

demands (religious, political, economic, and social) of the modern world. The issues are not only about Islam's accommodation to change but also about the relationship of Islam to the West, since much of modern change is associated with Western ideas, institutions, and values. Muslim responses to issues of reform and modernization have spanned the spectrum from secularists and Islamic modernists to religious conservatives or traditionalists, "fundamentalists," and Islamic reformists.

Modern secularists are Western oriented and advocate a separation between religion and the rest of society, including politics. They believe that religion is and should be strictly a private matter. Islamic modernists believe that Islam and modernity, particularly science and technology, are compatible, so that Islam should inform public life without necessarily dominating it. The other groups are more "Islamically" oriented but have different opinions as to the role Islam should play in public life. Conservatives, or traditionalists, emphasize the authority of the past and tend to call for a reimplementation of Islamic laws and norms as they existed in that past. "Fundamentalists" emphasize going back to the earliest period and teachings of Islam, believing that the Islamic tradition needs to be purified of popular, cultural, and Western beliefs and practices that have "corrupted" Islam. However, the term *fundamentalist* is applied to such a broad spectrum of Islamic movements and actors that, in the end, it includes both those who simply want to reintroduce or restore their pure and puritanical vision of a romanticized past and others who advocate modern reforms that are rooted in Islamic principles and values. There are a significant number of Islamic reformers, intellectuals, and religious leaders who also emphasize the critical need for an Islamic reformation, a wide-

ranging program of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and reform urging fresh approaches to Quranic interpretation as well as to issues of gender, human rights, democratization, and legal reform.

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### *What is the difference between Sunni and Shii Muslims?*

Sunni and Shii Muslims represent the two largest institutional divisions within the Muslim community. Today, Sunnis constitute approximately 85 percent of Muslims and Shiis make up 15 percent. The Shii have significant numbers in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon. The differences that led to the formation of these two groups centered on disagreements about who should be the successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

In the early Muslim community, Muhammad provided immediate and authoritative answers. Muhammad's death in 632 was a traumatic event for the Muslim community, marking not only the end of direct, personal contact with and guidance from the Prophet but also the end of direct revelation from God. The companions of the Prophet moved quickly to steady and reassure community members. Abu Bakr, the man whom Muhammad had appointed to lead the Friday communal prayer in his absence, announced the death of the Prophet in this way: "Muslims! If any of you has worshipped Muhammad, let me tell you that Muhammad is dead. But if you worship God, then know that God is living and will never die!"

The majority of Muslims, who came to be called Sunnis, or followers of the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet, believed that Muhammad had died without establishing a system for selecting a successor or designating a replacement. After an initial period of uncertainty, the elders or leaders of Medina

selected Abu Bakr to be the *caliph* (successor, deputy). An early convert who had been Muhammad's close companion and trusted advisor as well as his father-in-law, Abu Bakr was respected for his sagacity and piety. Thus Sunni Muslims adopted the belief that leadership should pass to the most qualified person, not through hereditary succession.

As caliph, Abu Bakr became the political and military leader of the community. Although he was not a prophet—the Quran had declared Muhammad to be the last of the prophets—the caliph had religious prestige as head of the community of believers (*ummah*). This was symbolized in later history by the caliph's right to lead the Friday prayer and the inclusion of the caliph's name in the community's prayers.

A minority of the Muslim community, the Shiis, or Party of Ali, opposed the selection of Abu Bakr as caliph, believing that succession should be hereditary. Since Muhammad had no sons who survived infancy, this minority believed that succession should pass through Muhammad's daughter Fatima and that her husband Ali, Muhammad's first cousin and closest living male relative, should be the leader (called Imam) of the Islamic community. Shiis took strong exception to the fact that Ali was passed over for the position of caliph three times, finally gaining his rightful place after thirty-five years only to be assassinated a few short years later. To make matters worse, Ali's charismatic son Hussein, who had been persuaded to lead a rebellion against the caliph Yazid, was overwhelmed and massacred along with his small band of followers.

Muslims point out that the differences between Sunnis and Shiis do not have to do with dogma but rather are political, having to do with the qualifications for the head of the Muslim community. Their shared belief and practice notwithstand-

ing, however, they also developed different views about the meaning of history.

