the contemporary information age, it is especially important to read critically the controversial material that appears on Internet sites attacking and condemning opposed points of view.[23] Since anyone with a few hours to spare can create a website that looks reasonably impressive, it is possible for any extremist or eccentric to present one-sided and distorting material in a way that makes it look acceptable. In the culture of the Internet, religious advocacy websites, as a category, are closer to advertising websites than any other kind. One needs to ask questions about the purposes of such websites and about the identities of their authors in order to distinguish missionaries and partisans from neutral sources of information. In light of the long history of negative portrayals and distortions of Islam by hostile outside critics, it is particularly necessary to question contemporary material that plays into this extraordinarily strong anti-Islamic bias. Just as in the case of racial prejudice against blacks or anti-Semitism against Jews, the gross negative stereotyping of centuries of religious thought and hundreds of millions of people should be treated as a contemptible form of bigotry.

CHAPTER 2

APPROACHING ISLAM IN TERMS OF RELIGION

أدين بدين الحبّ أنى توجّهت

ركائبه فالحبّ ديني وإيماني

Islam and the Modern Concept of Religion

One of the goals of this book is to raise the level of the understanding of Islam from the perspective of religion, yet this is no easy task. How can one define the concept of religion? Like any other word, "religion" has a history. The term came into existence at a certain time for certain purposes, and its meaning has changed significantly over the years. Although it may be tempting to regard major concepts such as religion as being universal and applicable in all times and places, they are, in fact, historically conditioned and depend on particular circumstances. We cannot understand religion in a timeless sense or through an abstract definition. Religion can be understood only with respect to context: we have to understand the actors, the time, the place, and the issues in order to avoid making serious mistakes.

Surprisingly, religion is not mentioned in the Bible. The word is derived from a pre-Christian Latin term, *religio*, which was adopted by European Christians in the western Mediterranean region. It is surprisingly difficult to find an equivalent term in any of the other classical languages of Christianity, such as Greek, and it is even more difficult to find comparable concepts outside Christian sources. A brief excursion into the history of this term and some of its principal transformations illustrates how dramatically a fundamental term can change. While this sketch considerably simplifies the development of the concept of religion in the West, it demonstrates how our concept of multiple religions is closely linked to the modern period of European colonialism.

One of the most important authors in ancient Rome, Cicero,

offered an explanation of the origin of the term "religion" in his Latin treatise *On the Nature of the Gods*, written around 45 B.C.E.[1] According to this explanation, the Latin term *religio* was derived from the word *relegere*, which means "to read again," or "to read over and over." Thus *religio* means a painstaking sense of duty, concentrating fully on what one is supposed to do. We still retain a sense of this usage in our expression, "He reads the daily paper religiously." It was most common for Latin writers to use the word in the plural, in the form *religiones*, meaning ritual duties. There was not necessarily any theological or doctrinal content to this concept of religion, but it did contain a notion of duty and obligatory practices.[2]

The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire led to a distinctively Christian adaptation of the concept of religion. The influential theologian St. Augustine expanded on this in a short book entirely devoted to the subject, *Of True Religion* (390 C.E.). This was in part a philosophical treatise in which Augustine argued that true religion meant acknowledging the creator with reverence, uniting a correct intellectual perspective with appropriate attitudes and actions. The exact nature of this acknowledgment could vary from one age to another. Augustine felt that in earlier times the non-Christian philosopher Plato had been an example of true religion. In the fourth century C.E. he announced the divine arrangement or dispensation for humanity was Christianity, uniting the philosophy of Plato with the truth of Christ. Augustine went on to articulate a detailed series of intellectual and spiritual stages of development that were available to the seekers of true religion. Several points emerged, however, as radical innovations in this Christian concept of religion. First, for Augustine, true religion only existed in the singular; he did not have any concept of multiple religions. Second, religion was now a subject that had strong theological and doctrinal content. Third, the source of authority for the articulation of proper at-

titudes and actions was located in the Christian Church, as the historic tradition connecting humanity with Christ; religion was not merely an abstract teaching but depended on revelation expressed in time and space, in a historical and local context. Uniting theological truth with the legal authority of the church would have immense repercussions for the development of Christianity.

A major shift in the concept of religion can be detected at the dawn of the modern era, some fourteen centuries later. Major and drastic transformations had taken place in European Christianity since the time of Augustine, not the least of which was the split caused by the Protestant Reformation. A convenient example of the new perspective can be seen in the work of the famous Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius in his book *On the Truth of the Christian Religion* (published in Latin in 1627). Although the title appears superficially similar to that of Augustine's book, the difference is profound. Particularly in the wake of the European wars of religion between Protestant and Catholic, it had become clear that religion is a noun in the plural—there are multiple religions that all claim the same authority. Glossing over the split within Christianity, Grotius turned his gaze outward and described non-Christian groups as religions, too, although necessarily false ones.

