Women and Islam

An Historical and Theological Enquiry

FATIMA MERNISSI

TRANSLATED BY
MARY JO LAKELAND

Chapters 2-4

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The Prophet and Hadith

How could a very ethnocentric Arab who knew no foreign language, who had traveled very little (just a few excursions northward into Syria as a youth), throw the world into upheaval with a message (the Koran) that gave, and still gives, meaning to life to people belonging to very different cultures – from China (around 20 million in the provinces of Kansu and Yunan) to Senegal; from Russia (valley of the Volga, Siberia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizistan, Crimea) to India (the Indus valley and the Ganges, Bengal, and Deccan plains)? Is it of more than merely anecdotal significance to say that this man made a success of his life, private as well as public?

The story of Islam is the saga of a happy man who in his youth dreamed of a different world and realized all his dreams in his maturity and vigorous old age, when, filled with success with women and military triumphs, he bent the most recalcitrant of his enemies to his will. The first time that Lalla Faqiha (my teacher in the Koranic school) spoke to us about Christ and Christianity, she ended her lesson mumbling: "What a sad life the Messiah had, yes, very sad. He lost everything, even his life, unlike our Prophet who continued to fight right up to the final triumph."

Muhammad was born in Mecca about AD 570. Mecca, despite its importance as a flourishing commercial center, had no illusions about its power. Compared to the Romans and the Persians, the two giants who dominated the region, the Arabs appeared to be a backward people, reduced to the state of vassal when they were

not occupied, or simply ignored in their desert when their tribes did not interfere too much with the interests of the great powers of the age. The Byzantines (the Roman empire) and the Sassanids (the Persian empire), who were continually at war for control of the great international trade routes that crossed Arabia, had each created from among the great Arab tribes vassal states which defended their interests and saw to the propagation of their influence and religion. These Arab tribal kingdoms never hesitated to go to war and to tear each other to pieces if their masters demanded it. In AD 580 (when Muhammad was ten years old) the Ghassanid Arab kingdom, a vassal of the Roman empire, attacked the Lakhmid Arab kingdom, a vassal of the Persians, and burned their capital, Hira, which was located in the Iraqi desert.

Forty-eight years later, in AD 628, at the age of 58, Muhammad – who had been preaching Islam for 20 years, and promising the Arabs who converted to his religion the conquest of the Roman and Persian empires – sent letters to the leaders of those empires: one to Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, and the other to the Persian emperor, calling on them to become Muslims. The latter, who flaunted his contempt for the Arab tribes, was so outraged, according to Arab sources, that he wrote to his governor in Yemen in the following words: "That Arab who has suddenly appeared in the Hijaz has sent me an unacceptable letter. Send two reliable men to bring him before me in chains so that I can see how best to deal with him. If he refuses to come when ordered, take an army to go find him and bring me his head."[1] Fifteen years later, Iran would be conquered and Islamicized forever.

So, beyond its spiritual dimension, Islam was first and foremost a promise of power, unity, and triumph for a marginalized people, divided and occupied, who wasted their energy in intertribal wars. The Islam that the fundamentalists today lay claim to as the solution to economic problems and military defeats treasures the memory of this scarcely believable life of a young Meccan who declared himself a prophet at the age of 40 and, in 22 years of preaching interspersed with military expeditions, realized before his death the dreams that seemed impossible to his contemporaries: the union of the Arabs through a religious faith (and not through descent from the same ancestor, which is the basis of the tribal

system) and their emergence on the international scene as a world power.

Yet the religion of the Meccan prophet was not complicated. The five key duties that Muslims had to, and still have to, carry out directed everyone toward the same idea: submission of the daily behavior of the individual to a strict discipline. Above everything else, Islam is a very earthly religion, rooted in the most banal acts of everyday life (washing, eating, etc.), but also permitting one to constantly situate oneself in the cosmos. The *shahada* is the first duty: it is a profession of faith that consists of recognizing that Allah is the sole God and that Muhammad is his prophet. The *salat*, praying five times a day, is the second. It is an extremely rapid exercise in intense meditation. You must, wherever you are, at home, at work, or in transit, stop what you are doing, face Mecca, and try through the discipline of concentration to transcend your daily problems and put yourself in contact with the divine, and do all this in a very short period of time. The first prayer is said at dawn, the second when the sun is at midpoint, the third when the sun begins its descent, the fourth at sunset, and the fifth when night has fallen. Fasting during the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset is the third duty. Giving alms is the fourth. And finally, the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who can make it is the fifth duty.

Mecca was one of the most important towns of Arabia in Muhammad's time. He was a quiet inhabitant who devoted himself to trading, married young, and lived among his people, the Banu Hashim, one of the most esteemed clans of the tribe of Quraysh (literally "little shark"). Mecca had become indispensable for the security of the great international trade routes which flourished in that part of the world, for it was situated at a crossroads linking the two key routes: from west to east (from Africa to Asia) and from south to north (from the Persian Gulf to Europe). Muhammad, as a member of his clan, was destined to become a merchant. He went into business with a businesswoman named Khadija Bint Khuwaylid, a widow who, like him, belonged to the tribe of Quraysh and who had inherited a large fortune from her late husband. Muhammad quickly made such a good impression on the Meccans with his probity and honesty

that they nicknamed him al-Amin (The Trustworthy). Upon his return from a journey to Syria, Khadija was so happy with their collaboration and so surprised by his rectitude (which must have been a fairly rare quality) that she proposed marriage to him. He accepted. He was 25 years old and, according to tradition, she was over 40. It was his first marriage. She had already had other husbands, and had borne four daughters and three sons. The sons died at an early age. Although Khadija could not know that 15 years later the man she married would be the prophet of a new religion, she was nevertheless convinced that he was no ordinary husband, and she had complete confidence in him.