Historically, Sunnis have almost always ruled over Shiis. Because Shiis existed as an oppressed and disinherited minority, they understood history to be a test of the righteous community's perseverance in the struggle to restore God's rule on earth. Realization of a just social order led by their Imam became the dream of Shiis throughout the centuries. While Sunni history looked to the glorious and victorious history of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs and then the development of imperial Islam under the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ottomans, Shii history was the theater for the struggle of the oppressed and disinherited. Thus, while Sunnis can claim a golden age when they were a great world power and civilization, which they believe is evidence of God's favor upon them and a historic validation of Muslim beliefs, Shiis see in these same developments the illegitimate usurpation of power by Sunni rulers at the expense of a just society. Shiis view history more as a paradigm of the suffering, disinheritance, and oppression of a righteous minority community who must constantly struggle to restore God's rule on earth under His divinely appointed Imam.

In the twentieth century, Shii history was reinterpreted as a paradigm providing inspiration and mobilization to actively fight against injustice, rather than passively accept it. This reinterpretation has had the most significant impact among the Shiis in Lebanon, who struggled to achieve greater social, educational, and economic opportunities during the 1970s and 1980s, and in Iran, where the Shah was equated with Yazid, and Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers with Hussein, during the Islamic revolution of 1978–79. Thus the victory of the Islamic revolution was declared the victory of the righteous against illegitimate usurpers of power.

### ***What are the divisions among Shii Muslims?***

Shii Islam developed three main divisions, stemming from disagreement over the number of Imams who succeeded Muhammad: the Zaydis (also called the Fivers) recognized five Imams, the Ismailis (also called the Seveners) recognized seven, and the Ithna Ashari (also called the Twelvers) recognized twelve. The Zaydis split with the other Shiis by recognizing Hussein's grandson Zayd as the fifth Imam. They believed that any descendant of Ali who was willing to assert his claim to the imamate publicly and fight for it could become Imam. The Zaydis were the first Shii group to achieve independence. They founded a dynasty in Tabaristan on the Caspian Sea in 864. Another Zaydi imamate state was founded in Yemen in 893 and lasted until 1963.

The split between the Ismailis (Seveners) and Ithna Ashari (Twelvers) occurred in the eighth century over the question of who succeeded the sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 765). The Ismailis recognize seven Imams, ending with Jafar al-Sadiq's son Ismail, who was designated to become the seventh Imam but who predeceased his father and left no son. They formed a revolutionary movement against the Sunni caliphate and established the Fatimid Dynasty, whose empire stretched from Egypt and North Africa to the Sind province of India between the tenth and twelfth centuries.

An Ismaili offshoot, the Nizari Ismailis, were particularly vehement in their violent opposition to Sunni Abbasid rule. Their tactics of violence and terror earned them the epithet of the Assassins. One of the ironies of history is that a Nizari leader who fled to India established a line of Imams known by the honorific title of Agha Khan and created a nonviolent mainstream form of Shii that now has prosperous communities in

Canada, Britain, East Africa, and South Asia. The current Harvard-educated Agha Khan oversees the cultural and spiritual lives of his followers, in addition to looking after the educational, social, and commercial institutions of the community.

The third and most populous Shii group, the Ithna Ashari (Twelvers), recognized twelve legitimate successors to Muhammad. Today, they are a majority in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain. The twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Muntazar (Muhammad the Awaited One) "disappeared" in 874 as a child with no sons, creating a major dilemma for the line of succession. Shii theology resolved this dilemma with the doctrine of the Hidden Imam, which declares that the twelfth Imam did not die but rather "disappeared" and is in hiding, or "occlusion," for an unspecified period of time. This messianic figure is expected to return as the divinely guided Mahdi at the end of time to vindicate his followers, restore his faithful community, and usher in a perfect Islamic society of justice and truth. In the interim, Shiis are guided in religious matters by religious experts, or *mujtahids* (those capable of independently interpreting Islamic law). In contrast to the majority Muslim experience, Twelver Shiism developed a clerical hierarchy at whose apex are religious leaders acknowledged by their followers as *ayatollahs* (signs of God) because of their reputations for knowledge and piety.

### ***What is Wahhabi Islam?***

Until recently, most Westerners had never heard of Wahhabi Islam, but we have now repeatedly heard this term with respect to Osama bin Laden and Saudi Arabia. There are many interpretations of Islam, many schools of theology and law.

