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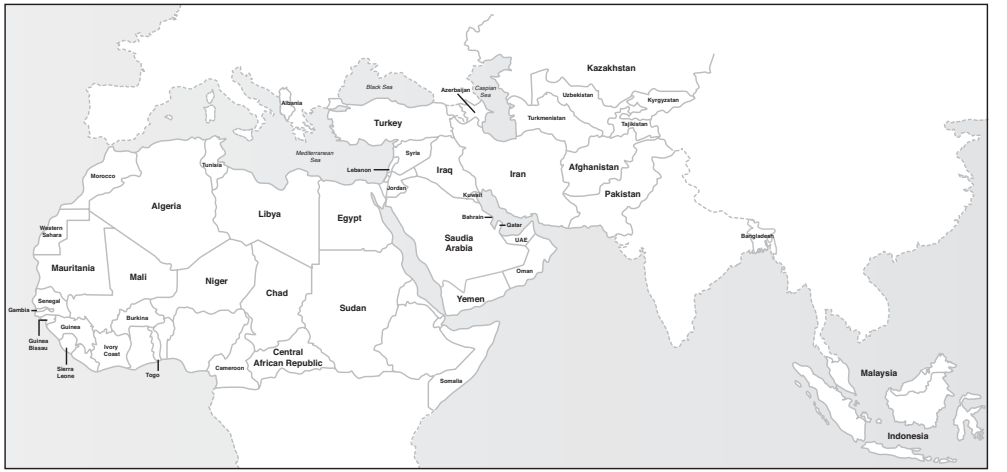
# ISLAM

## THE RELIGION AND THE PEOPLE




**Countries with Majority Muslim Populations**

such time as they can return as conquerors to their homes. According to a dissenting view, Muslims might remain in their homes under the rule of infidel conquerors, provided that they were free to practice their religion and fulfill their religious duties. As more and more Muslim countries came under Christian rule, notably in the British, French, and Russian empires, emigration ceased to be a practical possibility and adjustment became necessary. In the event, this proved not to be too difficult, since the imperial powers were for the most part cautiously conservative in their treatment of their new Muslim subjects and preferred not to interfere with existing practice. In some areas, as for example in the African colonies, the Islamization of society and the replacement of African custom by Islamic law proceeded apace under the Imperial yoke.

Muslim communities living as minorities in non-Muslim countries fall into two main groups. One of these, the more recent, is the new communities established by migration in Europe, the Americas and, to some extent, Australasia. The second group is the Muslim communities left behind in countries which were once part of the Muslim world but are no longer. The most important of these is India, where a community of many millions remains, from the time of Islamic conquest and domination. Smaller groups remain in southeastern Europe, in lands that once formed a part of the Ottoman Empire. These include, notably, the Muslim communities in Albania, Kossovo, and Bosnia. Other surviving Muslim communities are in the Russian Federation and in the central Asian regions of China, in countries that were at one time ruled by one or other of the great Muslim or Islamized empires in central Asia. To these we may add Israel, with a Muslim population comprising approximately one-fifth of the total.

What never seems to have occurred to any of the jurists in any place at any time was that Muslims would voluntarily migrate from Muslim lands to infidel lands and become residents, even citizens, of non-Muslim states. There are many reasons for this previously unthinkable migration, notably the great and growing discrepancy between the economic and social situations—standard of living, opportunity,

public services—between the Islamic and the Western worlds. This has led to a massive migration from the Muslim lands of Asia and Africa into Europe and recently also to many countries in North, Central, and South America. By migration, demography and, to a significant degree, conversion, there are now large and growing Muslim communities in many of these countries. In the course of time, they pass from the status of immigrants to that of legal residents and, in due course, citizens by naturalization. In most though not all places, the second generation, born in the country, are citizens by birth.

How are they treated in their new homes, and how does this treatment compare with their expectations, with what they regard as their legitimate rights? The answers to these questions vary considerably according to differences both of reality and of perception. In material things, most would agree, they are better off than they were at home, in terms of standard of living and of social services. In terms of status, or in Western language, of rights, they are getting both more and less than what they expect and see as an entitlement. In terms of economic opportunity and of political and social self-expression, they enjoy opportunity and access vastly better than in almost any Muslim country. On the other hand, they are denied the autonomous communal status that was granted as a matter of course to non-Muslim minorities in most Muslim countries in an increasingly remote past.

Despite the efforts of some European governments to be accommodating in this matter, for example by approving welfare payments to plural wives, these problems remain unresolved.

## Chapter 6

# *Sunni, Shiʿa, and Others*

Of the differences that arose among Muslims, by far the most important, from early times to the present day, have been between the Sunnis and the Shiʿa, and most of the Muslim world is divided between these two groups. Some have tried to explain this division by likening it to the split between Catholics and Protestants in Christendom. This is a false analogy and can easily be discredited by asking a simple question: "Which are the Protestants and which are the Catholics?" There can be no serious answer to this question, because the comparison itself is meaningless and misleading. The Christian difference between Protestants and Catholics—and earlier between the church of Rome and the Eastern (Orthodox) churches—arose basically over ecclesiastical authority. In Islam, there is not—or to be precise, there was not until modern times—anything that could really be called ecclesiastical authority, since there was nothing that could be called a church in the institutional sense of that term (see Chapter 4, "The Mosque").