Dissatisfied with the customs he found around him, Muhammad went each year, like all the pious men of Mecca, to Mount Hira for meditation and a spiritual retreat. He was held in very high regard among his people: "All the inhabitants of Mecca agreed in recognizing his influence and rectitude . . . . Whoever had money to deposit brought it to him, and all who had disputes among themselves came to him for arbitration."[2] But it was not until later that he received his prophetic mission: "When Muhammad had completed his fortieth year, God sent Gabriel to bring him a vision."[3]

The first revelation that Allah sent him through his angel Gabriel was the first verse of sura 96, "*Iqra*" (Read). So Islam began with an order to read, to inform oneself. That was in the year AD 610. The first revelations were distressing to him, and, terrified by the voice he had heard, he went and described them to Khadija. He was assailed by self-doubt: "O Khadija, I fear I am going mad."[4] She reassured him, convincing him that what had happened was marvelous and unique. He was the chosen prophet, the one who was going to give the Arabs what they lacked: a book revealed by God, which was the foundation of the prestige of Judaism and Christianity, the two religions that had successfully taken root in Arabia despite the strength of polytheism. Khadija celebrated the event by converting to the new religion of her husband; she was Islam's first adherent. The new religion was going to cause great changes in polytheistic Mecca, which housed in its temple, the Ka'ba, not less than 300 idols. The Meccans found absurd the idea of one single God, which Muhammad was now proclaiming publicly, after having preached secretly for the

first three years. He had to struggle to make his cult accepted in the only place worthy of it: the sanctuary of the Ka'ba, respected from one end of Arabia to the other and the site of a great yearly pilgrimage that drew travelers from the whole region.

Once he had overcome the surprise of the revelation of the first verses, Muhammad became accustomed to the unexpected, mysterious rhythm of the revelations. Over a period of 22 years he would await those privileged moments when he was touched by divine grace, the moments of *wahy* (inspiration), also called *al-tanzil* (revelation) – the two words referring to the flowing movement of a knowledge that came from Heaven and flooded the earth through the intermediary of *al-rasul*, the Arab messenger. For – and this was the miracle – God spoke to Muhammad in his native tongue, Arabic: *Qu'ran 'arabi* (Koran in the Arabic language). Only the Jews and Christians had had this honor and privilege of direct revelation from God in their native languages. Muhammad would receive his final revelation nine days before his death, June 8, AD 632.[5]

The Prophet received Allah's message orally and transmitted it orally. He controlled neither the time of the revelations nor their length. The suras (chapters) were composed of a number of *ayat* (verses) of varying length: "The rhythm of the revelations varied from two to five verses at a time, sometimes more, sometimes less."[6] He only knew that a chapter was finished when he received the order to say *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* (In the name of Allah, the Beneficient, the Merciful).[7] The order in which the suras were revealed to the Prophet (*tartib nuzuli*) is different from the order in the text that we have today (*tartib mushafi*). The order of the revelations corresponded to the needs of the moment. The suras revealed at Mecca set forth dogma and the duties of the Muslim. The suras revealed later at Medina related to problems that the Prophet faced and to questions asked of him by the first Muslims. The order given to the revelations in the written text of the Koran, according to the experts, answered a more pedagogic need. The first suras, it is true, were those setting forth the main arrangements of Islam regarding marriage, inheritance, etc.[8] It can be said that it was at Medina that Islam as *shari'a*, social law of divine origin, was born.

The Prophet went into exile at Medina in AD 622, a key date because it constitutes year *one* of the Muslim calendar.[9] The Meccans who migrated with him would be called the Muhajirun (literally "migrants," which is the same word used today to describe the North African migrant workers who go to France and the rest of Europe!). His new adherents, recruited from among the tribes of Medina, would be called the Ansar (auxiliaries, supporters).

In AD 622 the Prophet arrived secretly in Medina. The Meccans were searching for him in order to kill him. He had insulted their gods, and above all their cherished goddesses, al-Uzza, al-Lat, and al-Manat.[10]

Two events brought about the rift between the Prophet and his town: the death of his uncle Abu Talib, and that of his wife Khadija. Abu Talib had a prestigious position in the tribe of the Quraysh as chief of the Banu Hashim clan. For ten years the Meccans tolerated the Prophet's attacks on their religion. But with the death of Abu Talib, about the year AD 619, he lost his chief supporter and the guarantee of tribal protection. That same year Muhammad lost Khadija, his companion and adherent. Saddened and emotionally drained by the loss of his close supporters, Muhammad decided to leave Mecca, which for him had become a hostile place and every day more dangerous. But where was he to go? A person could not travel around in Arabia without first undertaking careful negotiations to insure protection according to the strict code of tribal allegiances. He began by "offering himself to the tribes": "Each year at the time of the pilgrimage the Prophet approached Arabs coming from all directions and propounded his religion to them. He hoped that one of them would believe in him and take him into their tribe and thus rescue him from the people of Mecca."[11] But no one wanted to give asylum to a man who had displeased Mecca.

