Chapter 6: Muslim Traditions

Chapter Overview

In chapter six titled “Muslims Traditions,” Amir Hussain provides a concise summary of the historical developments in Islam by detailing the sacred texts, leaders, the Sunni, Shi ‘a, Sufi traditions, theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, art, architecture and contemporary reform/revivalist movements, and contemporary issues, such as, the role and place of women. Hussain begins with the historical background from which Islam (literally means “submission) emerged in the Arabian Peninsula. After discussing the background of Islam, Hussain recounts the life of Muhammad (570–632), who received revelations of the Qur’an, and after persecution, underwent a *hijrah* (migration) from Mecca to Yathrib, which became known as Medina (“the city”), where he established the first *ummah* (Islamic community) in 622. Along with Abraham, Jesus, Noah, and Moses, Muhammad is regarded as a “prophet of power” because his revelations were universally binding rather than only to a particular place and time. In addition to the Qur’an (literally “Recitation”), which is considered “the Word of God made into a book,” Hussain notes the importance of the *hadith* (literally “narrative”), which contain the sayings and examples of Muhammad.

Hussain gives a concise summary of the five “pillars” of Islam: the *shahadah* (profession that there is no god but God and bearing witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God), *salat* (five daily prayers), *zakat* (almsgiving), Ramadan fast, and the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). These five pillars are central to Muslim practice and life. In addition to the five pillars, Hussain summarizes the importance of *shari’ah* (universally binding sacred law) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), including sources, methods and the various legal schools.

Hussain provides an account of the historical development and distinctive features of the Sunni and Shi‘i traditions, including, the diversity within the latter tradition. Sufism – that is the mystical tradition within Islam – is also detailed from its beginnings, to its teachings and practices (e.g., *dhikr*), to summaries of its key teachers, including, Rabi’a al-’Adawiyah and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273).

Hussain emphasizes the universal reach of Islam by summarizing its variations throughout the world, then turns to a discussion of reform and revivalist movements from the pre-modern then up through the modern era, including the Wahhabi movement, Muslim Brotherhood, and the Nation of Islam in the United States. Lastly, Hussain includes discussions of contemporary issues which are often made more difficult to comprehend due to misrepresentations across media and political discourse in Europe and North America. Some of the past and contemporary issues discussed include women, honor killings, marriage, war and terrorism.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Summarize the life of Muhammad and its importance for Islam as the Prophet, the founding of the Islamic community and his sayings and life examples as preserved within the *hadith.*
2. Demonstrate a clear understanding of the Qur’an, including its importance as divine revelation, its formation, structure, the key teachings, and its relation to Judaism and Christianity.

1. Describe the main teachings, practices and leaders within the Sunni, Shi’a, and Sufi traditions, therein, delineating the similarities and differences across these three Islamic traditions.
2. Identify the key teachings, methods and sources, which support the various schools of theology, philosophy and jurisprudence across the Islamic traditions.
3. Evaluate the key reform and revivalist movements from the pre-modern up to the present day across the world, including the Wahhabi Movement, Muslim Brotherhood, and the Nation of Islam. Compare and contrast these movements to the Sunni and Shi‘a traditions.

Study Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between prophets and messengers within the Islamic understanding of history?
2. What are the five “pillars” of Islam?
3. What are two of the key differences between Sunni and Shi‘a Islam?
4. What are the three main elements of Islamic Art? To what do these elements call attention?
5. In addition to the reform and revivalist movements, today, there are notable Muslim activists, here, briefly summarize the scholarly and activist work of Aminah Beverly Al-Deen.

Study Questions:

