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ISLAM: AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been an increase in public and media attention in the West given to Islam, one of the world's major religions, which currently counts approximately 1.2 billion people among its followers; it is the fastest-growing religion. The fact that Osama bin Laden and his terrorist Al-Qaeda organization claimed to be motivated by their devout Muslim beliefs led some to conclude that there was a link between this faith and extreme political violence and terrorism. Further, it was claimed that "Islamic fundamentalism," as represented by groups like bin Laden's, posed a deadly threat to the values of Western civilization, and as a result had to be crushed. In Europe and North America alike, there were disturbing indications that Muslims were being singled out for scapegoating and racist attacks in the wake of the terrorist strikes; even political leaders like Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, publicly stated that the events of September 11 proved that Western, Christian civilization was superior to that of the Islamic world.

Such sentiments were based on fundamental ignorance of Islam, and revealed more about those who espoused them than they did about the religion against which they were directed. As he organized Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S.-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan, U.S. President George Bush became sensitive to this, and went out of his way to assure Muslims around the world that his military actions were not intended as an attack on them. He quickly dropped his early references to a "crusade" against bin Laden and the Taliban when it was pointed out to him that this term was deeply offensive to Muslims. The medieval Crusades, which lasted from the 11th to the 13th centuries, and pitted European Christians against Middle Eastern Muslims, had been an early

example of a clash between the two religions that appeared to be reviving after September 11, 2001. While most people in the West today have only a foggy idea about their importance, to many in the Arab and Muslim worlds the centuries-old Crusades have not been forgotten. Instead, they are recalled with deep resentment as but one in a continuing series of European Christian incursions into their part of the world, in an effort to impose what they regard as an unwelcome Western political, religious, and cultural domination over them.

For their part, religious extremists like bin Laden and those who supported his cause in the Muslim world revealed an equally blinkered view of history in their denunciations of Christian "crusaders" and Jews as the twin evils responsible for the sufferings of the Muslim faithful in the Middle East and elsewhere. Their championing of the extremist, narrow-minded Taliban regime in Afghanistan as an example of a "pure" Islamic state, based on the tenets of the holy Koran, was to many Muslims an affront to their faith's long and honourable traditions of culture, enlightenment, and religious tolerance. During the period when the Muslim area of dominance stretched from Spain to Central Asia, Christians and Jews lived in peace with their Islamic hosts. The Muslim Kingdom of Granada in what is now Andalusia in southern Spain was a beacon of civilized life at a time when most of Europe was mired in the backwardness and chaos of the Dark Ages.

The recent terrorist attacks, and the conflicts they have generated or worsened, from Afghanistan to the Middle East, demonstrate once again the need for greater understanding of the long and sometimes troubled history of the interactions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims over the centuries. While many

in Europe and North America view Islam as a non-Western religion and culture, in reality it shares a number of features in common with Judaism and Christianity, and has made significant contributions to Western civilization. A deeper awareness of this shared history, among Muslims and non-Muslims

alike, might help dissipate some of the suspicion and hatred that now seems to be disturbingly evident on both sides of the alleged “clash of civilizations,” a mutual enmity that threatens to explode into a serious and violent international conflict.

Recommended Web Sites for Teachers and Students

- A PBS Web site for the two-part video series dealing with the faith, culture, innovations, and people of the Islamic empires is found at www.pbs.org/empires/islam.
- Islam 101, an introductory educational site on Islamic civilization and culture, can be accessed at www.islam101.com.
- An Islamic studies site containing resources for religion, art, architecture, music, and history is found at www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas.
- At www.islam-guide.com, you will find a brief guide to understanding Islam, designed for non-Muslims who would like to learn more about the religion.
- Islam Online at www.islam-online.net provides news and information about Islamic civilization.
- Islam for Today at www.islamfortoday.com promotes a positive image of Islam, including information about Muslims in the West and the rights of women.

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► *A Comparative Religion*

This *News in Review* report provides a historical background to the religion of Islam, its contributions to human society, but also the troubled relationship it has had at times over the centuries with Christianity. This examination of one of the world's great religions is especially timely, given the events of September 11, 2001, and necessary for understanding the deep and complex roots of the Muslim-Christian historical encounter. It is important to understand as well how extremists on all sides have distorted and abused the historical facts in order to further their own narrow political and religious ends. By studying this report you will gain more information about the history of Islam's engagement with Christian civilization, how this history is understood in the Muslim world, and how divergent interpretations of the historical relationship can, on the one hand, promote greater tolerance and mutual appreciation, or on the other, increased suspicion, distrust, and hatred.