Among the most ultraconservative is Wahhabi Islam, the official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi movement takes its name from Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791), a scholar of Islamic law and theology in Mecca and Medina. Disillusioned by the decline and moral laxity of his society, Abd al-Wahhab denounced many popular beliefs and practices as un-Islamic idolatry and a return to the paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia. He rejected blind imitation or following (*taqlid*) of past scholarship. He regarded the medieval law of the *ulama* (religious scholars) as fallible and, at times, unwarranted innovations (*bida*) or heresy. Abd al-Wahhab called for a fresh interpretation of Islam that returned to the “fundamentals” of Islam, the Quran and the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab joined with Muhammad Ibn Saud, a local tribal chief, to form a religious-political movement. Ibn Saud used Wahhabism to legitimate his jihad to subdue and unite the tribes of Arabia, converting them to this puritanical version of Islam. Like the Kharijites, Wahhabi theology saw the world in white and black categories—Muslim and non-Muslim, belief and unbelief, the realm of Islam and that of warfare. They regarded all Muslims who did not agree with them as unbelievers to be subdued (that is, fought and killed) in the name of Islam. Central to Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s theology was the doctrine of God’s unity (*tawhid*), an absolute monotheism reflected in the Wahhabis’ self-designation as “Unitarians” (*muwahiddun*)—those who uphold the unity of God. In imitation of Muhammad’s destruction of the pantheon of pre-Islamic tribal gods in Mecca’s sacred shrine (Kaaba) and its restoration to worship of the one true God (Allah), Wahhabi puritanism spared neither the sacred tombs of Muhammad and his Companions in Mecca

and Medina nor the Shiite pilgrimage site at Karbala (in modern Iraq) that housed the tomb of Hussein. The destruction of this venerated site has never been forgotten by Shii Muslims and contributed to the historic antipathy between the Wahhabi of Saudi Arabia and Shii Islam in both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Centuries later, many would point to Wahhabi-inspired iconoclasm as the source behind the Taliban’s wanton destruction of Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan, an action condemned by Muslim leaders worldwide.

In the early nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali of Egypt defeated the Saudis, but the Wahhabi movement and the House of Saud proved resilient. By the early twentieth century, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud recaptured Riyadh, united the tribes of Arabia, restored the Saudi kingdom, and spread the Wahhabi movement. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia melded the political and religious in a self-declared Islamic state, using the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam as the official basis for state and society.

Internationally, the Saudis, both government-sponsored organizations and wealthy individuals, have exported their ultraconservative version of Wahhabi Islam to other countries and communities in the Muslim world and the West. They have offered development aid, built mosques, libraries, and other institutions, funded and distributed religious tracts, and commissioned imams and religious scholars. Wahhabi puritanism and financial support have been exported to Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics, China, Africa, Southeast Asia, the United States, and Europe. At the same time, some wealthy businessmen in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have provided financial support to extremist groups who follow a militant “fundamentalist” brand of Islam (commonly referred to as Wahhabi or Salafi) with its jihad culture.

The challenge is to distinguish between the export of an ultraconservative theology on the one hand and militant extremism on the other. This difficulty is compounded by the propensity of authoritarian governments in Central Asia and China, especially since 9/11, to use the label "Wahhabi extremism" for all opposition, legitimate and illegitimate, and thus justify widespread repression of all opposition to their rule and policies.

### ***Is there a difference between Muslims and Black Muslims?***

African-American Islam emerged in the early twentieth century when a number of black Americans converted to Islam, the religion that they believed was part of their original African identity. Islam was preferred over Christianity, which was seen as a religion of white supremacy and oppression, the religion of those who treated black Americans as second-class citizens and denied them their full civil rights. By contrast, Islam seemed to emphasize a brotherhood of believers, the *ummah*, which transcended race and ethnicity.

In the early 1930s Wallace D. Fard Muhammad drew on the Quran and the Bible to preach a message of black liberation in the ghettos of Detroit. Wallace D., who was called the Great Mahdi, or messiah, taught withdrawal from white society, saying that blacks were not Americans and owed no loyalty to the state. He rejected Christianity and the domination of white "blue-eyed devils" and emphasized the "religion of the Black Man" and the "Nation of Islam."

Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934. Elijah Muhammad (formerly Elijah Poole [1897–1975]) took over and built the "Nation of Islam," an effective national movement whose members

became known as "Black Muslims." Elijah Muhammad denounced white society's political and economic oppression of blacks and its results: self-hatred, poverty, and dependency. His apocalyptic message promised the fall of the white racist oppressor America and the restoration of the righteous black community, a "Chosen People." His religious teachings gave alienated and marginalized poor and unemployed people a sense of identity and community and a program for self-improvement and empowerment. Elijah Muhammad emphasized a "Do for Self" philosophy, appealing particularly to black youth, focusing on black pride and identity, strength and self-sufficiency, strong family values, hard work, discipline, thrift, and abstention from gambling, alcohol, drugs, and pork. By the 1970s the Nation of Islam had more than one hundred thousand members.

A number of basic beliefs in the Black Muslim movement differed significantly from mainstream Islam. Elijah Muhammad announced that Wallace D. Fard was Allah, and thus that God was a black man, and that he, Elijah Muhammad, not the Prophet Muhammad, was the last messenger of God. The Nation taught black supremacy and black separatism, not Islam's brotherhood of all believers in a community that transcends racial, tribal, and ethnic differences. In addition, the Nation did not follow the Five Pillars of Islam or observe major Muslim rituals.

A key individual who rose through the ranks of the Nation of Islam to gain national prominence was Malcolm X, who accepted the teaching of the Nation of Islam while in prison. Drawn by Elijah Muhammad's black nationalism, denunciation of white racism, and promotion of self-help, Malcolm Little became Malcolm X: ex-smoker, ex-drinker, ex-Christian, and ex-slave. A gifted, charismatic speaker, Malcolm was the

most visible and prominent spokesperson for Elijah Muhammad, recruiting new members (including the boxer Cassius Clay, renamed Muhammad Ali), establishing temples, and preaching the message of the Nation of Islam nationally and internationally. However, Malcolm's exposure to world events and contact with Sunni Muslims resulted in a gradual change in his own religious worldview, away from that of Elijah Muhammad and toward mainstream Islam.

In 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam to start his own organization. At this time he also went on pilgrimage to Mecca. On the pilgrimage he was deeply affected by what he experienced—the equality of all believers regardless of race, tribe, or nation. Malcolm explained his realization that “we were truly all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God removed the ‘white’ from their minds, the ‘white’ from their behavior and the ‘white’ from their attitude.” He also recognized that he did not know how to perform Islam's daily prayers and had not observed the other prescribed practices in the Five Pillars of Islam. Malcolm returned from the pilgrimage as El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, a Muslim, rather than a Black Muslim, and he changed his position on black nationalism, moving to pan-Africanism, which aligns African Americans with their cultural and religious ties in Africa.

On February 21, 1965, the former Malcolm X was assassinated as he spoke to an audience in New York City. Two members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of the murder.

The 1960s were a time of transition for the Nation of Islam. Not only Malcolm X but also Wallace D. Muhammad, son of Elijah Muhammad, along with his brother Akbar Muhammad, a distinguished scholar of Islam who had studied in Egypt and Scotland, questioned and challenged some of the teachings and strategies of their father. Both sons were

excommunicated by their father. Yet toward the end of his life Elijah Muhammad also made the pilgrimage to Mecca and began to modify some of his teachings. By the time of his death in 1975, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation were publicly acknowledged for their constructive contributions to America's inner cities and communities.

When Wallace D. Muhammad succeeded his father as Supreme Minister of the Nation, he implemented major reforms in doctrines and organizational structure, so that they conformed to the teachings of orthodox Sunni Islam. Wallace Fard was identified as the founder of the Nation and Elijah Muhammad as the leader who brought black Americans to his interpretation of Islam. Wallace Muhammad made the pilgrimage to Mecca and encouraged his followers to study Arabic in order to better understand Islam. Temples were renamed mosques, and their leaders were now called imams rather than ministers. The community observed the Five Pillars of Islam in union with the worldwide Islamic community to which they now belonged. Black separatist doctrines were dropped as the Nation community began to participate within the American political process. Finally, the equality of male and female members was reaffirmed, and women were given more responsible positions in the ministry of the community. While the Nation continued to work for social and economic change, business ventures were cut back and religious identity and mission were given priority.