Grotius's book, in fact, was a debating manual for European sailors on missions of economic and military conquest; it was designed to help them convert the Jew, the Muslim, and the pagan to Christianity. What is new about this perspective? As with Augustine, doctrinal truth and legal authority are claimed for Christianity. But now Christianity is only one of several religions that are in competition for world domination. The framework for this new emphasis was the era of European colonialism, which can be dated back to the time of Columbus but began to hit its full stride by the end of the eighteenth century.

It is worth pausing to examine the picture of religion that emerges from the extremely popular work of Grotius (it was translated into multiple languages, and the Latin version was a standard school text through the mid-1800s in England). If one looks at the frontispiece of the English translation published in 1632 (*True Religion Explained and Defended against ye Archenemies Thereof in These Times*), one sees a portrait of religion as an allegorical female figure poised between the New Testament and the Old Testament (fig. 2.1). In separate portraits around the page, the Christian is contrasted with the Jew, the Muslim (here called "the Turke"), and the pagan, each with a suitable biblical verse describing their relative status. Notes to the frontispiece explain the basic concept of Islam as both violent and false: "The Turke stands with his sword in his hand, by which he defends his Religion, that sprang from Mahomet (Muhammad), a false Prophet, foretold in generall by Christ." Without going into all the details, one can see here in the overall trend from "religion" to "religions" a concept of competing beliefs and political communities in a context of imperialism and missions. Grotius's conclusion to this book is as follows: "There is not, neither ever was there any other Religion in the whole world [other than Christianity], that can bee imagined more honourable for excellency of reward, more absolute and perfect for precepts, or more admirable for the manner according to which it was commanded to bee propagated and divulged."[3] This unsurprising choice of Christianity as the supreme religion of the world and the automatic assumption of the falsity of other religions is another aspect of the modern European concept of religion. All this will have particular importance for the concept of Islam.

In setting up this global conflict between Christianity and all other religions, Grotius skips a crucial conflict internal to Christianity, which has had immense repercussions for the modern

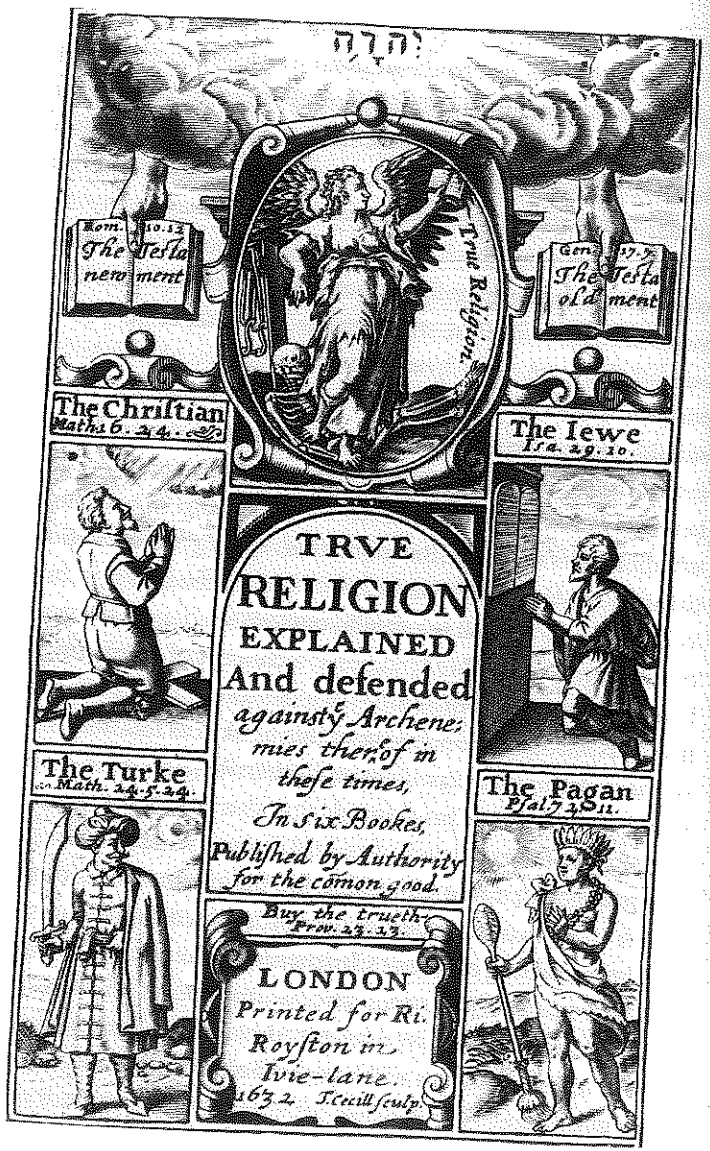

FIGURE 2.1

Frontispiece of True Religion Explained and Defended against ye Archenemies Thereof in These Times, *by Hugo Grotius (London, 1632)*