He took the initiative and went to Ta'if – a city which, like Medina, was not too far from Mecca – in order to negotiate his exile there. The people of Ta'if drove him away.[12] He returned to Mecca and continued to use the time of the pilgrimage to find a city that would give him asylum. It was in these circumstances that he got in contact for the first time with six pilgrims from the

city of Medina. He recited some verses from the Koran to them and offered to come and preach in their city.[13] The six Medinese "were well-known people, but of the middle class, neither very illustrious nor of low rank."[14] They explained to him that they were not qualified to make such an important decision; they would have to have the consent of the chiefs of their clans. And they explained to him the tense situation that existed in their community: "We are a community torn by dissension and conflicts . . . . We have to convey your message to the others once we return to Medina."[15] "The following year 12 of them contacted him and pledged allegiance to him . . . . The year after that 72 Medinese met with him during the pilgrimage; this time they represented the principal clans of the Aws and Khazraj tribes."[16] This was the beginning of the great Medinese venture.

Medina became the first Muslim community and constituted for generations to come the model to be followed and the experiment to be imitated, for it was led by Muhammad as the political and military chief, the arbiter (*hakam*), and the legislator inspired by God himself. It was Allah who answered, through the medium of *ayat* (verses), the questions of the new converts about the way to be Muslim (*al-ayat jawab li mustakhbir*).[17]

The problem of Hadith came up after the death of the Prophet. During the Medinese period, the community lived out the Muslim ideal, in which God and His Prophet could be consulted at any moment, the former through the intermediary of the latter. It is this decade that is being claimed today as the key moment embodying the principles that should guide the planning of economic and social relationships in modern Muslim societies. But after the death of the Prophet in AD 632, ten years after the Hejira (the flight to Medina), the question of the succession arose. It was necessary to replace the Prophet in both his political and his legislative role. As a solution to the political problem, Muslim experts developed the political theory of the caliphate: what were the qualifications necessary to become caliph, successor to the Prophet in his role as chief of the Muslim state, and how was he to be selected by the community? A whole literature with its experts, its schools, and its theoreticians grew out of this. Islam as political theory has an unparalleled sophistication (you would not think it

when you see what goes on in contemporary practice!). To resolve the second problem – that of the *shari'a*, the sacred law, which incarnates, represents, and expresses the divine will – the experts elaborated a body of religious knowledge, the *fiqh*. This consisted of, on the one hand, controlling the interpretation of the Koran, the text revealed by God, and, on the other hand, establishing the Sunna (tradition) of the Prophet by putting into writing Hadith, everything that the Prophet said in order to illuminate the way of Islam.

Choosing the right political leader and making no mistakes about the meaning of the interpretation of the *shari'a*, drawn from the Koran and the Sunna, are the two axes that animate – at least officially – the whole history of Islam. They will justify war and peace. They will be invoked to explain the periods of grandeur and of decadence. And, finally, they constitute the essential points of the aspirations of those contemporary figures who assert the return to Islam as the means for settling the political and economic problems that are tearing modern Muslim society apart. Imam Khomeini took power in Iran in the name of these two eternal motives, that is, to assure social justice by choosing a chief of state who will be inspired by the *shari'a* for leading the people and administering them.

To understand the place of writing, of the sacred text, and of its manipulation on the political chessboard yesterday and today, we have to go back to the events that took place in the days following the death of the Prophet, particularly the naming of his successor and the three who followed him, who are the only ones considered as orthodox. All contemporary demands for a return to Islam refer back to those fateful moments. The political concepts that the Islamic movements propose today as key concepts for the guarantee of democracy refer to the process of the designation of the four orthodox caliphs. How was the first caliph selected?

DEATH OF THE PROPHET

At the time of his death the Prophet did not have a male heir. Ibrahim, his last son, whom he had by his wife Maria, died at a

young age (as had those borne by Khadija). However, in his immediate entourage four men played a prominent role. First of all there was 'Ali, his son-in-law and cousin, who had a privileged affectionate relationship with him. Muhammad practically adopted him when 'Ali's father, Abu Talib, was going through a severe financial crisis, and when Muhammad revealed himself as a prophet and received his first revelations, 'Ali became the first man to be converted (the first person was his wife Khadija). 'Ali was not more than ten years old at the time.[18] Later he married Fatima, the Prophet's eldest daughter, followed the Prophet into exile at Medina, and became his right-hand man in the direction of the affairs of the community. After the death of the Prophet, it is through the descendants of 'Ali that his line was to be preserved.

The second closest man to the Prophet was 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, who was also among the first converts and, like 'Ali, married one of the daughters of the Prophet, Ruqayya. 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan was descended from the clan of the Umayyads, a rival of the Banu Hashim clan, who shared with the former a common ancestor, 'Abd Manaf. The two other men who were extremely close to Muhammad, and who were of the Quraysh tribe like him, were Abu Bakr al-Siddiq and 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab. They only had an in-law relationship with the Prophet, both being his father-in-law. Abu Bakr was the father of his wife 'A'isha, and 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab was the father of his wife Hafsa. (At his death the Prophet left nine wives.) But the privileged place that these two men occupied was the result of a factor considered secondary by the aristocratic tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia: psychological affinity, a great friendship. Abu Bakr, a sensitive, cultured man, took a great interest in history, especially genealogical narratives. 'Umar was a dashing, fiery man, but also proud, fastidious, strict, and rigidly upright.

If, instead of resisting the pressures put on him to name a successor from his clan (it would have been 'Ali), Muhammad had accepted and reproduced the tribal system, Islam would have been identified from the beginning with a tribal "family affair" – in keeping with pre-Islamic tradition.