At the end of the 1970s Wallace transferred organizational leadership to an elected council of six imams and focused on his role as religious and spiritual leader. In the mid-1980s, signaling his and the Nation's new religious identity and mission, Wallace changed his name to Warith Deen Muhammad

and renamed the community American Muslim Mission, integrating it within the global mainstream Islamic community and within the American Muslim community.

Media coverage of the Black Muslim movement often focuses on Louis Farrakhan, the man who led a minority of Nation members in protest against Warith's reforms. Farrakhan bitterly rejected the changes instituted by both Malcolm and Warith Deen Muhammad, maintaining that only he and his followers had remained faithful to the original message and mission of Elijah Muhammad. Farrakhan retained the mantle of leadership of the Nation of Islam, along with its black nationalist and separatist doctrines. Farrakhan's strident, separatist messages as well as the international connections he has established with militant leaders like those of Libya and Iran have given him and his minority of followers a disproportionate visibility.

Farrakhan's militancy and anti-Semitic statements have been widely criticized. At the same time, his charisma and energy directed to fighting crime and drugs and to rehabilitating prisoners have earned praise for the Nation. His leadership of the 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., received widespread media coverage and support from Christian as well as Muslim leaders and organizations. In recent years, Farrakhan has moved the Nation closer to more orthodox Islamic practices, maintaining a closer identity with mainstream Islam.

### *Are Sufis Muslims?*

Yes. Sufis belong to the mystical tradition of Islam known as Sufism. The name "Sufi" is derived from the Arabic word *suf* (wool), in honor of the coarse woolen garments worn by the first Sufis, resembling the garb of Christian monks and mys-

tics in other faiths. Like other mystical movements in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the Sufi path seeks to discipline the mind and body in order to experience directly the presence of God. Sufis view their struggle to find God as one that takes place in the world, in contrast to the Christian monastic tradition of withdrawing from the world in order to find God.

Sufis set as their highest priority the individual spiritual effort of self-sacrifice and discipline in a struggle within oneself against greed, laziness, and ego. This struggle is known as the "greater jihad" (as opposed to the "lesser jihad" of armed struggle in the defense of Islam). This "greater jihad" is carried out by devoting oneself completely to fulfilling God's will, studying and meditating on the Quran and the Sunnah (the example of Muhammad), performing religious duties, especially prayer and fasting, focusing on the centrality of God and the Last Judgment, denying material desires that could distract one from God, and carrying out good works. A famous woman mystic, Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801), added the devotional love of God to Sufi practices.

Like Islamic law, Sufism began as a reform movement in response to the growing materialism and wealth of Muslim society that accompanied the expansion and growing power of the Islamic empire. While some believed that strict adherence to Islamic law and rituals was the solution to the excesses of imperial lifestyles and luxuries, Sufis found the emphasis on laws, rules, duties, and rights to be spiritually lacking. Instead, they emphasized the "interior" path, seeking the purity and simplicity of the time of Muhammad, as the route to the direct and personal experience of God. Following the example of Muhammad in working tirelessly in the world to create the ideal Islamic society, Sufis have often

played an important role in the political life of Muslims. For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sufi brotherhoods led jihad movements (the Mahdi in Sudan, Fulani in Nigeria, and Sanusi in Libya) that spearheaded an Islamic revivalist wave that regenerated society, created Islamic states, and fought off colonial powers.

The Sufi orders also played an important role in the spread of Islam through missionary work. Their tendency to adopt and adapt to local non-Islamic customs and practices in new places and their strong devotional and emotional practices helped them to become a popular mass movement and a threat to the more orthodox religious establishment. In this way, Sufism became integral to popular religious practices and spirituality in Islam. However, their willingness to embrace local traditions also left them open to criticism by the conservative religious establishment for being unfaithful to the tenets of Islam. Indeed, popular Sufism at times slipped into magic and superstition, as well as withdrawal from the world. Some of the major Islamic revival and reform movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries sought to eliminate superstitious practices from Sufism and bring it back into line with more orthodox interpretations of Islam.

Sufism today exists throughout the Muslim world and in a variety of devotional paths. It remains a strong spiritual presence and force in Muslim societies, in both private and public life, and enjoys a wide following in Europe and America, attracting many converts to Islam.

