The Formation of Islam
Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800

JONATHAN P. BERKEY
Davidson College

To Vivien

- Issues of Islamic identity
p. 113-123
CHAPTER 12

Issues of Islamic identity

The master narrative of the two and a half centuries which followed the 'Abbasid Revolution might be characterized as one that took the institution of the caliphate from revolution to autocracy, and thence to disintegration and the concomitant fragmentation of the umma—that, at least, was the political framework within which radical transformations in the society and religious identity of Muslims transpired. What follows is a very brief sketch of some of the political highlights of the period, from the accession of al-Saffah, the first 'Abbasid caliph, to the end of the tenth century.1

In 762, al-Mansur, the second 'Abbasid caliph, established a new capital for the empire in Iraq. The foundation of Baghdad, which al-Mansur actually called the "City of Peace," reflected the growing tensions between the 'Abbasids and the supporters of 'Ali's family, who were especially strong in Kufa, the principal Muslim settlement in Iraq which had served as the 'Abbasid caliphs' first capital. In many ways the city can stand as a metaphor for the character of the Islamic empire in this period, and for its greatness. The city, like the state of which it was the capital, was ambitious. Much of it was occupied by a palace surrounded by explicitly imperial structures—palaces; gardens, vast reception halls—with a domed room housing the caliph's throne at the very center. Everything about the city—its spatial arrangement and decoration, the ceremony of the caliphs and their courtiers within it, its very location not far from the old Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon— signaled the unabashed absorption of pre-Islamic imperial traditions, as well as a sharpening of Iranian influence on the character of the civilization. And the whole was not without effect, if we are to believe the historian al-Tabari's famous account of the visit to Baghdad in 917 of Byzantine ambassadors who, though representing themselves as a state with a well-developed imperial tradition and ceremonial, were suitably overwhelmed by the splendor of the 'Abbasid court and the majesty of the caliph.2

1 The best comprehensive history of the 'Abbasid period can be found in Hugh Kennedy, The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphate (London: Longman, 1990).
Some Muslims came to think of Baghdad as the "umbilicus" of the world, and so it is no surprise that the civilization and culture associated with the "Abbasid capital has loomed large in later accounts of early Islamic history. The popular view is reflected, for example, in tales such as the Thousand and One Nights, in which many of the tales are set "in the days of Harun al-Rashid," the fifth 'Abbasid caliph (r. 786-809), even though the collection itself took its present shape many centuries later - as if to recall a golden age of prosperity and peace. Such Islamic viewpoints also have encouraged some Western historians to think of the early 'Abbasid period as a sort of "classical" one, in which Islamic civilization, having outgrown the perversities of an Arab faith, embraced a truly cosmopolitan world view, and in which many of the norms and artifacts which defined "Islam" in later centuries took recognizable shape. The grounds for such a viewpoint are obvious. From a political perspective, the "Abbasids were markedly successful, at least until the middle of the ninth century. There was a tremendous concentration of wealth in cities like Baghdad, which provided the material foundations for a vibrant cultural life. Most importantly from our perspective, the late eighth and ninth centuries did see some consolidation of foundational texts and patterns of religious authority within the Muslim community - for example, in the early codification of the schools of law (madhâb), and the collection and writing down of the first and most important compilations of hadith. But the term "classical" is too strong, and deceptive if it is taken to imply that the state of Islam in this period constitutes a model against which all later incarnations and permutations must be measured. The period was one of growth, struggle, and contention, in which Muslims thought (and fought) very seriously about what it meant to be a Muslim, and in which those struggles took on ever greater significance, as the portion of the population which was Muslim grew relatively larger and as the dhimmī communities adapted themselves to a state of permanent inferiority. But much of what was later taken to be characteristic of Islam in fact took clearer shape in the centuries which followed those which form the subject of this chapter - in the period which has been identified as the "Middle Period" of Islamic history.