concept of religion. The Protestant Reformation was arguably the biggest crisis in the history of Christianity. It led to immense social upheavals, including peasant revolts, apocalyptic uprisings, and interminable wars between Protestant and Catholic, based on religious identity. Politics was so closely fused with religion that the slogan of the day was "religion belongs to the ruler" (*cuius regio eius religio*); that is, the state religion would be dictated by the ruler. These bloody and prolonged religious wars eventually provoked revulsion against intolerance of different religious beliefs. A series of philosophers and thinkers began to advocate that morality and behavior alone should be controlled by the state, while belief could remain a private matter. The culmination of this doctrine of the Enlightenment came in the concept of freedom of religion and tolerance, as seen in the rejection of established state religion by the framers of the American Constitution. But many European countries (with the exception of revolutionary France and various Communist regimes) have continued to accept various forms of official state recognition of particular churches. Still, in general terms, this shift to modernity has decisively elevated the power of the state over religion in matters of law and political authority while leaving various religious groups in competition in the realm of belief. In the colonies, however, with their large numbers of non-Christian subjects, Christian missionaries were given free rein and encouragement to seek new converts. The essential point to be noted is that religious toleration in Europe was only extended to different varieties of Christianity; non-Christian religions did not receive this concession.

Since the terms of debate about religion have been set by the modern colonial era, it is not surprising that Muslims (along with other non-Christians) have responded by defending themselves in the same language. Some major changes in modern Muslim thinking about religion are outlined below. The intense

preoccupation of Christians with missionary activity, particularly in the last few centuries, has no equivalent in Islamic history before modern times. Yet Christians, in what psychologists might call a form of projection, have constructed a highly simplified and misleading picture of Islam as fueled by a relentless thirst to convert the world—preferably at the edge of the sword. The serious distortions in this picture will be discussed later in this book, but ironically, the missionary concept of Islam has been picked up enthusiastically by many modern Muslims. The general mentality associated with missions generates similar questions and concepts. For instance, Christians and Muslims are equally likely to discuss with gusto the question of which religion is superior. Everyone is equipped with arguments to prove that his or her religion is supreme, and a practically endless series of examples could be given to demonstrate this. Yet the assumptions of this imperialistic missionary attitude about the nature of religion are rarely examined. Even nonreligious people examining an unfamiliar religion for the first time feel as though they are being called upon either to accept or to reject the religion in terms of personal allegiance.

The postmodern and postcolonial world, however, calls for a different approach to religion. Except for the diehard fanatics who are intent on converting the world to their doctrine, it should be apparent to everyone that religious pluralism is a fact of life. Not only do we have to accept the existence of multiple religions, but we must also acknowledge the nonreligious option as a significant and legitimate choice. In pluralistic modern societies, to assert the authority of a particular holy book, according to a particular "literal" interpretation, amounts to a tyrannical assertion of power. Although this is precisely what religious fundamentalists do, in practice they can only attain this authority by suppressing or eliminating everyone who holds a different point of view.

Interestingly, the Islamic tradition possesses extensive resources that lend themselves to concepts of religious pluralism. The Qur'an (2:256) explicitly states, "There is no compulsion in religion." Religious dogma plays a much smaller role for Muslims than it does for Christians, who in various periods of history have been much more absorbed with questions of orthodoxy and heresy. Modern Christianity tends to be viewed primarily in terms of belief, whereas Muslims (like Jews) have generally emphasized legal and ethical practice more than theology and doctrine. Among the large majority of Sunni Muslims, the four principal schools of law are equally acceptable. A well-known statement of the Prophet Muhammad illustrates this concept of pluralism and is often understood as authorizing different interpretations of Islamic law: "Difference of opinion is a mercy for my community." It would be hard to find the equivalent to this recognition of pluralism in any Christian theological doctrine.

With respect to other religions, Islamic thinkers have traditionally accepted the concept of multiple revelations, in the concept of the "peoples of the book." The Qur'an invokes the authority of the prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and many others, some of whose names are central to the texts of the Bible. Three major earlier scriptures are cited in the Qur'an: the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus. And there were certainly indications that there may have been many other prophets who brought revelations. The Qur'an depicts this multiplicity as part of the divine plan: "For everyone we have established a law, and a way. If God had wished, he would have made you a single community, but this was so he might test you regarding what he sent you. So try to be first in doing what is best" (5:48). Thus Islamic law contained a legal category for protected religious minorities, defined mainly with respect to Jews and Christians but extended in practice to other groups

such as Zoroastrians and Hindus. This legal status guaranteed these communities protection for their lives and property and for the practice of their religion; they were exempted from military service but were required to pay additional taxes. In practice, there have been instances in which particular Muslim rulers persecuted religious minorities. But it is important to acknowledge the existence of legal principles protecting religious minorities in Muslim societies. This stands in contrast to Christian Europe, where non-Christian minorities had no legal rights whatever but were entirely dependent on the goodwill of the political authorities. It was for this reason that Jewish communities in Europe were so vulnerable to persecution during the Christian Middle Ages.