Not only should you broaden your awareness of Islam and its significance as a religious and cultural force in history, but you should also strive to develop a greater appreciation of the importance of history itself as a crucial determinant and motivating factor in current conflicts such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the "war on terrorism" they have generated.

Enlightened Views

All of us develop points of view and attitudes based on many factors. In terms of understanding and appreciating culture and religion, it is especially important to first and foremost be informed. While viewing the video, make notes in order to present answers to the following questions.

1. What is the cry that calls the faithful to prayer in the Islamic world?
2. What was the "tragedy of Andalusia" that some Muslims do not want to see repeated in Palestine today?
3. Why do many Muslims regard the word *crusade* as an insult to their religion?
4. Where did the religion of Islam begin? How much of the world did it dominate within two centuries of its birth?
5. In what fields did Arab Muslim scholars make great contributions during the medieval period?
6. Why was the Muslim kingdom in Spain an example of culture, civilization, and tolerance?
7. Why do some Muslims consider the war on terrorism to be an attack on them?
8. Who was Saladdin? Why do many Muslims today regard him as a hero?
9. What was the Ottoman Empire? Why did it eventually collapse?
10. What sentiment does Osama bin Laden try to provoke among Muslims in their attitudes toward Christians and the West?

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► *Extrapolation*

Extend your awareness of the factual information that the questions on the previous page elicit. Examine the following answers and suggest answers to the secondary questions.

1. “There is no God but God and Mohammed is his messenger.” This is the traditional Muslim call to prayer, repeated five times daily from the minarets of mosques in all parts of the Islamic world. Are there similar comprehensive statements of faith that you are aware of in other religions?
2. The “tragedy of Andalusia” refers to the defeat of the last Muslim kingdom in southern Spain in 1492, when Christian forces overran Granada, its capital, and drove the Muslims out of Europe. Extremists today invoke it as a warning of what they fear may happen to the Palestinian Arabs at the hands of Israel and the West today. What is the generic lesson of history from this historic event?
3. To many Muslims, the word *crusade* is offensive because it triggers historical memories of resentment of the fact that Christian Europeans tried to conquer their lands in the Middle East during the medieval period and impose their religion on them by force. Osama bin Laden and others accuse the West of plotting yet another crusade against the Islamic world today. Research the derivation of the word *crusade*. What symbol is implied in the word?
4. The religion of Islam was born in Arabia during the seventh century, when the Prophet Mohammed revealed the messages he believed he had been given by Allah (God). Within two centuries, the followers of Mohammed had established an Arab empire stretching from northwest Africa to the borders of China. What do these historical facts tell you about Islam and its influence?
5. During the medieval period, Arab Muslim scholars based in Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East made major contributions to fields such as astronomy, geography, and mathematics. The numerical system we use today is based on Arab notation. How does knowing the contributions a religion has made to human society help us gain an appreciation for it?
6. The Muslim kingdom in Andalusia, southern Spain, was a symbol of culture, civilization, and tolerance during the medieval period. It was home to the library of Cordoba, then the largest in the Western world, and was a place where Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike practiced their religions in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect. The city of Granada was a remarkably modern place, with running water, street lighting, and other amenities that did not exist elsewhere at that time. The standards of civilized life reached in Muslim Andalusia were far higher than those prevailing in the Christian areas of Europe at that time, a fact on which Christian visitors frequently commented. Why might some people find this information surprising?