Moreover, from at least the mid-late ninth century, the political power of the central 'Abbasid administration was undermined and fragmented by developments both at the center and on the periphery, and some of these developments had a profound impact on the evolution of religious identities and practice. From at least the reign of al-Mu'tasim (r. 833-42) on, the military power of the state centered on imported slaves, freedmen, and tribeless hired as mercenaries, many of them of Turkish origin. These Turks and others, who replaced the Arab (and also Iranian) soldiers who had hitherto constituted the core of the Muslim armies, were extremely effective from a military standpoint. However, their mercenary ties to the state or to its leaders contrasted sharply with the religious and ethnic links which had previously characterized the ties between the umma and its armies. From this point on, therefore, the development of religious institutions and patterns of authority unfolded under circumstances characterized by the exclusion of native Muslim populations from military, and later political, power. This would have an especially great impact on the emergence of the religious scholars, the ulama, as a critical social group.

At roughly the same moment that the character of the military supporting the central state was transformed, that central authority itself began to succumb to centrifugal forces. While the caliphal regime remained a symbol of Islamic unity, effective political power in the provinces outside of Iraq passed into the hands of local regimes. In Egypt, for example, Ahmad ibn Tulun, a Turkish soldier sent out from Baghdad as governor of the province, established an autonomous local government which he was (briefly) able to pass on in dynastic fashion to his son. This pattern - of a nominal acknowledgment of caliphal authority overshadowed by administration of real power by a local regime - turned out to be characteristic of political arrangements in the Near East from the tenth century onward, at least until the Mongol destruction of the caliphate in Baghdad in 1258. Some of the local regimes had profound impact on religious developments. Various autonomous 'Umayyad dynasties, for example that of the Samanids, cultivated a renaissance of Persian culture and language, which would prove to be the medium for much medieval religious growth in Islam, especially in the area of Sufi mysticism. The Buyids, originally from the region of Daylam south of the Caspian Sea, actually occupied Baghdad in the mid-tenth century and, while formally acknowledging the position of the caliph, ruled the central provinces of the Islamic empire for over a century. That development was all the more striking as the Buyids were Shi'i, and it was under their patronage that Twelver Shi'ism began to take more explicit doctrinal form. The fragmentation of political power posed its most serious threat to Islamic unity, and to the ultimate authority of the caliphs, in the Fatimid regime. The Fatimids, as Isma'ili Shi'i, rejected completely the authority of the caliphs and established a rival Imamate which claimed for itself supreme religious authority and political sovereignty. The Fatimids established their capital in Cairo, in Egypt, but the Fatimid caliphate was recognized at different times much more widely: in North Africa, western Arabia (including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina), Yemen, parts of Syria, and places as far afield as Sindh.

The articulation of a specifically Islamic tradition

As we saw in the previous chapter, there is some controversy as to the point at which we can safely speak of a distinctive Islamic tradition. It is likely that what
later generations would recognize as a distinctively Islamic identity did not exist in anything but a very rudimentary state at the death of the Prophet. On the other hand, by the middle of the eighth century, the 'Abbasids were able to lead an insurgency on explicitly Islamic grounds, advancing a process which was already well underway when the Dome of the Rock was built at the end of the seventh century. Even so, the process was by no means complete, and further developments were both enriched and complicated by the nature of the 'Abassids' success.

One can trace the outlines of the fuller articulation of the Islamic tradition in its relations with its sister religions, Judaism and Christianity, in this period. As we saw in the last chapter, there was considerable exchange of ideas and stories between Muslims, Jews and Christians in Islam's early years, for example, in the form of narratives about the pre-Islamic prophets known collectively as the *Isra* '1*il*yat. Those exchanges mark not only a relatively open cultural atmosphere, but also the fluidity of religious identities at the time, a fluidity perhaps encouraged by the oral nature of cultural transmission.\(^5\) The preference among Muslims for the oral transmission of texts was well known, and is reflected in the very terms by which the earliest Muslim texts are known - *hadith*, for example, meaning "narrative," "story," or "gossip," that is, "something that is talked about." But the ninth century was one in which these orally-transmitted texts took a more definitive written form. It was then, for example, that Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 870), and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875) produced their compilations of *hadith*, each titled the *Sahih*, the "sound" or "healthy" (i.e., marking the hadith they included as genuine and authoritative), compilations which over time acquired a definitive, almost iconic status among Sunni Muslims. In part, this represented the growing importance of the *sunna*, the normative practice of Muhammad, in the delineation of Muslim standards and practices, for that *sunna* was known principally through the *hadith*. But it also reflected the *inspiration* of authority, and its corollary was the assertion by the ulama, the scholars of the religious and legal sciences, of their principal responsibility for defining and defending the Islamic tradition - a responsibility which we will discuss more fully below and in the following section. Not surprisingly, therefore, this was also the period when the *Isra* '1*il*yat acquired a suspect reputation among most of the ulama, and while they continued to be transmitted as entertainment and in popular preaching circles, the very term *Isra* '1*il*yat came to have a negative connotation.\(^6\) In such ways did Muslims begin to assert the independence and exclusivity of their religious identity.