1. As part of the prophetic history, both prophets and messengers convey God’s will and seek to establish God’s law. From the time of Adam to Muhammad, God sent 124,000 prophets into the world to remind and warn communities of their obligation to submit to God. A prophet conveys a specific message, received from God, at a specific time and for a specific people. Unlike the majority of prophets, the messengers are prophets who convey a universally binding law meant for everyone at all times and places. In other words, while all messengers are prophets, not all prophets are messengers, as the majority of prophets are meant for specific people at a given time. There are messengers who are also considered “prophets of power,” most notably including Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jesus and Muhammad. (p. 251)
2. The five pillars of Islam are as follows: (1) the *shahadah*, that is, to declare or bear witness that there is no god except God, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; (2) *salat*, that is obligatory prayer to be practiced five times throughout the day at dawn, non, mid-afternoon, sunset and after dark; (3) *zakat*, that is, almsgiving, with the purpose to purify oneself by donating 2.5 percent of accumulated wealth (livestock, real estate, etc.) for the good of the community; (4) the fast of Ramadan, which extends from daybreak to sundown during the month during in which the Qur’an was first revealed to Muhammad; (5) and *hajj* is the pilgrimage to Mecca. (p. 255)
3. The first key difference between Sunni and Shi‘a Islam concerns the succession of Muhammad. Sunni Islam does not think that Muhammad chose a successor, while Shi‘a Islam thinks that Muhammad chose his son-in-law ‘Ali. The second key difference is that Shi’a also understands the imam, the leader of prayer, to be divinely mandated to lead because the imam is descended from ‘Ali. (pp. 266–267)
4. Islamic art is rich, elaborate and even exuberant. The first main element of Islamic Art is calligraphy, which involves the decorative use of script and units of text. Calligraphy is often used in mosques where the texts are often passages from the Qur’an. The second main element is geometrical decoration, and in the West, particularly, in the interlaced motifs known as arabesques in the West. The third main element is floral designs, which are most common in Iran. All three elements are more abstract than pictorial in order to point our attention to the larger structure on which the decoration appears, most often a mosque, a page of Qur’an a prayer rug, or a tiled entrance of a mosque. (p. 283)
5. In 1993, Dr. Aminah Al-Deen, who is a professor of Islamic studies at DePaul University, founded the Islam in America Archives at DePaul University, which collects the works of American Islamic scholars. In 1995, she organized the first of several “Islam in America” conferences at the university. In 2003, she began to write the courses that became the foundation of the nation’s first undergraduate baccalaureate program in Islamic world studies. She also ran a 10- week “Exploring Muslim Cultures” program in the city of Chicago, with 22 lectures, 10 events, and three exhibits that engaged 60,000 Chicago high school students and their social studies teachers. For this program, she was able to turn her DePaul University students into docents. A 2004 article about her in the *New York Times* ran under a headline that summed up her work: “An Islamic Scholar with the Dual Role of Activist.” Other examples of her activism include during Ramadan in 2013, Al-Deen spoke against the injustices during the Trayvon Martin trial. In 2017, Al-Deen was appalled that the reports of slavery and slave markets being reintroduced in Libya was not an issue of concern for American Muslims. In the interview for this textbook, she declared, “The Muslim world is in bad shape. Recreating it here in the United States isn’t going to help us. This is why we see African American Muslims pulling away from immigrant Muslim communities. They do not want to see reproductions of a bad story.” She sees her home as a “third space,” a safe space where Muslims who are frustrated with their mosque communities can meet. In her home, they can speak freely without the “strictures that the mosque community is putting on people—gender segregation, clothing, what you say, and if you say it with the correct number of Qur’anic references recited in a particular style of Arabic.” (p. 295)

Research Questions

1. The centrality of Muhammad as the Prophet is essential to the Muslim tradition. What do we know about Muhammad? What was his cultural, familial and social background, and why is this important for understanding his legacy? What are some of the main events throughout his life? What are his main contributions?
2. The Qur’an is the central sacred text within Islam, however, at the same time, Jews and Christians are also considered to be “People of the Book.” How would you assess and describe the relationship between the Qur’an and the Bible (Hebrew Bible, a.k.a., Old Testament, and the New Testament)?
3. Prayer is a common practice within a number of religious traditions. What are some of the distinctive features of prayer within the Islamic tradition? How often is prayer mandated to be performed in the life of a Muslim? What are the components, the context, and structure of prayer? Where is prayer to be performed? What does the Qur’an and the *hadith* teach us about prayer?
4. Pilgrimage is a common practice within a number of religious traditions. Why is the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca one of the five “pillars” of Islam? Explain the historical and religious significance of the *hajj.* What are the key practices of the *hajj*, and what is the significance of these practices?
5. Delineate the similarities and differences between the Sunni and Shi‘a traditions, including their understandings of leadership and authority, their reading of the Qur’an and *hadiths* for theology, philosophy and jurisprudence. In what ways could the differences between the two traditions be bridged, and/or, what are some of the more difficult chasms to bridge?