7. Some Muslims today view the “war on terrorism” as an attack on them and their religion because they have seen Muslims killed by Christians in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Chechnya, by Jews in the Middle East, and by Hindus in Kashmir. They resent the U.S. support of Israel, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the economic sanctions directed against Iraq, and the bombing campaign against Afghanistan. To them, these events prove that the West is engaged in a new crusade against Islam. It is important to note, however, that in Kosovo and Bosnia, the Western world went to war on behalf of Muslims there. What is the nature of the fundamental misunderstanding in this perception?
8. Saladdin was a great Islamic hero because he defeated the Christian Crusaders and recaptured the holy city of Jerusalem in 1187. This victory is seen as symbolic of the fact that Muslims are capable of withstanding Western Christian invasions and eventually repelling them. Saladdin’s military success laid the foundations for the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Why is the notion of “heroes” in these circumstances counterproductive?
9. The Ottoman Empire was a Muslim, Turkish-based state that arose after the Crusades and came to control the vast area once ruled by the Arabs. In 1453, Ottoman forces captured the capital of the eastern Christian empire, Constantinople, and renamed it Istanbul. They converted Christianity’s largest church, the Hagia Sophia, into a mosque, and continued their advance into southeastern Europe up to the gates of Vienna. However, after this early period of expansion and power, the Ottoman Empire entered into a slow and steady decline beginning in the 18th century. During this period, it became corrupt and technologically and economically backward compared with the rising Christian states of Europe. At the end of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire had completely disintegrated, and the European powers were able to re-establish their control over the Middle East and the other lands it had once ruled. What general lessons can be learned from the ebb and flow of historical fortunes?
10. Today, extremists like Osama bin Laden effectively play on and manipulate the sentiments of resentment and anger many Muslims harbour regarding their history and ill-treatment at the hands of European Christians from the time of the Crusades up to the present. To him and those who share his views, the problems the Muslim world faces today are the result of a centuries-old Christian campaign of aggression against it, and can only be solved by a *jihad*, or holy war against the West and all it stands for. Why do people need to understand and be aware of the difference between a prophet and a false prophet? Why is this a universal issue that doesn’t apply just to religious matters?

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Exponential Viewing

Expanding a Personal Database

The more one travels, either literally, figuratively, or through learning, our awareness and understanding of all human experience can grow exponentially. Our knowledge and awareness grows rapidly in increasing proportion to the expanding size of our knowledge base.

In this spirit, watch the video again and then form small groups to discuss what you learned from it about the history of Islam and the current issues of concern in the Muslim world today. Make a list of the things you already knew about Islam before watching the video, and the new information you gained after viewing it. How do you think this new information affects your understanding of Islam and your attitudes toward the Muslim world today? How important do you think it is to understand the history of Islam and its relationship with Christianity in view of the events that have occurred in the world since September 11, 2001? If you are Muslim yourself, how can you serve as an essential resource person in this activity?

Assessing Historical Interpretations

Now focus on the specific viewpoints expressed in the video, given below. Express in your own words what you think each is saying. To what extent can a close, objective examination of these statements increase our understanding of the current tensions between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds?

- “Muslims say what a wonderful glorious civilization we have and look what we’ve got today. And this juxtaposition makes people uneasy. It makes people angry. It makes people frustrated. And I believe this juxtaposition carries the seeds for people like Osama bin Laden who then come and then exploit this.” — Akbar Ahmed, professor at the American University
- “If [Osama bin Laden] can persuade people that this is not a crusade against him but it’s a crusade against the Islamic world, if he can persuade the people that the real fruit of this long heritage is the battle between Islam and the West, he wins the argument, and the bomb goes off.” — John Voll, professor at the Georgetown University
- “Many Muslims regard bin Laden’s call for a *jihad*, a holy war, as legitimate. . . . They’ve seen fellow Muslims being killed by Christians in Bosnia, in Kosovo, and in Chechnya, and by Jews in the holy land and by Hindus in Kashmir. . . . Muslims look at U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, at the sanctions strangling Iraq, and the current U.S. and British attacks on Afghanistan. What many see is a new period of Muslim suffering at the hands of Christendom, a new crusade.” — Joe Schlesinger, CBC journalist
- “It’s a conflict between visions of the virtuous life. The conflict between modes of clothing for women in particular, for example, or in terms of how open you can have a society for stirring up opposition. This is not a conflict between Islam and Christianity.” — John Voll, professor at the Georgetown University

- “Many people living in the Muslim world . . . and confronting the reality of the present would say that once we ruled the world, once we were world conquerors, once we were people the world respected and look at our present lot. And they would dream that one day this would all return to Islam.” — Akbar Ahmed, professor at the American University
- “Here is the irony and the tragedy of what’s happening today. In lamenting the loss of Andalusia, Osama bin Laden has been mourning a civilization that was the very opposite of all he stands for. For him . . . there’s but one book—the Koran. But instead of joining hands as their ancestors did, with the followers of Jesus and the people of Moses . . . they want to kill Christians and Jews and expel them from their midst.” — Joe Schlesinger, CBC journalist
- “The dream of Islam regaining the greatness of its power and glory by turning the clock back is a powerful one. But Islam grew great by going forward, not back. . . . To build a future on the distortions of the past as Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalists hope to do is an impossible dream and also a dangerous one. Because if the passion of fundamentalism should ever escalate into a clash of civilizations, it would be a disaster for all humanity, and not least, for the people of the Koran.” — Joe Schlesinger, veteran CBC journalist

Follow-up Activity

Write a 50-word response to two of these people quoted in which you comment on the central thesis of their statement.