Non-Muslim commentators, who often take modern extremist Muslims to be the only true Muslims, frequently characterize Islam as an intolerant religion. Yet religious pluralism was built into the social structure of most premodern Muslim societies, insofar as they observed the principles established in Islamic law. Indeed, it is surprising that while Christian authorities eradicated paganism in Europe centuries ago, pre-Islamic pagan groups still exist in some Muslim countries. The Mandaean community, an ancient non-Christian religious group that reveres John the Baptist, is based in Iraq and Iran and has perhaps 45,000 members worldwide. In the upper Himalayan region of Chitral in Pakistan, about 3,000 members of the Kalash trace their descent from the soldiers of Alexander the Great and practice a polytheistic religion. Unlike Christian Europe, Muslim societies had no equivalent of the Inquisition to implement a systematic policy of repression of religious minorities.

How have traditional Muslim doctrines of pluralism played out in recent times? The dissolution of premodern Muslim societies and the establishment of colonial rule have led to novel transformations in the role of religion and law. The premodern

societies ruled by Muslims generally cannot, in fact, be called Islamic in any fundamental sense. Politically speaking, within a generation after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632 C.E.), the Arabs established an empire modeled on the world-imperial domains of the Persians and the Romans. Later dynasties ruled in the style of Persian kingship or emulated the Central Asian empire of Genghis Khan. While Islamic law and symbolism played important roles within these empires, they were always accompanied by a combination of traditional local custom and administrative edict, neither of which derives from Islamic religious sources. Only in the twentieth century was a new kind of Islamic ideology created, in which life in its totality would be lived exclusively according to Islam. This modern concept of the Islamic state has a powerful emotional appeal, but it is paradoxical. While it attempts to bypass the preceding fourteen centuries of history and re-create the ideal religious society established by the Prophet Muhammad, it does so through the apparatus of the modern bureaucratic postcolonial state. So, like any other nation-state, contemporary Muslim societies define religion and the status of minorities through constitutions and legal codes that differ considerably from the legal and religious structures of the past. Since the theorists of the modern Islamic state are responding to European colonialism, the modern concept of religion has had a powerful influence in refashioning the concept of Islam.

Islam and the Historical Study of Religion

While the modern study of religion originated within Catholic and Protestant academic circles, it has grown to encompass a bewildering array of religious traditions from around the world.

Many attempts have been made to come up with systems of classification, although it was common to use Christianity as a template and to assume that other religions had the same basic features (scripture, priesthood, theology, and ritual), merely substituting different content in each case. In practice, however, it is difficult to make clear analogies between familiar Christian phenomena and other traditions. In addition, one can scarcely overestimate the importance of Christian missionary activity, particularly during the height of European colonialism in the nineteenth century, as a factor in the understanding of non-Christian religions. This missionary background, which assumes an imperial contest among religions for world domination, is evident in some of the main concepts used to understand religion on a global scale.

One of these familiar concepts of religion is comparative religion, an idea that in part arose in Protestant seminaries to answer the question, Which religion is better? In a missionary context, such comparisons usually juxtaposed one's own ideal with another's less than perfect practice, an approach that could be handy in debates with potential converts. Since the early twentieth century, the idea of comparative religion has shifted into a less missionary and more theoretical attempt to understand common structures that may be found in many traditions. Another popular concept, world religions (usually contrasted with folk or local religions), explicitly classified certain religions as competitive missionary religions on a global scale, awarding a major significance to large population figures. Again, this concept implicitly accepts the European colonial attempt at world domination as the context for understanding multiple religions. Usually Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism qualified as the main contenders for the status of missionary world religions, and everything else was considered local. Since Islam and Christianity both have significantly larger numbers of followers than does

Buddhism, this concept set the stage for a serious confrontation between Christians and Muslims.

The categorization of religions is an incredibly difficult task. The earliest efforts proceeded along the lines of the famous classification systems of Linnaean biology, strangely enough. The basic assumption was that there were certain broad major categories, similar to the genus of biology, that could then be broken down into species and subspecies. This biological method, derived from comparative zoology, is another source of the use of the term "comparative" in the phrase "comparative religion." One of the main problems with treating religious traditions as biological species is that competing groups claim the mantle of legitimacy and reject the claims of others. This means that there are multiple sources of order within each religion that challenge one another (think, for instance, of the evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups who regard the Catholic Church as a corruption and betrayal of true Christianity or even consider the pope to be the Antichrist). Further, the biological model of distinguishing characteristics of a species fails miserably when it comes to describing religious groups. Some, for instance, would define Christianity as belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, but this definition collides with self-described Christians (such as the Arian movement in antiquity or Unitarians today) who do not regard Jesus as divine. Likewise, definitions of Judaism, whether by practices such as circumcision or in terms of belief, run up against cases that confound standard expectations, such as the Messianic Jews or "Jews for Jesus." The definition of Islam runs into similar difficulties, both with established sectarian movements (such as various branches of Shi'ism) and with modern ideological groups (like the Taliban).