### ***Who are these Islamic fundamentalists?***

The term *Islamic fundamentalism* evokes many images: the Iranian revolution, the World Trade Center and Pentagon at-

tacks of 9/11, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, suicide bombers. For many, this term is simply equated with radicalism, religious extremism, and terrorism. But images of hostage crises, embassies under siege, hijackings, and bombings lead to simplistic understandings. The term *fundamentalist* is applied to such a broad spectrum of Islamic movements and actors that in the end it includes both those who simply want to reintroduce or restore their pure and puritanical vision of a romanticized past and others who advocate modern reforms that are rooted in Islamic principles and values.

The ranks of Islamic fundamentalists include those who provide much-needed services to the poor such as schools, health clinics, and social welfare agencies, as well as extremists. For every country where Islamic militants seek to reach their goals through violence and terrorism, there are Islamic political parties and social welfare organizations that participate in national and local elections and function effectively within mainstream society.

Though convenient, the use of the term *fundamentalism*, which originated in Christianity, can be misleading in the Islamic context, where it has been applied to a broad and diverse group of governments, individuals, and organizations. The conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the radical socialist state of Libya, clerically governed Iran, the Taliban's Afghanistan, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan have all been called "fundamentalist." The term obscures their differences. Libya and Iran, for example, have in the past espoused many anti-Western views, while Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have often been close allies of the United States. *Political Islam* and *Islamism* are more useful terms when referring to the role of Islam in politics.



Islamic fundamentalism, or political Islam, is rooted in a contemporary religious resurgence, which began in the late 1960s and has affected both the personal and public life of Muslims. On the one hand, many Muslims have become more religiously observant, demonstrating increased attention to prayer, fasting, dress, and family values as well as renewed interest in Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. On the other, Islam reemerged in public life as an alternative political and social ideology to secular nationalism, Western capitalism, and Marxist socialism, which many believe had failed to help the majority of Muslims escape poverty, unemployment, and political oppression. Governments, Islamic movements, and organizations from moderate to extremist have appealed to Islam for legitimacy and to mobilize popular support.

Islamic activists—"fundamentalists"—both extremists and mainstream come from very diverse educational and social backgrounds. They are recruited not only from the poor and unemployed living in slums and refugee camps but also from the middle class in prosperous neighborhoods. While some are from economically or politically marginalized or "oppressed" backgrounds, others are well-educated university students and professionals. Many hold degrees in the sciences, education, medicine, law, or engineering—professionals who function in and contribute to their societies.

Many Islamic activists are part of a nonviolent political and social force in mainstream society. Activists have served as prime minister of Turkey, president and speaker of the national assembly in Indonesia, and deputy prime minister of Malaysia, as well as cabinet officers, parliamentarians, and mayors in countries as diverse as Egypt, Sudan, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Israel-Palestine.

At the same time, a militant minority are religious extremists and terrorists: Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a religious leader who was imprisoned for his involvement in plans to bomb major sites in the United States, has a doctorate in Islamic studies; Osama bin Laden, a university graduate and member of one of the wealthiest families in Saudi Arabia, became a global terrorist and leader of al-Qaeda; Ayman al-Zawahiri, right-hand man to Osama bin Laden, is a trained surgeon from a prominent Egyptian family.

### *Is Islam medieval and against change?*

Islam and much of the Muslim world are often seen as medieval for many reasons: cultural (for example, the existence of strong patriarchal societies and the veiling and seclusion of women), political (authoritarianism on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other) and economic (lack of development and failed economies).

Yet, in truth, today as in the past Muslims interpret Islam in many different ways. Like their Abrahamic brothers and sisters, Muslims exhibit a wide range of approaches and orientations, ranging from ultraconservative and fundamentalist to progressive or reformist.

The contrast between Islam and Christianity and Judaism appears as more vivid because we usually equate Christianity and Judaism with believers in modern Europe and America rather than those in more traditional, premodern, and less developed societies such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, or Sudan. Ethiopian Jews and Christians, whose religion is linked to local tribal and cultural traditions, also contrast sharply with their Western cobelievers. Such contrasts are of course more evident among Christianity's 1.5 billion adherents spread across

the globe than among Judaism's 14 to 18 million followers, who have a far more restricted geographic representation.

The forces of tradition and the authority of the past have been reinforced in Islam by a variety of historic forces and experiences. For four centuries (the seventeenth through the twentieth), much of the Islamic world was dominated by European colonialism. Religions, like countries, under "siege" tend to focus on survival, preserving and protecting what they have, rather than seeking and accepting change. Thus Islamic calls for reform are often labeled by opponents as simply attempts to Westernize Islam.