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► ***What Do We Need to Know About Islam and the World Today?***

Many in Canada and other Western countries have very little knowledge of the religion of Islam and of those areas in the world where a majority of the population adheres to it. This is so even though Canadian cities such as Toronto and Montreal, among others, are home to a large number of people who originally came from Muslim countries, and who practise their faith in their new homeland. One major area of confusion, which sometimes leads to unfortunate stereotyping and prejudice, is the idea that Islam is in some way a religion that promotes violence, extremism, and hatred of others who do not share its beliefs. This is no more or less true of Islam than it is of any other major world religion, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism. The prophets and holy texts of all of these faiths have preached the virtues of peace and tolerance of others, while at various times in their histories each religion has been responsible for acts of cruel persecution of “non-believers.” The following are some frequently asked questions about Islam and its influence in the world today. The answers are intended to provide more information on this religion and help to dissipate some of the misunderstandings surrounding it that have led to suspicion, mistrust, and the danger of religious conflict in the world today.

1. Who was Mohammed and what was his message?

The Prophet Mohammed, whom Muslims recognize as the founder of their religion of Islam, was born in Arabia around 570 CE. At the age of 40, while fasting and praying in the hills outside Mecca, his native city, the angel Jibril (Gabriel) visited him, and informed him that Allah (God) had named him as his prophet. He had been chosen to bring the Word of Allah to the peoples of Arabia. In order to for him deliver this message, Allah made Mohammed, who had previously been an illiterate trader, miraculously able to read and write.

On his return to Mecca, Mohammed began to preach the message Allah had given him. At first, his audiences were not receptive, but after much struggle and conflict, Mohammed and his followers eventually prevailed, and the message he bore from Allah won widespread acceptance among the desert tribes of Arabia and the city-dwellers of Mecca and Medina. The main parts of it were that there was only one God, that no idol or image of Him should be worshipped, that He was not born from any other god, and did not have any son or daughter, that all who believed in Him were earthly brothers and sisters, and that all of the prophets, from the time of Adam through Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, had also revealed part of His message to the people. Mohammed was to be the last in the line of the prophets, and his message from Allah was to be considered the final one.

2. What are the main beliefs of and practices of Islam?

In Arabic, the word *Islam* means submission to the will of God. Islam is a monotheistic religion that incorporates a number of elements of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims believe that the Jewish Torah (Old Testament of the Bible), and Christian Scriptures (New Testament) form part of the message God revealed to human beings through a line of prophets stretching from the creation of the world. The Koran is the holiest book in Islam because it

contains the final message from God that He gave to Mohammed. Unlike Christians, who regard Jesus as the Son of God, or a divine being, Muslims believe that Mohammed was a human being, although a great one because he was the chosen messenger of God.

The five basic teachings of Islam, known as the “Pillars of the Faith,” which all Muslims are expected to observe, are: to pray five times daily, facing in the direction of Mecca; to witness their faith through their conduct in everyday life; to help the poor; to fast during the holy month of Ramadan; and, if possible, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Besides the Koran, Muslims study a collection of traditions relating to Mohammed and his early followers, known as the Hadith. The legal system that emerged when Islam established itself as the dominant religion in Arabia and elsewhere is called the Shari’a; it still forms the basis of law in a number of Islamic countries today. Muslims are required to abstain from eating pork or shellfish, and from drinking alcohol. Lending money at interest is also forbidden. Although their religion technically allows men to marry as many as four wives, in reality this practice is not very common in many Islamic countries today.

Muslims gather in temples known as mosques to worship God every Friday. While often ornately decorated, mosques contain absolutely no pictorial depictions of Mohammed, which are forbidden. Worshippers are segregated by sex, with men and women praying separately or at different times. Before entering the mosque, worshippers must ritually clean themselves and remove their shoes. An imam, or priest, leads the service and preaches a sermon, but for the most part Islam does not have a rigid hierarchy of religious leaders, as is the case in Christianity. The muezzin, who mounts the minaret or tower of the mosque to summon the worshippers, delivers the daily call to prayer.