Muhammad died quietly at home at a respectable old age. He

who had foreseen and planned political campaigns was not able to foresee the problems of his succession. According to all evidence, his preferences were for Abu Bakr and 'Umar, who would become respectively the first and second orthodox caliphs (the first was caliph for two years, 632–4; the second for ten years, 634–44). The assassination of 'Uthman, the third caliph, pitched the community into the first *fitna* (civil war). 'Ali, chosen as the fourth caliph in the middle of the civil war, never really exercised power, the era of turmoil having begun. It was against him that 'A'isha took up arms at the Battle of the Camel in year 36 of the Hejira (AD 658). 'Ali himself was assassinated by political opponents. The traumatizing effect of this first *fitna*, which extended throughout the reign of 'Ali (656 to 661), was to haunt Muslim memory for ever.

In order to protect themselves against political terror and violence, the Muslims plunged into a systematic collection of Hadith: What did the Prophet say about civil war? How is the Muslim to behave in such a case? How, among the various pretenders to the caliphate, is the best qualified one to be chosen? Should one accept an unjust caliph if he can guarantee peace, or should one fight him even if it throws society into civil war? The assassins of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt based many of their arguments and models on the events and Hadith of this period.[19] In a time of crisis, Hadith emerge as a formidable political weapon.

In this sense, one can call a Hadith all the "pertinent" information (with regard to what one wishes to justify) attributed to the Prophet. It is the recording in writing of everything that he is supposed to have said or done. His opinions, his reactions to events, the way in which he justified his decisions had to be put in writing so that they could be drawn upon and referred to later, in order to distinguish what is right from what is wrong, whether it be with regard to the practice of power or something else. How is one to act against an unjust caliph? The answer is to be found in the Koran and in the Hadith establishing the Sunna of the Prophet, his tradition. What are the husband's duties toward his wife or wives? How does one perform the daily ablutions? What is the status of a natural child? The Hadith sayings are in fact a veritable

panorama of daily life in the seventh century, a vivid panorama, extremely varied because there are various versions of the same event. Finally, one also finds side by side subjects as different as "how to perform one's ablutions," "how to behave on one's wedding night," and "what is to be done in case of civil war."

The person who took on the task of transcribing the Hadith necessarily had to master the technique that today we call "interview technique," for the word *Hadith* itself comes from the verb *haddatha*, meaning *recount*, or simply *tell*. Each generation of experts had to personally collect the testimony of those who had heard the Hadith directly spoken by the Prophet (those would have been the Companions), or to collect the indirect testimony of those who followed the Companions (*al-tabi'un*, literally "the followers") or of the second generation after the Companions (*tabi'un al-tabi'in*, "the followers of the followers"). The person who recorded the oral Hadith and put it in a written collection had to deal with various methodological problems. Not only did he have to record the Hadith itself as faithfully as possible, but he also had to establish its *isnad*, that is, the chain of people who transmitted it from its source, its source being a Companion of the Prophet who had heard it said or seen it done. A Companion might be a man or a woman, a prominent person or a slave. The important points were that person's proximity to the Prophet, his or her personal qualities, and especially the reputation for having a good memory and for not recounting just anything. This was the reason for the importance attached to the immediate entourage of the Prophet – his wives, his secretaries, his relatives – as sources of Hadith.

The science of establishing the Hadith collection consists not only in putting the content of the Hadith at the disposal of believing readers, but also in furnishing them with information about the informants. The principle of the *isnad* (transmission chain) thus makes it necessary to give the biography of the person transmitting. The believing reader has the right to have all the pertinent information about the source of the Hadith and the chain of its transmitters, so that he or she can continually judge whether they are worthy of credence or not. Islam was, at least during its first centuries, the religion of reasoning, responsible individuals

capable of telling what was true from what was false as long as they were well equipped to do so, as long as they possessed the tools of knowledge – specifically, the collections of Hadith. The fact that, over the course of centuries, we have seen believers who criticize and judge replaced by muzzled, censored, obedient, and grateful Muslims in no way detracts from this fundamental dimension of Islam.[20]

One of the reasons for the increase in false, fabricated Hadith, Muhammad Abu Zahra tells us in a chapter entitled "The Increase in Lying Concerning the Prophet and the Schisms and Divisions in the Ranks of the *Fuqaha*," is that after the death of the Prophet the Muslim world was torn by dissension. Beneath the spiritual enthusiasm and fervor, "passions and fierce struggles for earthly power were smoldering, passions which would lead the *umma* [community of believers] into interminable civil wars and finally to schisms that would give to Islam the sects that we know today."[21] The great schism that he refers to is the division of the Muslim world, during the five years of the first *fitna*, into Sunnis (those who follow the Sunna, the tradition) and Shi'ites (schismatics) after the assassination of the fourth orthodox caliph, 'Ali, and the seizure of power by Mu'awiya.

This division, which gave birth to the great Islamic schism, rested on the question, among others, of the proper attitude to have toward an unjust caliph. The Sunnis accepted Mu'awiya as the successor to 'Ali because, according to them, the most important consideration was putting an end to the civil war. The Shi'ites took the contrary position, opposing the successor to 'Ali, at the cost of civil war, on the grounds that his selection was based on a blatantly fraudulent arbitration. According to them, only 'Ali and his descendants were worthy of leading the Muslim community. This schism, which divided Islam into two groups, each developing a different theory of politics and law, then subdivided and gave rise to subgroups, stirring up trouble and confusion:

> The wind of discord was blowing strong, the hatred of some for others was fierce. They [the Muslims] were throwing insults like *kafir* [infidel] and *fasiq* [libertine] at each other

> . . . . The *umma* was now divided into Shi'ites [pro-'Ali] and [pro-]Ummayads . . . , the Shi'ites themselves were split into various opposing factions . . . . The result of all this was that many lost interest in religion itself. Religion became weakened. There was such an increase in false Hadith attributed to the Prophet that those in charge among the believers took fright. They sought advice from the experts and tried to palliate this state of affairs by writing down the Hadith that were known, certain, authentic.[22]

To give an idea of the intensity of the struggle for political power engaged in by the first Muslims, we must recall the situation at the time of the burial of the Prophet, who was still uncontestably the representative of the Divine.