Gordon Newby, "Tsafir Isra '1il: The Development of Qur'anic Commentary in Early Islam in its Relationship to Jewish-Christological Traditions in Scriptural Commentary," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, Thematic Issue 5 (1989), 685-97. However, not only does this make it clear that the Muslim community turned toward the inner values of Islam after the period of seeking external confirmation (690), but that the Muslims of the community turned toward the inner values of Islam after the period of seeking external confirmation (690).


One of the principal unresolved tensions concerned the cultural orientation of the new faith. We have seen how questions of Arab, even tribal identity continued to shape the political life of the Islamic community right down to the 'Abbasid revolution. The central importance of a sacred scripture self-consciously revealed in Arabic as a language of administration under the Umayyads, and in much of the Near East, the momentum was unstoppable, as Arab gradually squeezed other languages such as Syriac and Coptic, either eliminating them or reducing them to local liturgical usage. The issues of Arabization and Islamization are related but not identical, and on the whole the Arabs' language spread further and faster than did their religion, at least in the western regions of the Islamic world. In Palestine by the late eighth and ninth centuries, as Christians from the Melkite Church were writing in Arabic, and - which suggests that Arabic was in common usage among their congregants - translating older liturgical works from Greek into the conquerors' tongue. Similarly in Egypt, while Coptic survived longer as a spoken language in some remote villages, by at least the tenth century it was largely eclipsed, among Christians as well as native Egyptian Muslims, by Arabic.\(^7\) It is notable that the one Near Eastern language which survived on a large scale (albeit in a form heavily influenced by Arabic) was that of the non-Arab cultural tradition which, in the years following the 'Abbasid revolution, shaped Islam more than any other: namely, Persian.

The question of the cultural orientation of Islam is closely linked to that of conversion to the new faith on the part of the native inhabitants of the territories conquered by the Arabs. The empirical evidence available on the subject is intriguing but limited, and the few attempts which have been made to put it to systematic use have been controversial. Still, we may carefully venture a few propositions. In the first place, the process had begun in a limited way already in the decades before the 'Abbasid seizure of power. During the conquests, many defeated soldiers, their families, and other captives were enslaved and, later, mansurred after embracing the new faith. The number of converts during the later Umayyad period, as the government, especially in Iraq, tightened its methods of tax collection, inadvertently encouraging the flight of (non-Muslim) peasants from the land. Some of these peasants (those who were not caught and sent back to their villages) ended up in the garrison towns established to house and to isolate the Muslim Arab immigrants, and successful integration into those societies effectively required their conversion. The pace of conversion only

...
quenched during the first century of ‘Abbasid rule, although there must have been
tremendous regional variation. Places such as Egypt and Syria, for example,
retained considerable non-Muslim minorities down into the modern period. In
Iran, after a slow start, conversion probably proceeded more quickly, so that, by
the beginning of the tenth century, the new religion was demographically as well as
politically dominant. Secondly, converts came from a variety of different social
classes. At first, most were probably from lower social orders—prisoners of war,
slaves, and those peasants driven from their farms by oppressive taxation. But
certainly some of the upper classes of the non-Arab peoples who came under
Muslim rule converted—one need think only of Ibn al-Muqaffa’, *manlūla*, belle-
leterist, and officer of the state in the first years of ‘Abbasid rule, who came from
a noble Iranian family, or the various Barmakids, officials and ministers to several
‘Abbasid caliphs, at least one of whose ancestors probably held important religious
(Buddhist) positions before their descendents converted to Islam.8