3. What are the main branches of Islam and how do they differ?

Like many religions, Islam contains a number of different sects or branches. The differences between these factions relate mainly to disputes over the line of succession in the faith following the death of Mohammed in 632. The dominant branch of Islam is known as the Sunni, a name deriving from the Arabic word *sunna* (traditional way). This group forms the majority in most Muslim countries and recognizes the first three caliphs, or religious leaders who immediately followed Mohammed, as the legitimate carriers of his legacy. The main group that disputes the Sunnite claim is known as the Shi’a, an orthodox sect that rejects the authority of the first three caliphs and instead regards Mohammed’s son-in-law, Ali, and his descendants as the rightful heirs of the prophet. The only country in which Shi’ites form the majority is Iran, where their view of Islam has had a major influence on that country’s government since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah (king). Religious leaders such as the Ayatollah Khomeini were Shi’ite mullahs, or priests, who assumed positions of great political power in Iran after this event. Important Shi’a minorities can be found in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Wahabis are a small ultra-orthodox branch of Islam that emerged in Arabia during the 18th century. Their leaders were reformers who sought to restore what they regarded as the basic principles of the religion after centuries of change and, they alleged, corruption of its beliefs and practices. This extreme branch of Islam gained power because the royal family that assumed control of Saudi Arabia during the 1920s followed it. Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalist Muslims who are part of his terrorist network come from the Wahabi sect, which also is the sect that set up religious schools from which most members of bin

Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorist network have come. The sect preaches an ultra-orthodox version of Islam, including strong denunciations of any who do not follow its teachings, be they Muslim or non-Muslim.

The last important group within Islam is known as the Ismailis, sometimes called the "seveners," because they follow Ismail, the seventh imam, or religious leader after Mohammed, who died in 760. The notorious sect of assassins, or religious killers, who practiced their deadly art in Iran and Syria during the medieval period are an offshoot of the Ismailis. Today, Ismailis revere the Aga Khan IV, a Harvard-educated businessman and philanthropist, as their religious leader. Following the partition of British India into Muslim Pakistan and mainly Hindu India in 1947, many Indian Ismailis emigrated to East Africa, Britain, and North America.

4. Why is Islam sometimes linked to religious extremism and even terrorism?

Like all major world religions, Islam's history has been marked by periods of violence and intolerance of those who followed other faiths. Even though the holy texts of these religions contain numerous references to the values of love, peace, and acceptance of others, each has participated in instances of persecution, war, and hatred fomented in the name of God over the centuries. What many refer to as fundamentalism or the rigid belief that one's own religion represents the truth and all others are at best wrong or at worst evil is a mindset that can be found among some adherents to all of the world's major religions. Some Muslims are fundamentalists in this sense, so equally are some Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, among others. (The term *fundamentalism*, however, is disputed in that some say that people erroneously equate fundamentalism with violent or oppressive extremism.)

The connection between Islam and terrorism is equally tenuous and misleading. The Koran enjoins Muslims to resort to *jihad* (holy war) in self-defence if they believe their faith is under attack. But it in no way condones terrorist violence that targets innocent people, and it expressly forbids the taking of one's own life in such an act. The suicide bombers who detonate explosives on buses in Israel, or the hijackers of the airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are violating two of their religion's strictest ordinances: those prohibiting the shedding of innocent blood and deliberate self-destruction. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam celebrates those who have willingly given their lives for their religion as holy martyrs. However, terrorists willing to sacrifice their own lives in the name of this religion do so in contradiction to the tenets of their own faith.

5. Why does it seem that some Muslims hate the West and the values it represents?

After the horrific terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, some commentators in the United States and elsewhere claimed that such actions symbolized a visceral Islamic fundamentalist hatred of the West and its values of secularism, democracy, individual freedom, gender equality, and materialism. But in the weeks following the events of September 11, none of Osama bin Laden's public pronouncements made any reference to these matters, but instead focused on specific grievances such as continuing U.S. support for Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians, the continuing economic sanctions against Iraq, and the presence of U.S. troops in his native Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, there was a growing consensus among some Western policy analysts that the war on terrorism President Bush proclaimed

shortly after the strikes was indeed the opening round in the “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West that had been predicted for years.