The Prophet died on a Monday, and his body was left in a corner of 'A'isha's room. He was not buried until Wednesday night: "The body of the Prophet, covered by a cloak, lay in his house. Everyone was caught up in the election [of the successor]; no one thought about the washing of the body nor of the burial."[23] The struggle for political power in Islam, already begun, would never cease.

A brief look at the process of selection of the first four orthodox caliphs, and their deaths – always violent (with the exception of the first) – allows us both to grasp the events of the past and to understand the debates of the present in their light, and, above all, to familiarize ourselves with the context in which the Hadith, true and false, were elaborated.

POLITICAL DISSENSIONS

Three days after the death of the Prophet in AD 632 at Medina, Abu Bakr was finally selected as the first caliph through a maneuver by 'Umar, as power began to slip away from the Muhajirun (migrants from Mecca) in favor of the Ansar (the Medinese adherents of the Prophet). The competition between the two groups had always been extremely fierce, leading to open conflicts that the Prophet tried to calm. In the course of one

expedition (that of the Banu Mustaliq in year 6 of the Hejira, AD 628), Muhammad's army was split in two with the Muhajirun and the Ansar "having recourse to their swords." It was a veritable mutiny in which former tribal divisions took over. 'Abdallah Ibn Ubayy, one of the leaders of those Medinese who had never really accepted the arrival of the strangers (Muhammad and his Meccan Companions), summarized the conflict of interests thus: "We [the Medinese] have been well punished for having enriched the Muhajirun and protected them. This is how they repay us! It is like a dog who has been raised by someone and who, when grown, devours the one who has fed him."[24] The Prophet was extremely grieved by this remark and doubled his vigilance by asserting himself as an arbiter who transcended tribal allegiances. With his death, the Muhajirun/Ansar conflict broke out into the open.

Immediately after the announcement of the death of the Prophet, the Ansar called an urgent meeting of their principal clan chiefs in a *saqifa* (a sort of shed) belonging to one of their clans, the Banu Sa'ida, in order to proceed to the selection from among themselves of a successor to Muhammad.[25] Abu Bakr and 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the Companions who were closest to the Prophet and normally the only ones who should have been considered as candidates, were not even notified: "A man entered the mosque and said: 'The Ansar are meeting and administering the oath to Sa'd, the son of 'Ubayda.' Abu Bakr rose and, taking 'Umar by the hand, left with him."[26] This was the reason they were obliged to leave the Prophet's body without carrying out the funeral ritual and to hasten to the *saqifa* of the Banu Sa'ida, where the future of the Muslim community was being decided. The Muhajirun had to engage in intense negotiations with the Ansar, who proposed the election of two leaders: "The merit of you Muhajirun," said the Ansar, "is unquestionable, but we want to name one of our own as leader. So choose one from among yourselves. In this way each of the two parties will be satisfied, and there will be no disputes or claims among us."[27] This would have meant the end of Muhammad's long-term project, which involved the end of tribal allegiances and territorial fiefdoms and their merger into a higher ideal, that of the *umma* –

a community in which the tie uniting the members was spiritual. His two best friends and faithful Companions, Abu Bakr and 'Umar, who wanted to continue the Prophet's tradition, were indeed of the Quraysh, the Meccan tribe of Muhammad, but they did not belong to his clan. And among the Ansar there was no Companion who occupied a position like that of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. How were they to impose their leadership on the Ansar in these difficult conditions? Abu Bakr and 'Umar let the Ansar continue to hold forth, and then at a certain moment 'Umar intervened in such a fast-paced manner that he hypnotized those present:

> 'Umar, fearing that the struggle would be prolonged and become bloody, said to Abu Bakr: "Extend your hand and receive our oath, for you are an esteemed Qurashi and the most worthy." Abu Bakr replied: "No, it is for you to extend your hand and receive my oath." 'Umar seized Abu Bakr's hand and gave his oath to him. When the news spread through Medina, the whole populace ran to the scene, and in the rush Sa'd, the son of 'Ubayda [the candidate of the Ansar], was trampled underfoot and very nearly killed.[28]

And this was the way Islam began after the death of the Prophet: through a process in which only the elite was involved. And they negotiated to preserve what was essential to them – and the essential varied according to the interests of the participants.

On the death of Abu Bakr two years later in AD 634, 'Umar was chosen as his successor. But the process of choosing him was different – less spectacular but even more elitist. Abu Bakr is the only one of the orthodox caliphs who died a natural death in his bed after a brief illness. He had time to plan his succession. He consulted a number of influential persons in private meetings that he demanded to be kept secret. He sought their opinion on the candidature of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and asked that they "not repeat to anyone the subject of their interview with him."[29] Then Abu Bakr "presided at a gathering of *ashraf al-nas* [leaders, notables] and asked them: 'Would you accept him whom I will name as my successor?'"[30] He then announced to them that

'Umar was his candidate. "They responded: 'We have heard and we obey.'"[31] Another version says that the people learned indirectly of Abu Bakr's intention to select 'Umar as his successor after his death.[32]