Scholars of religious studies in North American universities in recent decades have tried to focus on historical understanding and interpretation instead of doctrinal authority and politi-

cal competition. If this way of studying religion has an aim that differs from that of missionary and colonial concepts of religion, it is to permit a notion of pluralistic community based on mutual understanding, rather than assuming that one imposes an authoritarian religious doctrine. The peculiarly American notion of separation of church and state is probably a factor in this concept of pluralism. Although there are some who would still try to claim that the United States is or should be a Christian nation, there have been numerous court decisions making it plain that the Constitution does not permit endorsing one particular religious perspective over others. On the other hand, there has also been a recognition of the importance of religion for understanding our complicated history and culture. As Justice Arthur Goldberg observed, "The Court would recognize the propriety . . . of the teaching about religion, as distinguished from the teaching of religion, in the public schools."[4] The important distinction here is between teaching *about* religion, which is an academic study, and the teaching *of* religion, which is the inculcation of doctrine and the training for practice appropriate to religious communities. It is perhaps because of this distinctive historical experience that academic departments of religion, unattached to particular churches or theologies, are found in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout North America. In contrast, teaching about religion as a separate subject outside theological seminaries is comparatively rare in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

One of the important insights that have emerged from the study of religion as a historical and cultural reality is the realization that religions change; they are not timeless, eternal essences. There are, moreover, major divisions within all of the large abstract categories that we typically find in the common lists of world religions. A prominent example of this historical approach is the work of the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who

argued forcefully that "religion" is an ambiguous term that has to be broken down into two major components. The first is what may be called religious experience or faith, which is the internal dimension of religion and is of immediate concern to religious practitioners and professionals. The second component of religion is what Smith calls the cumulative tradition, the external dimension, which includes scriptures, ritual practice, morality, law, literature and myth, knowledge of the natural world, art and architecture, teaching or doctrine, family and community, the political order, and the like. This external aspect of religion may be observed by anyone, regardless of religious background or faith commitment. The cumulative tradition of religion grows and changes throughout history, and this can be documented, explained, debated, and interpreted; but this tradition is in theory accessible to everyone, whether they belong to the religion in question or not.

A major consequence of the historical study of religion is that it becomes increasingly impossible to consider a religion to be a "thing" (scholars called this process the "objectification" or "reification" of religion).[5] Although it is common to hear people say, for example, "Christianity says that . . . " or "according to Islam . . . ," the only thing that can be observed or demonstrated is that individual people who call themselves Christians or Muslims have particular positions and practices that they observe and defend. No one, however, has ever seen Christianity or Islam do anything. They are abstractions, not actors comparable to human beings. Moreover, the atmosphere of contest between different religions has given rise to a subtle but momentous shift of perspective in which people speak of believing in Christianity or in Islam, as opposed to believing in God. Again, as Smith pointed out, there is something almost idolatrous about putting a religion into the place of God, given the very human history of all religions. But in the popular media and in

modern discourse about religions, it is common to treat them as if they were things that could be compared and contrasted according to their essences.

Unlike Smith, however, I do not privilege the internal dimension of faith or religious experience as something beyond historical conditions, restricted only to the believer. Nevertheless, Smith's emphasis on religious tradition as historical is an important insight that has seriously eroded the concept of religions as having essential characteristics, at least in the academic study of religion. As Smith himself pointed out, if religion is part of history, then we have to take seriously the point that history (with all of its changes and transformations) has no essence. Thus a classical definition of religion in general, or of any particular religion, would be contradictory, since any such definition presupposes an unchanging essence. I therefore use "religion" and "religions" in a contextual and provisional fashion, qualifying the terms as much as possible with particular historical circumstances to illuminate the issue at hand.[6]

From a parallel perspective, the study of religion can be broken down into prescriptive and descriptive approaches. Religious communities define their faith and practice in an authoritative fashion, judging what is appropriate and inappropriate from their perspective. It is up to them to prescribe the authentic or true way to follow their teachings. It is not the duty of outsiders who may be interested in a particular religious tradition to make these prescriptive decisions. Instead, they have the ability to describe what has taken place in the history of that tradition, and most would agree that the ethics of scholarship requires these descriptions to be fair-minded and respectful, and that they should in some measure take account of the views of practitioners of that religion. But in the many instances where there are deep disagreements within a religious tradition, outside scholars and commentators have a limited role. It would be inappropriate, for instance, for a Hindu scholar to take sides on the issues of the Protestant Reformation—to decide, for instance, that either the pope or Martin Luther was correct. While particular Christian communities may find it necessary to take sides on this dispute, it is absurd for someone who has no stake in the matter to attempt to decide which is the authoritative interpretation; that would be a prescriptive rather than a descriptive move, and a misguided one at that. What is appropriate for the scholar is to explain what was at stake in this momentous conflict. By explaining the significance and importance of the arguments and the actors, the scholar is able to illuminate the history of religion in a way that both insiders and outsiders should be able to appreciate.

