



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 Mevlevi, known as Whirling Dervishes for their spinning spiritual dance, are followers of Rumi. © Atlantide Phototravel/Corbis.



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



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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'a 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 Mevlevi) 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.

Biblical Studies

We saw in Chapter 3 that the academic study of the Bible started in early modern times with scholars such as Spinoza. Then in the 19th century, Biblical Studies became more sophisticated with the method known as Higher Criticism, practiced by people such as William Robertson Smith. Julius Wellhausen formulated the Documentary Hypothesis, arguing that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible – the “Books of Moses” – were actually compiled from four independent sources probably well after the time of Moses. This hypothesis was dismissed by some as an attack on Judaism, but ultimately was accepted – with refinements – by the majority of scholars.

In the 20th century, archaeological discoveries added new materials for scholars to analyze, including documents with particular relevance for Christians. Among the things found were the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Scrolls. From these documents scholars learned that in the first three centuries of the common era there were many different Christian and Jewish groups with different scriptures and beliefs. It was only in the 4th century that Christian leaders and Jewish leaders chose certain documents to become their official Bibles, their canons. Before that, Christians had several other gospels besides the now familiar Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, including the gospels of Thomas, Mary, Peter, Philip, Judas, and one called the Gospel of Truth.

Analyzing and comparing all these gospels, scholars saw that they were a special kind of writing. They were not written as history books but rather as messages of “Good News” – persuasive writings meant to spread various ideas about Jesus, and thereby gain converts. For the first quarter-century, messages about Jesus were passed on by word of mouth. Different communities of Christians had different beliefs and different agendas. Some groups consisted only of Jews; others were mostly non-Jews.

As we saw, the first writings that were eventually included in the New Testament were letters written by Paul in the 50s to communities around the Mediterranean Sea. Then around 70 CE the first gospel was written, the Gospel of Mark. Its author had not known Jesus personally, scholars concluded, but composed the Gospel from material that had been transmitted orally for those 40 years. Mark’s is the shortest and simplest of the four Gospels.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written next, in the 80s, and they present a lot of the same material that is in Mark’s gospel. Because of their similarities, the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the **synoptic Gospels**. Scholars also noticed that the material reported by Matthew and Luke that is not covered by Mark is similar. That is, Matthew and Luke report similar “non-Markan” material. That led to the hypothesis that there was once a document that the authors of Matthew and Luke both worked from, that no longer exists. Scholars call it *Quelle*, the German word for *source*, or Q for short.

We saw that Judaism is a tradition that integrates religious scholars’ commentaries on scripture, generation after generation. And as a practice-based tradition, Judaism does not place a great deal of emphasis on theological analysis. However, it is different in Christianity. The realization that the four canonical gospels were neither the only reports on the life of Jesus, nor complete ones, prompted theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann to return to the Gospels and rethink what can be learned from them.