The caliphate of 'Umar lasted ten years. Under his rule the Muslims conquered Iran and Egypt. To him is owed the organization and financial administration of the army. He was stabbed by a foreign slave while in the mosque conducting public prayers. Abu Lu'lu'a, the assassin, was an *'ajami* slave (of non-Arab origin), a Christian, and as such subject to the tax that foreigners had to pay. In fact, 'Umar "had forbidden non-Muslims to stay in Medina."[33] Abu Lu'lu'a, believing that he was paying too much tax, had complained about it to 'Umar, who had decided that he was being justly taxed. 'Umar, wounded, was carried home. On his death bed he took an initiative that ever after would be known as *shura* (consultation): he selected a group of six of the most prominent persons and told them to choose from among themselves a caliph to succeed him.[34] Al-Tabari devotes nine pages to recounting the bargaining that took place and that ended three days after the death of 'Umar with the naming of one of the six as the successor. He was 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, who became the third orthodox caliph in AD 644. Like the first two caliphs he was a Meccan Muhajir of the Quraysh tribe, but from one of the clans who were rivals of the Prophet's clan – the clan of the Umayyads. The Umayyads and the Banu Hashim (the clan of the Prophet and of 'Ali) were descended from a common ancestor, 'Abd Manaf. In addition, 'Uthman, who had married one of the Prophet's daughters, Ruqayya, had very early on appreciated the exceptional importance of his father-in-law's message and had stood at his side during the conflicts that put him in opposition to the Quraysh tribe. So he was a member of the small group of privileged persons from which were recruited the first caliphs.

But his caliphate ended in tragedy. Eleven years after his selection, at the end of the year 35 of the Hejira (AD 655), a crowd of insurgents, claiming that he was governing the country unjustly, surrounded his house, and he was killed by a group who broke in while he was reading the Koran.[35] With his death began

what is called the first *fitna*, a period of instability which, despite the selection of 'Ali as the fourth orthodox caliph, plunged the country into the first civil war.

'Ali was chosen caliph in June AD 656 in a Medina that was in a state of total disarray. Many Muslims took up arms because they challenged his selection. 'A'isha took command of them, and, with an army of insurgents, she went forth to fight 'Ali at Basra a year later at the famous Battle of the Camel.[36] 'Ali inflicted a crushing defeat on her, and it was after this battle that the Hadith declaring defeat for those who let themselves be led by a woman was pronounced. 'Ali, weakened by the Battle of the Camel, nevertheless had to confront another political adversary, militarily more dangerous than 'A'isha: Mu'awiya, governor of Syria, who reproached him, as had 'A'isha, for not having punished the murderers of 'Uthman. Mu'awiya belonged to the same clan as 'Uthman, the clan of the Umayyads who were rivals of the Banu Hashim clan. 'A'isha's army numbered only several thousand, while that of Mu'awiya had not less than 85,000 men. 'Ali arrived from Iraq with 90,000 men.[37]

'Ali and Mu'awiya met at the Battle of Siffin, which was long and bloody, for neither of the two forces could get the upper hand. The dead numbered 70,000 men. It was finally decided by arbitration, which took place in February AD 658 and which designated Mu'awiya as caliph. Nevertheless, there was no unanimity on the result of the arbitration, the outcome of which was rigged. This is what brought about the split of the Muslims into Sunnis (those who accepted the result of the arbitration however rigged it was, the essential point for them being that a strong leader would end the civil war) and Shi'ites, who refused to recognize Mu'awiya. For them, the sole caliph remained 'Ali, Mu'awiya being an impostor. In addition to these two groups, there was a group of extremists, the Kharijites, determined to get rid of both caliphs, resulting in the first act of political terrorism and assassination of a head of state by a splinter group:

> In year 40 of the Hejira, a band of Kharijites gathered at Mecca were discussing the dissensions and wars that were overwhelming them when three of them agreed to kill 'Ali,

> Mu'awiya, and 'Amr Ibn al-'As [a third person] . . . . They made a compact among themselves that each would pursue his chosen victim until he had killed him or perished in the attempt . . . . The night of the seventeenth or, according to others, the twenty-first of the month of Ramadan [January 28, AD 661] was chosen for carrying out the crime.[38]

The conspirators were partially successful in carrying out their plot. Although Mu'awiya was only wounded, 'Ali, attacked at dawn while he was preparing to lead prayers in the mosque, died from his injuries. At this point the story of the first caliphs ends, for, with the accession of Mu'awiya to power, no one would any longer believe in the myth of an "orthodox" choice (today we would call it "democratic") of the head of the Muslim state. Mu'awiya would simply name, during his lifetime, his son Yazid as his heir. Islam, which wanted to avoid the system of tribal aristocracy, fell back into a similar pattern, but on the scale of empire – the dynastic pattern. Mu'awiya held power until AD 680, a long reign which provided time to solidify the bases of the absolutist state.

BIRTH OF THE HADITH

This summary of the process of choosing the first orthodox caliphs is intended to familiarize the reader with the historical events taking place when the Sunna (the tradition, the Hadith) of the Prophet was being elaborated. And it is particularly intended to raise an issue which, 15 centuries later, Muslims still do not seem ready to resolve: How is the principle of the equality of all believers (whatever their sex and ethnic or social origin) to be transformed into a practical political system which gives everyone the right to participate in the choice of the leader of the community? The "period of orthodoxy," and especially its brutal end, is both symptom and symbol for an understanding of modern political violence in Muslim countries. During the first decade, and before the accession of Mu'awiya to power, political

decisions were made on the basis of consensus among the *ahl al-bay'a* (the people who were qualified to take the oath of allegiance), the *ashraf* (the notables, those who were trusted by the clans and who were their leaders), and the *ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd* (those who could make contracts and annul them, those who could make alliances and break them).