Finally, the growing numbers of non-Arab converts enriched the new religion
and the culture which grew around it, contributing significantly to the shape
taken by Islam in these and later centuries; we will trace some of those contribu-
tions in the remainder of this chapter. Whether Islam became a majority
religion in most regions of the Near East in the eighth century or the ninth or even
later, at some point the number of Muslims whose ancestry was non-Arab must
have come to outnumber the descendents of the original conquerors. Of course the
situation was increasingly confused by inter-marriage, and despite the rather
strong feelings which miscegenation could stir up—a Umayyad governor of
Mecca had once had a non-Arab *manlūla* flogged, and had the man’s hair and beard
removed, for his temerity in marrying an Arab woman, while the essayist
and polemicist al-Jahiz in the ‘Abbasid period could still compare intermarriage
between Arabs and non-Arab converts to a marriage with donkeys and mules—
it must in practice have become the rule rather than the exception. But the triumph
in much of the Near East of the Arabic language, and of what would in the modern
world be called an Arab ethnic identity, cannot disguise the considerable con-
tributions of non-Arabs to the historical construction of Islam. Such contribu-
tions became considerably more pronounced in the years following the ‘Abbasid seizure
of power, as the number of converts grew, as the capital shifted to the east and as
the state began to rely more markedly on Persian clients and even the older Iranian
imperial traditions.9

---


expansion especially seriously. This region, in northern Mesopotamia and Syria and south-eastern Anatolia, was of course not devoid of cities, but it was removed from the more familiar metropolises such as Baghdad and Damascus. And here, in figures such as Abdallah ibn al-Mahran (d. 797) and the pious warrior Abdullah ibn Adham (d. 772–8), there crystallized a distinctive Islamic ascetic tradition which, over time, would take on a mystical dimension and so have an impact on the religious movement which came to be known as Sufism.

But that Islam should take shape in a largely urban milieu—or more precisely that the Islam that developed in an urban context should acquire a normative character among those who called themselves Muslim—is hardly surprising, given the long history of urban life and culture of those lands which, after the initial conquests, formed the heart of Islam. By the latter half of the eighth century, the garrison camps constructed for the conquering Arab armies, such as Kufa and Basra, had become real cities in which the Arab settlers, despite the fact that many of them had (or claimed) nomadic roots and that they were originally distributed along tribal lines, had become in fact town dwellers. The foundation of Baghdad itself testifies to the urban orientation of the Muslim elite. The process of conversion on the part of non-Arabs may have functioned in such a way as to strengthen the urban character of the crystallizing Islamic tradition. In a world in which religious identity was so closely linked to social status, the very act of conversion may have stimulated a movement to the cities, that is, to the places in which the convert would be more likely to find those social networks in which he could live his new life as a Muslim.

In fact, the late eighth and ninth centuries were, at least in the heartland of the Islamic empire in Iraq and eastern Iran, a period of considerable urban growth. Baghdad, and later Samarra, the new capital founded by the caliph al-Mutawakkil north of Baghdad, were Abbasid creations, and both became (and Baghdad long remained) major urban centers, the population of Baghdad dwarfing by a factor of ten or more the nearby Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon. The vitality of these cities is critical to an understanding of the religious history of this period, as they provided the crucible for the development of Islamic values and institutions.

This is most clearly visible in Islamic law as it took shape in precisely this period. The Islamic tradition is historically continuous with the Arabian context in which it originated, and tribal concerns had a role in giving this tradition its initial impetus. But the tradition was a living one, which meant that the law was shaped as much by the contingencies of the moment as by an increasingly remote and idealized past. So, for example, while Islamic law insists upon the collective responsibility of the social group for, say, the harm inflicted by one individual on another, that law was not simply a relic of ancient tribal practice. It was also a practical response to the pressures evident in the new Muslim cities. There, an individual’s social status rested on his membership in larger groups—on the one hand, in religious communities, and on the other, within the Muslim collective, in social units which were still identified by (an increasingly fictive) tribal genealogy, but which functioned now primarily as a means of assimilating non-Arab converts and of imparting a sense of social identity in large and growing urban conglomerations. Many of the jurists and scholars who shaped Islamic law were themselves merchants or from commercial families, and so the shari’ah quite naturally reflects the tastes and priorities of the urban middle classes. Islamic law constitutes more a discursive tradition informed by competing principles than a fixed body of rules, and so generalizations are inevitably dangerous; but the values of trust, a disciplined work ethic, and—within the limits imposed by a society in which a person’s status was so contingent on that of a larger social or religious group—individual privacy, responsibility, and initiative are readily apparent in the writings of the early jurists. One of the more colorful examples is found in a treatise, Kitab al-Kashf (roughly, “on earning”), attributed to the Hanafi jurist al-Shaybani (d. 804), which reports a story about “Umar ibn al-Khattab. The caliph saw a group of pious and penitent (and inactive) men and, told that they were the muta’attabun, ‘those who eat up other people’s money.’

