

Conclusion

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was a charismatic leader with many admirable qualities. He was responsible for elevating his followers to a higher level of self awareness. In the first chapter, Muhammad was presented as a model and a source of inspiration for Muslims to emulate in their lives. He realized on earth the perfect equilibrium between the material life and the spiritual life. Since Muhammad was central as a source of guidance for the community (*umma*), his death had created an immense loss and a deep vacuum. The problem raised by Muhammad's succession, examined in the second chapter, gave birth to the two main branches of Islam: the Sunnīs and the Shī'ites.

The Islamic revelation transmitted by Muhammad became successful in the Fertile Crescent (the region including 'Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Kuwait, Jordan, south-eastern Turkey and west and south-western Iran), right up to the modern era. Arab Muslims, in an amazingly brief period of time, conquered the entire Middle East, North Africa, most of Spain and parts of India and Central Asia. After the XIIth century, other Islamic expansions followed a more pacific course; these were carried by merchants and Sufis into sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey, Southeast Asia and China.

From the beginning of Islam, the Prophet encouraged the search for knowledge. The quest for knowledge requires an attitude of humility in acknowledging our ignorance and being open to listening to what others can teach us. The purpose of revelation is to understand God's creation; Muslims must apply knowledge and reason to build a better society. The ultimate goal of knowledge, intimately linked to Islamic ethics, is to reach happiness in the hereafter.

The Golden Age of Islam was characterized by an immense open-mindedness of Muslims who were even willing to go to China to acquire knowledge, as Muhammad had recommended. Following the example of the Prophet set in the Constitution of Madīna, Muslims were also very tolerant toward people of other cultures who could freely practice their faith. Jews, Christians, and Muslims were living in harmony; listening and

learning from each other and contributing to the welfare of society in all fields (philosophy, literature, science, etc.).

Despite the success of the Qur'ānic revelation, the long-established local cultures had the opportunity to flourish. Many older traditions of the conquered survived under Islamic rule. One of the most successful cultural survivals occurred in Iran. The early conversion of many of the Persian elite became a means of spreading Iranian culture to the tribes of Central Asia. In a great part of the Islamic world, Persian culture became as influential as Arabic culture.

This book examines the nature of Islamic civilization and the factors underlying its expansion, peak and decline. After summarizing Islamic history to the present-day in the third chapter, we hope to have shown that Islamic civilization is rich, diverse, and progressive. It evolves just like any other religion. The idea that prevailed throughout the centuries was that the Islamic value of an individual is to be judged by God alone, not by other humans. Thus, when compared with the history of Christianity, there have not been in Islam as many massacres in the name of religion. This tolerant legacy which characterized Islamic history is quite different from the recent attitude of certain extremists.

Islamic societies benefited from the economic and intellectual resources of non-Muslim populations. Following the initial conquest, these resources gave rise to a new flowering of civilization which historians refer to as the “Islamic Golden Age”. The decline of Islam, studied in the fourth chapter, cannot be mainly attributed to the Mongolians who set fire to libraries, thus drastically reducing the access to knowledge. Presently Muslim leaders are still dealing with the pressure of Westernization. Countries have reacted differently; some choose to accommodate while others decide to resist this foreign invasion.

The fifth chapter investigates the modern Muslim problematic. Among those modern thinkers, Abū al-A'ālā Mawdūdī and Sayyid Qutb have become prominent after they reinterpreted the *jāhiliyya*, establishing a new normative criterion. Today, the

Western media focus too much on radical political movements who claim to follow the principles of Islam. Several contemporary Muslims who have a more liberal interpretation of Islam are simply ignored. Also, the application of the Western democratic system has failed to serve populations who have a completely different history marked by colonialism and the Cold War. The respect and understanding of all cultures will be crucial in avoiding future wars.

After being dominated for centuries by Western technological superiority, Islam is starting to catch up. The re-emergence of Islam is due to the decolonization and the steady growth of the Muslim population, contrasting with the declining population of the West and the deteriorating practice of religion. In contrast to the Western world, the majority of Muslims continue to preserve their moral and religious values, which enable them to offset the problems caused by excessive material wealth. Islam is a way of life encompassing every facet of worldly life. The ethics of Islam bridge faith and society and it is aimed at helping the weaker members of the community: the poor, orphans, women, and the aged... One of the pillars of Islam, the *zakāt* (obligatory alms) —also present in other religion— allows the redistribution of wealth to the poor. The Muslim has to keep a balanced between the material and the spiritual aspects of life; he is supposed to give away what he has in excess. Islam cannot be imposed by force; as it is written in the Qur’ān (II: 256): “There is no compulsion in religion.” Unfortunately there are a few Muslim extremists such as the Tālibān who believe that only they are right and want to impose their views on others, going against this fundamental Qur’ānic principle.

This book has sought to show the plurality of Muslim views regarding Islam’s past and present. In chapter six, the content of the Qur’ān was presented as well as different interpretations of the revelation. Islam affirms the existence of a universal bond that unites all humans. The Qur’ān addresses itself to all humanity saying (IV: 1): “O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul (*naḥs*) and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women.” This verse refers to the unity of mankind and to its diversity. All humans are seen as the children of God since they originated from the same soul.

The Qur'ān explains that God intentionally created the diversity of humankind (XI: 118-119): “And if your Lord had willed, he could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ. Except whom your Lord has given Mercy, and for that He created them.” God created men with different ethnicities, languages, and cultures for humans to develop their mercy and tolerance toward others. Each ethnic and cultural community is unique. As the Qur'ān states (XLIX: 13): “God created male and female and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another.” Muslims should be proud of their own culture but also they must be willing to establish connecting bonds with other cultures so that they may learn from others. Since diversity is an integral part of the human reality, this book has sought to present the views of different schools of thought: chapter seven covered Islamic Law and Theology, chapter eight Shī'ī Islam, chapter nine Islamic philosophy and chapter ten Sufism.

Multiplicity and variety are an integral part of the Divine creation. The goal of the creation of humans is to worship God (LI: 56). The beauty of a garden resides in its diversity. If a garden was composed of only one kind of flower, it would not be as beautiful as if it was laid out with a great variety of flowers, each flower pouring out its own fragrance. God created man with free will, as a result he may exercise his intellectual capacity the way he wants, leading to a great variety of opinions. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Difference of opinion in my community is a manifestation of Divine Mercy.” Unfortunately, in some parts of the Muslim world today, some Muslims are hostile to diverse interpretations of Islam. They believe in a monolithic reality of Islam, and they want to impose their view on others by any means necessary.