To many in the United States and countries like Canada, the televised scenes of crowds of angry Muslims in Pakistan and other countries demonstrating in support of bin Laden after September 11 were deeply disturbing. How could anyone champion a person alleged to have plotted such terrible destruction and loss of life against innocent civilians going about their daily routines in a city far away from the conflict zones of the Middle East and central Asia? What kind of fanatical hatred could have provoked such an outrage? To the French journalist Éric Rouleau, who has covered the Islamic world for many years, questions and reactions such as these are understandable, but fail to grasp what he and others perceive to be an essential dimension of the conflict between extremist Muslims and the West.

In Rouleau’s view, bin Laden and others like him who advocate violent acts against Western powers like the United States, however misguided and fanatical they may be, will unfortunately attract at least some degree of grudging support, if not sympathy, from the millions of desperate people around the world who are the economic victims of the ongoing process of globalization. Such people, whether they live in Muslim nations or other impoverished regions of the world, view themselves, rightly or wrongly, as the victims of U.S. economic and cultural domination. For this reason, and in view of the continuing suffering that they have had to endure for a very long time, and the almost total lack of attention, let alone assistance they perceive has not been forthcoming from Western nations, it is hard for them to find much sympathy for the victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. (In fact, Western nations contribute billions of dollars to Muslim Nations each year.) On the contrary, some of them probably derive a grim sense of satisfaction from knowing that what they regard as the world’s imperial superpower has now itself fallen victim to the kind of violence their countries have had to cope with for some time. Rouleau and those who share this analysis believe that it is imperative that the leaders of the Western nations recognize this fact as soon as possible, and take concrete steps to address the root causes of the economic, social, political, and cultural grievances of what has been referred to as the “wretched of the earth” that have provided such a fertile seedbed for terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, and violent fanatics like Osama bin Laden.

Activities

- 1. Form groups with your classmates to read and discuss the questions and answers in the passages above. In your groups, make a list of the new facts and ideas you gained from these frequently asked questions, concerning: (a) the religion of Islam, (b) the relationship between Islam and the non-Islamic West, and (c) the connections between Islam and political terrorism.
2. Then formulate together a list of other questions you would like to ask about Islam and the current attention it is receiving in the media as a result of the terrorist acts of September 11. After drafting your questions, use your school’s resource centre or the list of books at the end of this section and other resources provided at the end of this guide to find information that could help you to answer them. You may also wish to invite a spokesperson from the Muslim community in your area to speak to the class. A class field trip to a mosque or Islamic cultural centre would also be an important way to increase your knowledge of Islamic culture.

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The Clash of Civilizations

During the last years of the Cold War between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard University political scientist, published an influential book titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington argued that with the end of the ideological confrontation between communism and capitalist democracy, the world was about to enter a new era of conflict based on cultural and religious (rather than political and economic) differences. He claimed that while the global political situation during the Cold War had been a bipolar one, rigidly split between two contending groups of countries led by one of the superpowers, the emerging world order in the post-Cold War period would be multipolar. He theorized that a number of competing civilizations, representing the major religious and cultural groupings, would engage in a global race for supremacy, with the potential for triggering considerable upheaval and violence.

To Huntington, the most serious fault-line in this clash of civilizations was the one dividing the Islamic and Western secular societies. In his view, the value systems of these two civilizations were diametrically opposed in a number of crucial respects, and as a result, serious conflict between them was inevitable. Another U.S. political scientist, Benjamin R. Barber coined the expression “Jihad vs. McWorld” in his book of the same title, a phrase that aptly labelled what both writers interpreted as a fundamental disagreement in the way each civilization viewed the world and its place in it in relation to the other.

After September 11, this thesis of the “clash of civilizations” gained even more attention from many political commentators. It seemed to provide a cogent explanation for the fanatical hatred of Western (in particular U.S.) society that Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda organization and other Islamic fundamentalist groups like it were alleged to harbour. But according to Salim Mansur, a political scientist at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, such a view is greatly oversimplified and misleading. In order to demonstrate this, Mansur turns to the ideas of a great medieval Arab thinker, ibn Khaldun, whose writings are considered to form the basis of our modern understanding of history.