The difference between Sunni and Shiʿa goes back to the beginnings of Islam and was in its origins purely political—a dispute over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad as the head of the Muslim state and community which he had founded. When the Prophet died, the leaders of that community chose first one, then others of his senior followers to succeed him in what came to be known as the caliphate. At the time, there were some who believed that the succession belonged by right to the Prophet's family. The Prophet left no son, but he left a daughter, Fatima, who married his cousin Ali and was the ancestress of all the Prophet's descendants. The primary meaning of the Arabic word *Shiʿa*

is "party" or "faction," and the supporters of Ali's claims to the caliphate came to be known as the Shiʿa, that is, party, of Ali. In 656 CE, after the murder of the third caliph Uthman by a group of Arab Muslim mutineers, Ali succeeded him in the caliphate. But the circumstances of his succession split the Islamic community and led to a civil war, in the course of which Ali himself was murdered and replaced by another Muslim leader.

The followers of Ali's sons, Hasan and Husayn, tried to overthrow the ruling caliphs, whom they and their followers regarded as usurpers. Their rising was ruthlessly suppressed, and the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala in Iraq, some 60 miles southwest of Baghdad, on 10 Muharram 61 of the Muslim ura corresponding to 10 October 680 CE marks an important date in the Shiite calendar.

Though their origins were, thus, primarily political and in a sense personal, other differences developed between Sunni, or mainstream Islam, and the Shiʿa, who soon subdivided into a variety of factions, originally supporting different claimants to the succession to Ali. In most of the Muslim world, the Sunnis have been the dominant element, the Shiʿa the opposition. The differences arising from these contrasting experiences have left their mark on Sunni and Shiʿa beliefs, customs, and in a few respects, even laws. The Shiʿa, for example, allow *mutʿa* (see p. 114), a contract of marriage for a specified period, automatically dissolved at the end of that period; the Sunnis do not. The Shiʿa also have a doctrine of *taqiyya* (see pp. 219-220), which one might translate as dissimulation. Not surprisingly for a sometimes persecuted minority, they accepted the principle that, in certain situations, it is permitted to dissimulate—that is, to conceal or even misstate one's beliefs. Originally a mainly Shiʿite notion, taqiyya has enjoyed somewhat wider acceptance and practice in modern times.

In the course of time, the Shiʿa became the main opposition within the Islamic state and society, supporting a series of claimants to the caliphate, known to their followers as the Imams. All of these claimed to be the descendants of Ali and Fatima and, thus, of the Prophet, through different lines of descent.

Among the Shiʿa as among the Sunnis, internal differences of both doctrine and practice arose, but no doubt because the Shiʿa were usually in opposition and therefore under constraint, they proved less tolerant than the Sunnis of diversity. These splits usually arose over the succession to the Imamate, but sometimes developed into more important differences of both doctrine and practice.

The most important difference was between the so-called Twelver Shiʿa and the Ismaʿilis. The first major dispute began in 765 CE on the death of the sixth Imam in the line of succession of Ali and Fatima when the Shiʿa split between two claimants. One group, the more conservative of the two, later came to be known as the Twelvers. The other group followed a rival claimant, Ismaʿil, and are still known as the Ismaʿilis. For most of the Shiʿa, there was a succession of twelve generations of Imams after Ali. The twelfth Imam disappeared circa 874 CE, leaving no successor. Among the Shiʿa, he is known as "the hidden Imam," a Messianic figure who will return in God's good time. In some circles in the Islamic Republic in Iran, it is being strongly suggested that the hidden Imam has already returned and will soon emerge from hiding and inaugurate the sequence of events leading to the final establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

In medieval times, Ismaʿilism was a movement of considerable importance and even gave rise to one of the major dynasties of the medieval Islamic world, the Fatimid Caliphate, which ruled first North Africa, and then Egypt and its dependencies, between the 10th and 12th centuries and, for a while, offered a serious challenge to the Sunni caliphs of Baghdad for the headship of the Muslim world. Their regime was finally overthrown by the great Muslim hero Saladin, who reincorporated their domains into the world of Sunni Islam.

In the late Fatimid period, the Ismaʿilis split into two groups, again following rival candidates for the succession. The split began in 1094 CE on the death of the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir. Some of the Ismaʿilis accepted his successor in the caliphate as the rightful Imam; others followed his brother Nizar. Both groups survive to the present day and

are usually known by the names of Bohra or Bohora and Nizari. Their main centers are in the Indian subcontinent and Yemen, with smaller groups in central Asia and Syria and, by more recent migration, in parts of Africa and America. An offshoot of the Nizari Ismaʿili movement was the famous order of Assassins (see pp. 181-182). The largest group of the Ismaʿilis today are the Nizaris, whose Imam is known as the Aga Khan (see p. 180).

Two other groups, related to the extremist wing of the Shiʿa, should be mentioned. The first are the Alawis or Alawites, chiefly represented in Turkey and in Syria, where they are also known as Nusayris. The Alawis are regarded as deviants alike by the Twelver Shiʿa, the Ismaʿilis, and, of course, most of all, by the Sunnis. They nevertheless form an important minority in both countries. In Syria, the reigning dynasty of presidents of the Asad family, now in its second generation, are Alawis, and the main basis of their power is in the Alawi territories in the northwest part of the country. In Turkey, where they are known as Alevi, they benefitted significantly from the secularist policies of the republic but were and are otherwise regarded with suspicion by the Sunni establishment.

The second are the Druze, a group of followers of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim (reigned 996–1021 CE), to whom they accord a quasi-divine status. They form a more or less secret religious sect, located mainly in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan. No one is permitted either to leave or to join their community. They have at times played an important role in local history, notably in Lebanon. In the state of Israel, since its foundation in 1948, the Druze minority, unlike the other Arab communities, are included, at their own request, in the draft, from which other non-Jews are exempt. As their leaders put it at the time, they wanted to enjoy the full rights of citizenship in the new state and felt that they could not achieve this without accepting the burdens as well as the rights.

At the beginning of the 16th century, a new development occurred in Iran, which brought a radical change in the relationship between Sunni and Shiʿa all over the Middle East. The immediate cause of this change