When conservatives try to preserve Islam, they often do not distinguish between revealed sources of faith and socially conditioned human interpretations historically preserved in manuals of Islamic law and theology. In contrast, reformers stress the difference between divinely mandated beliefs, practices, and laws and human interpretations from the past as they engage in a bold process of reinterpretation and reform that reapplies Islamic guidelines to problems in the modern world.

Amidst these differing religious interpretations and orientations, change has occurred and continues to occur in a process that sometimes seems to take two steps forward and one step back. Secular and religious reformers have promoted changes affecting religious understanding and education, family laws (marriage, divorce, and inheritance), broader opportunities for women's education and employment, democratization, pluralism, and human rights. On the other hand, more conservative voices among religious leaders as well as some ultraconservative Islamic activists and organizations have often attempted to implement or impose rigid, militant, puritanical, and intolerant beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Finally, many authoritarian governments (secular and religious) use religion to restrict freedom of thought and expression. They limit or prohibit an independent press, media, political parties, and trade unions in the name of religion.

Muslims today are at a critical crossroads. They are faced with making radical social, political, and economic changes that the Western world has had many decades to implement gradually. Amidst increasing globalization, Muslims strive to survive and compete, often with limited resources, and to preserve their identity in a world dominated (culturally as well as politically and economically) by the West. For many, the role of religion is critical in the preservation of their personal and national identities. It provides a sense of continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern life. For some, the temptation is to cling to the authority and security of the past. Others seek to follow new paths, convinced that their faith and a tradition of Islamic reform that has existed throughout the ages can play a critical role in restoring the vitality of Muslim societies.

### *Is Islam compatible with modernization?*

The Muslim world is popularly pictured as lacking development. While some attribute this to Islam, lack of development in the Muslim world, as elsewhere, is in fact primarily due to issues of economy, limited resources, and education rather than religion. In Muslim societies around the world today, it is evident that modernization is seen as a goal worthy of pursuit and implementation. Travelers are often surprised to see television antennae or satellite dishes even in the remotest villages. The skylines of major cities are dotted with their World

Trade Centers, modern factories, and corporations. People—secular and conservative, fundamentalists and reformers—equally take advantage of modern technology: cell phones, computers, the Internet, fax machine, automobiles, and planes. The absence of certain technologies such as the Internet in some Muslim countries is due not to resistance from the people but to cost or security concerns (the fears of authoritarian rulers that the Internet will take away their control).

Belief in an inherent conflict between Islam and modernization has arisen when modernization is equated with the Westernization and secularization of society. One Western expert said that Muslims must choose between Mecca and mechanization, implying that modernization necessarily threatened and eroded faith. This attitude reflects a belief that faith and reason, religion and science, are ultimately incompatible. Thus to become modern intellectually, politically, and religiously would mean a loss or watering down of faith, identity, and values.

Secular Muslims and Islamic activists exist side by side in societies and in the professions. Their opposing views regarding the relationship of religious belief to society and politics do give rise to conflict. If some believe that a viable modern nation-state requires a separation of religion and politics, or mosque and state, others advocate governments and societies that are more informed by Islamic principles and values. Yet as examples from around the Muslim world (Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia) and other countries such as Japan or China have demonstrated, modernization does not have to mean the wholesale Westernization or secularization of society. Nowhere is this clearer than among so-called fundamentalists, or Islamic activists, who are also graduates of modern universities, majoring in science, medicine, law, en-

gineering, journalism, business, and the social sciences. Many hold prominent positions in their respective professions, functioning effectively and contributing to the ongoing modernization of their societies.

### ***Are there any modern Muslim thinkers or reformers?***

Because acts of violence and terrorism grab the headlines, most of us know a lot more about advocates of a “clash,” militant jihadists, than about those who are working toward a peaceful revolution and civilizational dialogue. Nevertheless, today Islam’s encounter with the West and the need for Islamic reform are being addressed by intellectuals, religious leaders, and activists all over the world.

Like Islamic modernist movements in the early twentieth century and, later, the Islamic (“fundamentalist”) movements of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-i Islami in Pakistan, today’s Islamically oriented intellectuals and activists are continuing the process of Islamic modernization and reform. They represent a creative new stage, a minority who are not only reformulating Islam but also implementing their ideas through their work in government and other public arenas.