It is important to clarify the difference between the internal and external aspects of religion, between religious experience and the cumulative tradition, and between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to religion, because they are often confused. It is particularly important for those who wish to understand Islam, because uninformed commentators—mostly from the news media—have been the principal sources of information for the general public. These media sources, whose role in depicting religion will be discussed at greater length later, are for the most part willing to relay the most extreme religious positions without attempting to put them into context or to relate them to majority views. Some reporters even appear to provoke extreme statements, since these will have greater impact on the evening news. When a religious extremist tells a television reporter that Islam requires holy war against the infidel West, this prescriptive minority view of Islam suddenly acquires an authority from the media that it could never attain within its own social context. In the absence of reliable descriptive information

about Islam in the public sphere of Western countries, it is now vitally important to explain and distinguish between the many voices that speak in the name of Islam.

Several other important conclusions follow from this historical approach to religion. If beliefs and practices change over time, and if interpretations are subject to change as well, then what is the role of sacred scriptures? Here the answer must be that the importance and the understanding of holy books vary from one religious tradition to another and can vary a great deal within a particular tradition. The Protestant approach to religion has supplied the most common model of the role of scripture. Protestant Christians, after all, distinguished themselves from Catholics by using the slogan "scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*, in Latin), whereas the Catholics insisted on the additional importance of Church tradition as equally authoritative alongside scripture. In addition, religious specialists have most often interpreted holy books according to a large and complex body of commentaries. The Protestant notion of "the priesthood of the believer," with every individual able to approach scripture independently, unencumbered by the accumulated traditions of religious knowledge, has few parallels in the history of other religions.

This Protestant model of religion lay behind early attempts to study non-Christian religions, as shown in such examples as the famous *Sacred Books of the East* series edited by F. Max Müller in the late nineteenth century. The problem was that most other religious traditions did not have a single compact body of scriptures similar to the Bible; in some cases, there are dozens or even hundreds of holy books of more or less relevance to major numbers of believers. A good example would be Buddhism, where one can find three vast and only partially overlapping major sets of scriptures, each in a different language (Tibetan, Chinese, and Pali). But the focus of many mod-

ern Protestant denominations on the Bible has led to the expectation that one can understand everything of importance of the other religious traditions if one knows what is said in their scriptures. This concept of scripturalism is tempting, but it is a fallacy. It assumes that all scriptural verses are equally weighty, that there is no debate about their meaning, and that there has been no change over the centuries in the understanding of particular verses. It also assumes that every member of a particular religious group is equally certain to follow every prescription found in the holy book (or books). Can one predict the behavior of a Christian simply by taking a verse out of the Bible and assuming that it has a controlling influence over that person? In reality, one would need to know a good deal more before making such a prediction.

Another important conclusion is the difficulty of evaluating adherence to a particular religion. How does one define a Christian? The results will vary dramatically depending on the yardstick one uses. If religion is defined by belief, the number of Christians will probably be much higher than if it is defined by practice. And if belief is the norm, how does one deal with smaller groups who differ significantly from the mainstream in what they believe? I have had students ask me in all seriousness whether Catholics are really Christians. From the viewpoint of some Christian communities, Catholics may appear to be outside the pale of Christianity, and the reverse may be true as well. What about groups such as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Unification Church, who consider themselves Christians but are regarded with ambivalence by others? If one follows the prescriptive view of religion and defines Christianity from, say, the Baptist perspective, the definition of membership in the mainstream of religion will exclude significant numbers of people because they do not have the correct beliefs. This kind of definition will also leave unexplained the fact that the excluded

people still consider themselves Christians. For this reason, most scholars follow the descriptive method, and they accept instead the self-identification of people as the only way to describe religious membership meaningfully. This is a sociological rather than a theological approach to religious identity.[7] There are admittedly many cases where it is quite difficult to establish consistent judgments about religious identity (the Nation of Islam, for instance, poses such a problem with respect to its Islamic identity). But this difficulty in categorizing and defining religion seems to be unavoidable.[8]

Despite the efforts of scholars, the level of knowledge about Islam is quite low among the general public, even among those who consider themselves well educated. Partly this is because the study of Islam has been carried out by specialists in academic departments of Near Eastern studies, who perpetuate a tradition of detailed academic study of past civilizations, which is often opaque and inaccessible to nonspecialists. In the more modern centers of Middle Eastern studies, funded by the federal government to aid policy users, the tendency is to focus on contemporary political issues at the expense of long-term cultural and humanistic subjects. In North America, while the growth of the study of religions besides Christianity expanded considerably in the 1960s, the study of Islam has lagged behind other fields. Currently there are barely 200 active scholars in North America who identify themselves as specialists in Islamic studies, though there are somewhat larger numbers of specialists in Middle Eastern history and politics. These scholars have contributed many significant and insightful studies of Muslim societies and cultures through their publications. Unfortunately, much of this information is not accessible to the general public, either because it is located in hard-to-find academic journals or, in the case of university press publications, because it is too often produced in limited quantities and aimed primarily at

other scholars. This knowledge about Islam could be much more relevant and helpful to a wider public if it were expressed in a more accessible fashion, without specialist jargon. At the same time, it should be recognized that the reading public sometimes is looking for authoritative pronouncements about the truth of religion rather than informative descriptions. The task for contemporary society is to come up with a way of speaking civilly about religion without staking authoritative claims that exclude certain parties from the conversation. The academic study of religion offers tools that can help create a new civil discourse about Islam.