Ibn Khaldun was a historian and social philosopher who lived from 1332 to 1406. Born in Tunisia, he was the descendant of an illustrious family of scholars and government officials who had served the Islamic rulers of Spain. Before his death in Cairo, he distinguished himself as a statesman, judge, and diplomat during a long and important career. His most significant achievement, however, was his great work called *Muqaddima* (Introduction to History), which he wrote while living in North Africa during the 1370s. In this sweeping book, ibn Khaldun sought to provide a total interpretation of the pattern of historical change and development societies undergo, basing his analysis on purely non-religious factors like economics, geography, and politics. To the major 20th-century British historian Arnold Toynbee, ibn Khaldun’s book was “undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been produced by any mind in any time or place.”

Ibn Khaldun saw all human societies as forming a single, global civilization. While there were undeniably major differences between them, in terms of religion, language, economics, social

organization, and value systems, in his view the aspects they shared in common with each other were far more important. He strongly believed that civilizations made progress when they opened themselves to outside influences, and stagnated when they closed their doors and retreated within themselves. Unlike Huntington, who views civilizations as hermetically sealed entities, impervious to external forces, ibn Khaldun saw societies as being in a constant state of flux and change as they respond to innovations and challenges coming from without. He was a strong believer in human progress toward even more advanced levels of civilized life, and he argued that this higher stage of human development could only be reached if different societies remained open-minded and accepting of new ideas and methods of organizing their collective lives. This inter-civilizational exchange process functioned best in the great cities of his day, where people from all over the known world travelled in order to buy and sell, engage in academic speculation, and share their knowledge of science and technology.

Ibn Khaldun's thought was tremendously influential on a number of Western political theorists during the Renaissance period in Europe. The fact that he, along with other major medieval Islamic writers, exerted such a profound impact itself appears to support his ideas about the openness of civilizations to different ways of understanding the world. At the same time, it calls into question interpretive systems like that of Huntington, which views the different civilizations existing today as totally distinct and disparate phenomena. According to Salim Mansur, ibn Khaldun's theories about the growth and development of civilizations, although centuries old, are far more insightful and sophisticated than those of contemporary writers like Huntington. In the wake of September 11, he argues, ibn Khaldun's contribution to our understanding of the violent and destructive forces at work in the world today is, if anything, even more profound. To ibn Khaldun, the terrorists who crashed the airplanes into the World Trade Center were not engaged in a clash of civilizations on behalf of Islam. Rather, they were motivated by a hatred of civilization and its values as such, and by their irrational and violent acts showed their determination to make war against it.

Discussion

To what extent do high school courses such as History, Philosophy, and other related subjects provide information on non-European thinkers like ibn Khaldun? How do such perspectives improve our understanding of different societies and civilizations and their course of historical development over the centuries?

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Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

- 1. Using your school's resource centre or other sources of information, prepare a report or visual display on Islam, dealing with the following topics: Mohammed and the founding of the Islamic religion; the Holy Koran; Islamic art and architecture; Mecca and other holy cities of Islam; Islamic beliefs, traditions, and practices; Islam today; images of Islam in the mass media.
- 2. View the PBS documentary *Islam: Empire of Faith* with your class, then visit the Web site www.pbs.org/empires/islam for activities based on it.
- 3. Prepare a report on one of the following periods of Islamic civilization and its contact with the non-Islamic world: the Muslim kingdoms of Andalusia; the period of the Crusades; the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire; the challenges facing Islamic societies in the 20th century.
- 4. Read one of the following books dealing with Islam and its importance in the contemporary world and prepare a book report on it: *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, by Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair; *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*, by Benjamin Barber; *Islam: A Short History and Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, by Karen Armstrong; *The Oxford History of Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito; *The World of Islam*, by Bernard Lewis; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, by Samuel P. Huntington; *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, edited by Francis Robinson; *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, by Reuven Firestone; *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam*, by Robin Wright; *God Has 99 Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East*, by Judith Miller; *In the Name of the Prophet: The Struggle for the Soul of Islam*, by Milton Viorst; *An Introduction to Islam*, by David Waines.
- 5. Research the role and treatment of women in various Islamic societies today and Islam's struggle with the changes that modernity has brought to other religions—especially as these changes apply to women, their civil rights, and their access to education. Why was the treatment of women under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan not the norm in most of the Islamic world? Why was it extreme and oppressive?
- 6. Find out more about the important contributions Islamic civilizations have made in the following areas of human investigation: science; medicine; mathematics; philosophy; art and architecture; music; history and the social sciences; literature.
- 7. Be conscious of the depiction of Arabs and/or Muslims in the mass media (especially television and Hollywood films). Do you see prejudicial or stereotyped images?