The reformist and modernist Muslim Abdurrahman Wahid, former leader of Indonesia’s Nahdatul Ulama (Renaissance of Religious Scholars) movement with thirty million members, became the first democratically elected president of Indonesia; Dr. Amien Rais, the University of Chicago-trained political scientist and former leader of Indonesia’s Muhammadiyah movement, became speaker of Indonesia’s national assembly; Anwar Ibrahim, founder of ABIM, Malaysia’s Islamic Youth

Movement, went on to become the deputy prime minister of Malaysia; Dr. Ecmettin Erbakan, a trained engineer, became Turkey's prime minister; and Muhammad Khatami, a religious scholar, is president of Iran. Many Islamically motivated professionals serve in parliaments or as mayors of major cities and are leaders in their professions (lawyers, physicians, engineers, and scientists).

Reformist thought is especially prevalent in America and Europe, where there is a free and open environment absent in many Muslim countries. In Europe we find Muslim scholars and activists like Drs. Tariq Ramadan, grandson of Hasan al-Banna, founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, a Swiss academic and activist, and Muhammad Arkoun of the Sorbonne university in Paris. In America, they include Drs. Sayyid Hossein Nasr of George Washington University, an expert on Sufism and on Islam and science; Abdulaziz Sachedina of the University of Virginia, who has written extensively on Islam and democratization and human rights; Howard University's Sulayman Nyang, a prolific author who writes about Islam in America and Africa; Fathi Osman, who has written extensively on the Quran, pluralism, and Islamic reform; Amina Wadud of Virginia Commonwealth University, author of *Quran and Woman*; Amira el-Azhary Sonbol of Georgetown University, an expert on women and law; and Khaled Abou El Fadl of UCLA Law School, who addresses issues of Islam, law, pluralism, gender, and violent extremism. These scholars formulate and debate new ideas, develop rationales and strategies for reform, and train the next generation in a more dynamic, progressive vision. Increasingly, their influence and impact are felt not only in the West but also in Muslim countries, as their ideas are exported through translations of their works.

Today, a two-way information superhighway spans the world. Ideas come not only from the traditional centers of

Islamic scholarship in Muslim countries but also from religious scholars, leaders, and institutions in the West and from their students, who return to become professionals and leaders in their home countries. The Internet plays host to debates between progressive Muslims and more conservative voices globally, providing a venue for heated discussion of Islam's relationship to the state, Islamic banking, democracy, religious and political pluralism, family values, and gay rights, among many other topics.

Just as they were in the process of modern reform in Judaism and Christianity, questions of leadership and the authority of the past (tradition) are critical in Islamic reform. "Whose Islam?" is a major question. Who reinterprets, decides, leads, and implements change? Is it rulers and regimes, the vast majority of whom are unelected kings, military, and former military, or should it be elected parliaments? Is it the *ulama* (religious scholars) or clergy, who continue to see themselves as the primary interpreters of Islam, although many are ill prepared to respond creatively to modern realities? Or are Islamically oriented intellectuals and activists with a modern education most qualified? Too often in authoritarian societies that restrict freedom of thought and expression, and thus effective leadership, extremists like Osama bin Laden with their theology of confrontation and hate fill the vacuum.

The second major question is "What Islam?" Is Islamic reform simply a restoration of past doctrines and laws, or is it a reformation through a reinterpretation and reformulation of Islam to meet the demands of modern life? While some call for an Islamic state based upon the reimplementation of classical formulations of Islamic laws, others argue the need to reinterpret and reformulate that law in light of the new realities of contemporary society.

The process of Islamic reform is difficult. As in all religions, tradition—centuries-old beliefs and practices—is a powerful force, rooted in the claim of being based upon the teachings of the Quran or the practice (Sunnah) of the Prophet. The vast majority of religious scholars and local mosque leaders (*imams*) and preachers, who wield significant influence over the religious education and worldview of the majority of Muslims, are products of a more traditional religious education. The ideas of a vanguard of reformers will never have broad appeal and acceptance unless they are incorporated within the curricula of seminaries and schools and universities where religion is taught. A twofold process of reform, intellectual and institutional, will be required in the face of powerful conservative forces, limited human and financial resources, and a culture of authoritarianism that limits or controls freedom of thought in many countries.