It is easy to imagine how important it was for each interest group to seek legitimacy in and through the sacred text. With the historical events as background, we can now appreciate in their true measure the two contradictory tendencies that were at odds with each other in the elaboration of the Hadith: on one hand, the desire of the male politicians to manipulate the sacred; and on the other hand, the fierce determination of the scholars to oppose them through the elaboration of the *fiqh* (a veritable science of religion) with its concepts and its methods of verification and counterverification.

Al-Bukhari is a good representative of these tensions. As an intellectual he isolated himself from power in order to concentrate on the research necessary for an objective editing of the Hadith, and at the same time he was the object of political pressure which called on him to put his knowledge into the service of politics – which he refused to do. Al-Bukhari was born, as his name indicates, in Bukhara in year 194 of the Hejira (the ninth century of the Christian calendar), and died in year 256 of the Hejira (AD 870). Like all the scholars of his time, he traveled throughout the Islamic lands, seeking better teachers and better universities. After pausing in Syria and Iraq and visiting the Hijaz, he settled for a time in Egypt. The duration of his stay in various places depended on how much he enjoyed the intellectual encounters he had and the quality of the masters. He made the rounds of all the known scholars who were experts in the area in which he was to specialize – the Hadith. Once they were recorded in a collection, the Hadith constituted the Sunna, the teaching of Muhammad. To show believers, through the Hadith (and the commentaries on the Koran, of course), the right way (*al-tariq al-mustaqim*) followed by the Prophet is to map out for them the path that leads to a worthy life on earth and to paradise after death.

Al-Bukhari, methodical, systematic, was able to interview

1,080 persons and collect 600,000 Hadith. His main objective was to be true to Muhammad – that is, to avoid having him say something that he had not said. Once the contents of a Hadith were recorded, the work consisted, above all, of assuring its authenticity. Al-Bukhari's problem was a methodological one. How is the truth or falsity of a Hadith to be verified? For him, writing the history of the Prophet was a serious undertaking: "I wrote only after hearing the testimony of 1,080 persons . . . and I entered no Hadith in the book before having carried out the ritual purification and prayed twice."[39] Al-Bukhari purified himself through prayer, thereby expressing the transcendent dimension of the function that he was performing and the distance that should exist between the scholar and the material he was handling. For the scholars of the first centuries religion was definitely a scientific endeavor. It was necessary to avoid, as much as possible, letting subjectivity intrude, all the while humbly recognizing that it could not be totally mastered. The way to do this was to see that the maximum number of versions was reported, to include repetitions in order not to neglect any point of view, and, above all, to distrust the witnesses and transmitters:

> When his [al-Bukhari's] scientific method had attained its full development, he began to distinguish authentic [*sahih*] Hadith from the others. After having developed a very advanced knowledge of the various kinds of Hadith, he mastered the techniques for uncovering their faults . . . . No one could equal his ability in this matter.[40]

Once his method of verification was perfected, al-Bukhari "retained as authentic only 7,257 Hadith, if the repetitions, which number 4,000, are eliminated."[41]

The great lesson to be drawn from al-Bukhari's experience in coming to grips with the flight of time and failing memory is that one must be true to one's method and honor it, by continuing to mistrust all those who regulate their affairs with the help of Hadith. If at the time of al-Bukhari – that is, less than two centuries after the death of the Prophet – there were already 596,725 false Hadith in circulation (600,000 minus 7,275 plus

4,000), it is easy to imagine how many there are today. The most astonishing thing is that the skepticism that guided the work of the founders of religious scholarship has disappeared today.

Al-Bukhari was not content with verifying what he recorded, but in order to show his veneration of the sacred text, he wrote an important study on the life of the transmitters of Hadith, *Al-tarikh al-kabir* (*The Great History*). The study of the transmitters became a scientific endeavor during the second century of the Hejira, with the triumph of the traditionalists.[42] Al-Bukhari became a celebrity, and the politically powerful were not slow in taking an interest in him: "When al-Bukhari came home to his native city, tents were pitched and the whole population came out to welcome him . . . . He stayed a while [in Bukhara], and then a conflict arose between him and the amir of the city, and he was forced to go into exile."[43] The amir, looking for a highly symbolic act that would show the population that he controlled the *fiqh* (religious knowledge), requested al-Bukhari to come to the palace to read to him in private some excerpts from his *Sahih*. And here is al-Bukhari's response, which earned him exile: " 'Go,' he said to the amir's emissary, 'tell your master that I hold knowledge in high esteem, and I refuse to drag it into the antechambers of sultans.' "[44]

Not all intellectuals had the same pride in their work as al-Bukhari. Many sold themselves for a few dinars to politicians who were trying to pressurize the collectors of religious knowledge to fabricate traditions that benefited them. There were so many liars who tried to put into the mouth of the Prophet words that would benefit them, Abu Zahra tells us, that Qadi Ayad undertook to set up a classification of them. According to him, the first category is those who attribute to the Prophet remarks that he did not make. This category is subdivided into two groups: those who lie for material advantage and those who lie for ideological advantage.[45] The second category is those who did not fabricate the content of the Hadith itself, but simply falsified the chain of transmitters: "For example, they attach onto a weak Hadith a very authentic *isnad*, composed of famous persons."[46] Qadi Ayad added a third category that is no less interesting: "There are those who simply lie. This individual claims to have heard remarks that

in fact never reached his ears. He claims to have met people that he never met."[47]

Behind this whole increase in lies about what the Prophet said or did, we must keep in mind the power struggles, the conflicting interests in a Muslim community which, judging by appearances, was growing rich, and in which social mobility, as well as geographic expansion due to conquests, was the order of the day. Claiming to have been close to the Prophet or to have been given some privilege or other by him was used to mask huge economic and political stakes. The source of the invention of Hadith – manipulation *par excellence* of the sacred text – is to be found in the very nature of a political system which never managed to transcend its elitist origins and seek pragmatic ways of mobilizing the whole population to participate in the choice of the head of state. Something so ordinary as the suffrage process – the people filing to the voting booth to express their choice – will be seen in our day, despite the principle of the equality of all, as a foreign idea imported from the West. The greater the number of people affected and excluded, the more violent were the dissensions within the governing elites and the more pressing the need to manipulate the sacred.