Much of Islamic law is designed to encourage the commercial spirit. The extensive sections of the law books which deal with sales, partnerships, and other commercial matters afford merchants a considerable freedom to enter into binding contracts, at least in so far as those contracts do not violate basic Islamic principles. So, for example, the Islamic lawyers would generally not allow the law to be used to enforce the sale of a forbidden substance, say, wine, but they also took it upon themselves to develop a series of ‘tricks’ (hijay), that is, legal manoeuvres which enabled them to give tacit acceptance to practices (such as the taking of interest on loans) which, while offensive to certain religious principles (usury is explicitly condemned in the Koran), were nonetheless essential to the smooth functioning of an urban, mercantile economy. More significantly, the lawyers recognized the claims of “custom” (‘urf) in the resolution of disputes and the setting of commercial standards—the custom, that is, of the urban marketplace. The role of custom is even more prominent in the jurisdiction and activities of the official known as the muhtasib. Usually translated as “market inspector,” the muhtasib’s authority was rooted partly in the Koranic injunction to “command what is good and forbid what is wrong,” a religious obligation incumbent on Muslims generally. More specifically, however, he also had a responsibility to ensure that commercial transactions were completed fairly and honestly. The office
of the muhassib probably did not derive directly from that of the agoronomos and other officials who supervised market affairs in the ancient and late antique worlds, as a previous generation of Western scholars assumed, but his prominence in medieval Islamic cities did testify more generally to the continuity of religious experience in the late antique and Islamic Near East and to the importance of cities and the commercial milieu as the crucible in which Islamic law took shape.  

All this is not to suggest that early Islamic cities were a sort of Whiggish paradise of a liberal and libertarian character. There were competing actors and values, as well as contradictory principles and impulses which were woven into the fabric of the law and of the social experience of religion. Those contradictions are especially visible in Muslim women's experience of the Islamic reality. The status and position of women in early and medieval Islamic societies is an especially complex topic, due in part to the multiple layers of cultural and religious suspicion through which Western observers have historically contemplated and criticized Islam, and cannot be dealt with adequately here. But it may serve for the moment to observe that women provide a revealing focus into the tensions and contradictions of Islamic jurisprudence and the relationship between legal theory and social practice. On the one hand, Islamic law accorded women a number of rights and privileges commensurate with the law's general respect for human dignity, responsibility and equality, rights and privileges which eclipsed those held by women in many (including Western) pre-modern societies – the right, for example, of a married woman to own and inherit property in her own right, property which was not at the disposal of her husband. On the other, a number of debilitating social customs were able to attach themselves to Muslim values and so achieved recognition and valorization, either through the law itself or through popular interpretation of legal principles. So, for example, while the custom of ritually excising the external genitalia of women was never universally practiced in the Islamic world, those Near Eastern Muslims who did practice it were able to perpetuate and disseminate it by describing it as a means of protecting the sexual honor of Muslim women, and so justifying it in the name of preserving sexual decorum, an important concern of the Islamic jurists.  


Other elements in early Islamic society competed with the urban bourgeoisie, in particular the imperial and aristocratic orientation of the caliphate, their court, and the government scribes. And it is important to remember that Islamic law took shape at precisely the same moment that alien military elites secured a monopoly over real political power that was to last down to the modern period. In other words, the cultural and social power of which the shari‘a is a reflection, carried with it no guaranteed access to the actual mechanisms of rule, and so politics in the later centuries would consist of constant negotiation between the Turkish military rulers and the native Muslim elites. But the contribution of the urban mobile classes to the parameters of Islamic civilization as they took shape in this period was decisive. It is only because of the persistent centrality of the shari‘a to Islamic identity. It is true that Sufism, which much later became an important, perhaps even dominant mode of Islamic piety, rejected or at least looked with suspicion on many of the values and principles of the jurists. But asceticism, even while rejecting bourgeois values, inadvertently reaffirms their significance; and in the later medieval Near Eastern urban landscape, the Sufi was as much a fixture as the merchant or judge.