Islam Defined by the State and by the Numbers

Defining religious identity is not just a theoretical problem, however. In practice, religion is defined by the state, throughout the world. In the United States, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the courts are the primary definers of religion. Since the U.S. tax code exempts religious groups from taxation, is up to the IRS to decide whether a particular religion is legitimate or fraudulent. Likewise, the INS awards visas for immigrant religious teachers on the basis of its determination of their authenticity. Of course the courts have the responsibility of interpreting religion in relation to the Constitution, deciding, for instance, whether the teaching of creationism in the public schools constitutes an establishment of religion by the state. The situation is similar in other countries. States such as Germany have ruled that the Church of Scientology is not a legitimate religion. Israel, following the legal precedent of Ottoman law, defines membership in religions strictly according to the community into which one

was born. Therefore, in Israel it does not matter if one converts to another religion or joins a Hare Krishna group; one still can only be married and buried according to one's original birth religion as defined by the state.

The possible disconnect between religious belief and religious identity is nicely illustrated by a story about a student who was filling in a registration form at the American University in Beirut. When he left the space marked "religion" blank, the student was told that the registration form was incomplete and that he had to specify his religion. "But I'm an atheist!" he protested. Patiently, the registrar asked, "Yes, but are you a Christian atheist, a Jewish atheist, or a Muslim atheist?" The key question here is not religious belief but membership in a politically identifiable community. That is how states tend to define religion.

For these reasons, statistics and census figures on religion should be viewed with great caution. The overall categories are subject to debate, and the qualifications for membership vary considerably. Some of the first attempts to conduct a census on religion were carried out by the British colonial government in India in 1881, when a massive survey of practically every village in the subcontinent required respondents to indicate their religious affiliation (among many other items). This was in many cases the first time these people had been asked what their religion was, and certainly it was the first time they were offered only one choice. The British administrators assumed that, as with political parties, it is possible to belong to only one religion at a time. But in India it has been common practice for centuries for people to attend multiple religious shrines, perhaps on the basis of a practical impulse to maximize the possibility of divine protection. Thus it is common for Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Muslims to pay their respects at the same religious sites, although the practices and beliefs of the different communities

may vary. Likewise, a survey of religious identity carried out in Japan in the 1960s offered respondents as many as four categories from which to choose their affiliation, including Buddhist, Shinto, Confucian, and Christian. To the surprise of the survey takers, most respondents checked two boxes, and some checked three. Deciding on one's religious identity was apparently not as simple as the American researchers had assumed. Not only can religious practice be more complicated than simple affiliation, but there may be practical economic and political consequences to the declaration of a particular religious identity. At the time of the first British censuses in India, some groups wondered whether to declare themselves as Hindus or to seek a separate identity, and uppermost in their minds were the tax implications of either choice. Similarly, one finds a tendency to inflate or minimize census figures when the political importance of particular religious groups is in question. Census figures on religion, then, are statistical classifications of groups rather than guides to belief or behavior.

Keeping these cautions in mind, it is useful to look at the most commonly cited census figures relative to Islam. It is clear that the world Muslim population is second only to the Christian population among major religious communities. The current total Muslim population, including all sectarian divisions, is thought to be about 1.3 billion, or roughly one of every four or five people alive today. The comparable figure for all branches of Christianity is roughly 1.8 billion people, although these numbers are quite general and estimates vary considerably. In terms of major sectarian divisions, it is thought that from 10 to 15 percent of Muslims are Shi'is (Shi'ites), while the remaining majority are loosely classified as Sunni. These two large categories obscure other important distinctions, such as the four major schools of Islamic law recognized by Sunnis, as well as the theological positions associated with particular modern religious

academies and movements (these categories will be discussed in more detail later).

Just as important as these overall religious figures, and perhaps more revealing, are the numbers for ethnic identity and national identity. Contrary to the common stereotype, Arabs are far from being a majority of Muslims. Although there are around 250 million Arabs (some of whom are Christians) in twenty different countries, Arabs comprise roughly 18 percent of the world Muslim population. Probably the next biggest ethnic group of Muslims is the Bengalis, with about 200 million people mostly split between Bangladesh and India. The nations with the greatest Muslim populations are in the East, the largest being Indonesia (180 million), Pakistan (150 million), Bangladesh (130 million), and India (120 million). Thus half of the Muslim population lives east of Karachi, in environments more often characterized by tropical climate and rice farming than by the deserts associated with Arab countries. The next largest Muslim populations are in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Nigeria, with around 60 million Muslims each. Despite its economic and political prominence, Saudi Arabia has only about 15 million people. All in all, more than fifty countries have a Muslim majority, but the role that Islamic religious authority plays in each case is different.