1. *Hadiths* are significant in both the Sunni and Shi‘a traditions as they contain the sayings and the example of the Muhammad. What are the components of, and what is the process by which the *hadiths* are transmitted and verified as authoritative? Why is this process significant? Why are the *hadith* so valuable for Muslim belief and practice? Are there teachings in the *hadith* that are missing from in the Qur’an?
2. What are the primary sources applied to Islamic jurisprudence? What is the relationship between these four sources, that is, the Qur’an, the Sunnah (teachings and life example of Muhammad), personal reasoning (*ijtihad*) of the scholar, and the general consensus (*ijma’*) of the community. Is there a hierarchy amongst these sources? Have there been any historical developments related to the use of these sources?
3. What are some of the misconceptions circulated and reiterated about Muslim women? Provide some examples from media and/or other current sources, mediums, discourses, and then provide a corrective that is rooted in the actual teachings, practices and beliefs of Muslims today. One example could be the ways by which the *hijab* is depicted within and throughout contemporary discourse in comparison to the diversity of practices and meanings amongst Muslim women today.
4. How does Islamic architecture, including the features of mosques and the decoration of Muslim buildings, relate to the central ideas of Muslim thought and practice? What are the distinctive features of Islamic architecture, and what are the meanings and uses made of these elements?
5. What significant contributions are advanced within Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali’s (1058 –1111) *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*?

Reflection Questions

1. Why is it significant that the Muslims understand the Qur’an to have been revealed specifically in Arabi? How does this belief shape the translation and transmission of the Qur’an and Islam throughout the world?
2. What are some of the similarities and differences between the five “pillars” of Islam and the practices and beliefs across other world religions? What are some of the possible historical, social and theological explanations that may account for the similarities and differences between the five “pillars” and the practices within other world religions?
3. Reflecting on the authoritative nature of the *hadith*, how do the *hadith* traditions support the practice of wearing the *hijab*?
4. How would you provide a correcting position to someone who argued that Islam, essentially, is a religion that has subordinated, marginalized and left little opportunity for women? What sources, practices, beliefs and movements would you cite to provide support for your position?
5. In what ways has media, cultural and political discourse led to a greater misunderstanding of Islam? Provide one or two examples by citing specific sources and then offer a corrective by citing the sacred texts (Qur’an and *hadith*) and the Muslim tradition.

Additional Resources

1. Qur’an. Website includes a search engine, Arabic and an English translation. <http://quran.com>.
2. *Hadith*. Website contains the *Hadith* traditions in searchable format with introductions and background information.
3. *Islam: Empire of Faith: Prophet Muhammad and rise of Islam* (PBS, 2000).

PBS documentary on the history of Islam from Muhammad up to the Ottoman Empire. <https://archive.org/details/IslamEmpireOfFaithCompletePart12And3-PBSDocumentary>

1. *The Life of Muhammad* (2011, PBS). <https://www.pbs.org/show/life-muhammad/>

This PBS program features a narrative of the Muhammad’s life with particular emphasis on his role as a spiritual leader as well as a military and civil leader.

1. Muslima: Muslim Women’s Art & Voices, a global online exhibition from the International Museum of Women (IMOW). <http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/about/media>

Muslima presents a collection of thought pieces and artwork from contemporary Muslim women who are defining their own identities and, in the process, challenging stereotypes.

1. *Sufi Chants From Cairo* (Audio) (1999, Institute du Monde Arab).

This is a collection of Sufi prayers.

1. *Frontline: Muslims* (2002, PBS)

This is a PBS documentary about stories of contemporary Muslims across the world, in different contexts. The events of 11 September 2001 occurred in the middle of filming and inform the direction of the second half of the documentary in particular. The companion website can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/>.

1. Barks, Coleman. *The Essential Rumi*. New York: HarperOne, 1997.
2. Denny, Frederick M. *Introduction to Islam*. New Jersey: Pearson, 2010.
3. Sajoo, Amyn B. ed. *Companion to the Muslim World*. London: I.B. Tauris Publications, 2009.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:*Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For mosques or Muslim sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees, shoulders, and heads should be covered for both men and women, and loose dress worn. Shoes also must be removed. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.