Time was the great challenge for the founders of Islam in making it a scientific body of knowledge. They had to establish the rules for verification of the authenticity of the Hadith. The rules went from affirmation of principles and methodological axioms to simple techniques for the detection of lies. For example, if one discovered that for transmitter *X* to have been able to transmit Hadith *x* to transmitter *Y* he would have had to be 250 years old, one deduced from that that transmitter *Y* had lied. But al-Bukhari was neither the first one nor the only one to develop this method of authentication. All those who dealt with the sacred text – *'alim* (scholar), *faqih* (expert in religious knowledge), *qadi* (judge of Muslim law), *imam* – emerged as leaders of public opinion and participants in all the negotiations where power and wealth were at stake. Caliphs and princes, conscious of the importance not only of those who study the sacred text but also of those who manipulate memory – like genealogists, poets, storytellers – tried to control them or, if they failed to do so, to get

rid of them. Taha Husayn, in his study of pre-Islamic poetry, describes the popular dimension of this phenomenon:

> The storytellers came to recite tales to crowds in provincial mosques. They recounted to them the old stories of the Arabs and the non-Arabs; they spoke to them of the prophets and used this material to slip in explications of the Koran, the Hadith, and the biography of the Prophet. Military expeditions and conquests were also touched on. These storytellers led the crowd through these subjects, carried along by imagination, knowing nothing of the limits imposed by scientific discipline and the rigor of authentication. The crowds, fascinated by the storytellers, gulped down all the stories they were told. The caliphs and princes, quickly realizing the political and religious importance of this new means of communication, encouraged and controlled it. They used and exploited it for their own purposes.[48]

Al-Isbahani, a writer of the fourth century of the Hejira (eleventh century AD), tells us about the case of a deal between a powerful man and a poet whom he asked to fabricate for 4,000 dirhams (not to be confused with today's Moroccan dirham) a poem that he would date back to the time of the Prophet. The poem was intended to enhance the image of his clan, the Umayyads, the rival clan to the Prophet's. The Umayyad said: "After writing your verses, say that you heard Ibn Thabit [the Prophet's official poet] declaim them in the presence of the Prophet, may the prayer of Allah and His peace be upon him." The poet replied: "I am too afraid of Allah to create lies concerning the Prophet. On the other hand, if you wish, I can say that I heard 'A'isha recite the verses."[49]

The Umayyad, not finding 'A'isha important enough, declined the poet's offer, insisting: "I want you to say that you heard Hasan Ibn Thabit declaim them before the Prophet while he was seated."[50]

The powerful men, having huge assets at their disposal, tried to buy not only the work of poets but also genealogies, which were the equivalent of our identity cards. Buying a genealogy is like, in our day, trying to falsify one's papers. Ibn al-Kalbi, author of one

of the rare books on the pre-Islamic religions and a great expert on the subject of genealogy, confessed to having sold one: "The first lie that I told was when Khalid Ibn 'Abdallah al-Qasri asked me to tell him about his grandmother." Instead of revealing that his grandmother was a prostitute, Ibn al-Kalbi fabricated a splendid genealogy, and obviously, he added, "Khalid was extremely happy and rewarded me for it."[51]

Taha Husayn, in the study quoted above, which had the effect of a bombshell when it appeared, called into question the authenticity of one of the pillars of Arab knowledge – pre-Islamic poetry, widely used as a reference for grammar and vocabulary by commentators on the Koran, biographers of the Prophet, and historians. He advanced the revolutionary theory that this poetry, key to our understanding of the sacred literature, especially the Koran, was a fabrication pure and simple. Calling into question a large part of the poetry contained in a text as fundamental as the *Sira* (biography of the Prophet) of Ibn Hisham, he reminded us that the original text of that biography was initially written by Ibn Ishaq, who apologized profusely for not knowing many poems. So, asked Taha Husayn, where did those long poetic passages that are part of the text that we have in our hands come from? Are they not additions designed to enliven the text?[52] He adds that if poetry and genealogies were the object of business deals, it is easy to imagine what conflicts there were over interpretation of the power-texts – the Koran and the Hadith. The body of the *'ulama* (scholars) was very heterogeneous, riddled with conflicting interests of all kinds, with ethnic conflict not being the least. There were not only experts of Arab origin. Many specialists on the interpretation and elaboration of religious literature were foreigners, belonging to other cultures (al-Tabari was from Tabaristan, al-Bukhari from Bukhara, etc.). Other conflicts were internal to the profession, like the rivalries that we know so well today between experts belonging to different disciplines.

This panorama gives us an idea of the magnitude of the political and economic stakes that presided over, and still preside over, the manipulation of the sacred text, since that Monday of the year AD 632 when the Prophet, who had succeeded in creating a community that was both democratic and powerful, lay forgotten and unburied.