The situation is quite different in countries where Muslims form a minority. Sometimes, as in the case of China, Muslims have been longtime residents of particular regions, although the total Chinese Muslim population is only about 30 million according to the most reliable estimates. But immigration to Europe and the Americas has created new living situations for Muslims. The U.S. Muslim population has been variously estimated to be between 3 million and 7 million, although most observers would probably settle around 5 million, placing American Muslims in a position comparable to that of the Mormons

or Lutherans in terms of population; there are probably more Muslims than Jews in the United States. In terms of origins, American Muslims may be conveniently divided into two groups that are roughly equal in size. Most immigrant Muslims have arrived in the United States since the liberalization of immigration laws in the 1960s. The largest segment of immigrant Muslims, about 45 percent, derives from South Asia (primarily India and Pakistan). Other major sources of Muslim immigration are Iran and various Arab countries, although the vast majority of Arab Americans (about 90 percent) are Christians. It must be emphasized that the religious attitudes of American Muslims are not uniform, for they include sectarian as well as relatively secular tendencies. Many local mosques cater to a particular ethnic or national group, although larger cities have cosmopolitan mosques frequented by people from different countries.

The other major group of American Muslims is from the African American community, with probably 2.5 million in all. This African American Islamic identity is based primarily on conversions since the 1930s, but it reflects a deeper historical reality; up to 15 percent of the Africans who were enslaved and sent to North America were Muslims. The greatest amount of publicity for any American Muslim movement undoubtedly attaches to the Nation of Islam, because of its controversial involvement with racial theories of black supremacy. A confrontational attitude against white society and a highly unusual theology have characterized the Nation of Islam from its early period under Elijah Mohammed and Malcolm X to Louis Farrakhan today. It should be pointed out, however, that the vast majority of African American Muslims left the Nation of Islam in the late 1970s under the leadership of Imam Wallace D. Mohammed (son of Elijah Mohammed), who renounced the racial doctrines of that movement. Thus while at least 2 million African Ameri-

can Muslims follow norms of Islamic practice that would be recognizable by Muslims anywhere in the world, the tiny Nation of Islam probably has no more than 25,000 members today. The disproportionately high profile of the Nation of Islam is a direct product of the news media and their obsession with conflict. There is also a small but significant number of Euro-American converts to Islam.

In Europe the Muslim population is around 10 million, with large concentrations in England, France, and Germany resulting from immigration in recent decades. There is considerable diversity among the European Muslim population as well. This results not only from differing national origins (Indians and Pakistanis in England, Algerians in France, and Turks in Germany) but also from a lot of variation on a spectrum that covers traditional conservatism, fundamentalism, and outright secularism. With demographic patterns and immigration expected to continue and increase, it is likely that the Muslim populations of European and American countries will likewise expand over the coming decades.

Islamic Religious Language

Because the Islamic tradition is so poorly understood in America and Europe, it is important to establish some basic terms that are used both to describe the religion from without and to elaborate on it from within. To begin with, the term "Islam" (with stress on the second syllable, which is a long vowel) comes from an Arabic word meaning "submission," with the implication of submission to God; it is also related to the Arabic word *salam*, meaning peace. A person who submits to God is called a Muslim (this spelling is preferable to the older form, Moslem).

The word "Muslim" should be pronounced without turning the *s* into a *z*, as English speakers tend to do; that mispronunciation unfortunately resembles the Arabic word *muzlim*, which means tyrant. Today we tend to use the word "Islam" as the name of a religion, in the specifically modern sense described above; in this sense, it is parallel with the word "Christianity." Likewise, a Muslim is a person who is an adherent to the religion of Islam, much as the Christian adheres to Christianity. It is also common for people to speak of Islam in a normative or prescriptive sense, referring to some kind of authoritative ideal of how things should be, while the term "Muslim" has a sense of the historical actuality of what people have done in practice. That is the ordinary usage.

The Arabic term *islam* itself was of relatively minor importance in classical theologies based on the Qur'an. If one looks at the works of theologians such as the famous al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the key term of religious identity is not *islam* but *iman*, or faith, and the one who possesses it is the *mu'min*, or believer. Faith is one of the major topics of the Qur'an; it is mentioned hundreds of times in the sacred text. In comparison, *islam* is a relatively less common term of secondary importance; it only occurs eight times in the Qur'an. Since, however, the term *islam* had a derivative meaning relating to the community of those who have submitted to God, it has taken on a new political significance, especially in recent history. Surprisingly, in eastern or non-Arab countries, followers of the faith were not typically known by the Arabic term *muslim* until relatively recent years, when in places such as India the Arabic usage has come to be consciously preferred. Instead, they were called *musalman*, a term evidently related to *muslim* but which by its irregular form suggests a non-Arab identity.[9]

Among the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (known as *hadith* in Arabic), one famous account depicts a