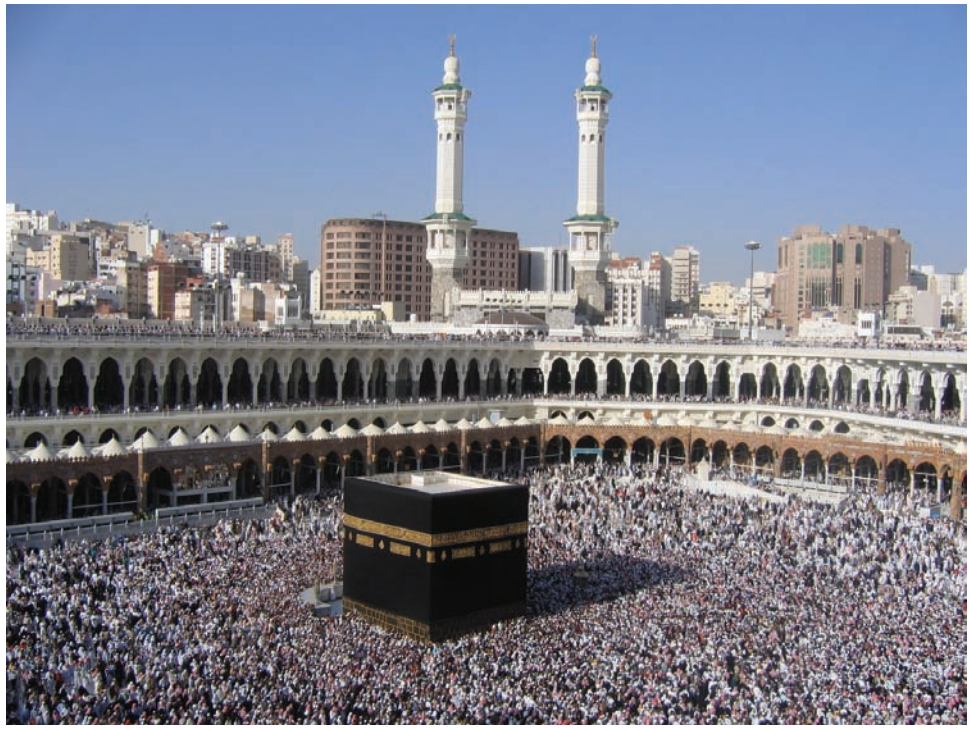

FIGURE 6.15 Pilgrims walking around the Kaaba in Mecca during the Hajj.
ayazad/Shutterstock Images.

practice female circumcision as well – "female genital mutilation" or FGM – but this is not required by Islam, nor is it practiced only by Muslims.)

The tenth day (**Ashura**) of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, is traditionally a day of fasting – similar to the Jewish Yom Kippur (observed on the tenth day of the new year). For Shi'i Muslims, Ashura is a day of mourning, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the son of Imam Ali. It is marked by processions of mourners and plays reenacting the suffering of Imam Hussein.

Major Divisions Today

Muslims comprise over one-fifth of the world's population, over 1.5 billion people. Fewer than one-quarter of them are Arabs; the largest Muslim populations are in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Muslims are the second largest religious minority in Europe, and the third largest in the United States.

The vast majority of Muslims – nearly 85% – are Sunni. The second largest branch of Islam are the Shi'a (or Shi'ite) Muslims. Shi'a Muslims trace their roots to the early community who supported Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as the leader of the community when the Prophet died. They believe he was the first legitimate

successor to the Prophet. Sunni and Shi'a Muslims differ little on matters of belief, except that Shi'a believe that members of the Prophet's family were endowed with special spiritual authority, particularly when it comes to understanding how to live in accordance with the Qur'an's teachings. They therefore believe that leadership of the community should have stayed within the Prophet's family, and reject the authority of the first three caliphs chosen by the Sunnis. They refer to legitimate successors to the Prophet as Imams, and Ali was the first one.

Shi'a Muslims traced the descendants of the Prophet through a number of generations, but there were occasional differences of opinion as to who was the rightful Imam. This led to the three main divisions among Shi'a Muslims. The majority of Shi'a Muslims recognize the legitimacy of twelve generations of Imams, ending in the 9th century, and are therefore called **Twelvers** (Ithna Ashari). Twelver Shi'a Muslims comprise the majority of the Iranian population as well as that of Azerbaijan, and smaller majorities in Iraq and Bahrain. **Isma'ili Shi'a** traced the Prophet's lineage through six Imams, but then differed with the majority over the seventh. The Zaidis recognize the first four Imams, but differed from both Twelvers and Isma'ilis over the fifth. Both Isma'ilis and Zaidis are further divided into smaller groups, including the Nizari Isma'ilis, who are led by the Aga Khan. The majority of Shi'a Muslims believe the last Imam, though invisible to human beings, exists in an "occult" form and will return at the end of time as the **Mahdi** or messiah. Many Shi'as believe in the efficacy of prayer to God through the intercession of an Imam, a belief rejected by most Sunni Muslims in favor of prayer directly to God.

All Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'i, can be **Sufis**. Sufi Islam is often called Islamic mysticism. Not all Sufis are mystics, but they do generally stress the inner, personal dimension of Islamic practice. Sufis try to cultivate deep and abiding awareness of the divine, often through meditation and other spiritual practices. There are many varieties of Sufi practice, often distinguished by the methods they use to develop spirituality. Some are characterized as more austere, calling for fasting, simplicity, and solitude, for example, while others are more "ecstatic" and find music and poetry to be effective routes to heightened spirituality. The "Whirling Dervishes" (technically known as Mevlevis) are famous for their twirling dance to the rhythmic beat of drums as a means to develop spiritual awareness. They trace their origin to the mystic poet and philosopher Rumi.

Unit IV The Impact of Religious Studies on the Western Monotheisms

We have stressed that learning a religion is quite different from studying religions. The scholarly study of religion – Religious Studies – has as its goal understanding what religion is, and how various religious traditions developed, rather than training people in a particular religion. Nevertheless, some of the methods and findings of Religious Studies have had an impact on specific religious traditions, notably Christianity, the religion of so many pioneers of Religious Studies.