III. The Spread of Islam and the “Holy Wars”

Today, of the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world, 934 million are Sunnis and 180 million are Shi’is. There are subdivisions of Shi’i Islam, but the majority are called Twelvers (Ithna-Ashariyyah). Shi’is predominate in Iran and Iraq. You may wish to explain to students that in the mid-600s CE, the followers of Muhammad split into two sects, Sunnis and Shi’is. Their differences were more political than doctrinal. Specifically, they differed over who was the rightful heir of Muhammad. The Sunni majority believed that the people should choose a leader not based on divine order but instead choose the person they believed was most capable of ruling in accordance with the current political situation and who could provide religious leadership and order for the community. The Shi’i Muslims believed the community should be led by a descendant of Muhammad. Since his closest living male relative at his death was his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, they thought he was the rightful leader of the Muslims.

B. Development of Islamic Civilization

As the Muslims spread their rule across North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula, through the Middle East, into the lands of the Byzantine Empire, and eastward throughout Persia and India, they came in contact with many different peoples and cultures. The result was a new civilization grounded in Islam but incorporating elements from many other cultures, which the Muslims in turn expanded and passed on in a cycle of cultural exchange.

Contributions to Science and Mathematics

An example of the amalgam of Islamic and non-Islamic ideas is that of Hindu-Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3, and so on. Some scholars believe that Hindus in India developed the system and that Arabs transmitted it to Europe. Another theory is that Muslim scholars discovered the numbers 0–9 in India and recognized their usefulness. Muslims also encouraged the translation of classical Greek mathematics texts into Arabic, and developed advanced mathematics.

The term algebra comes from the Arabic word al-jabr [AHL JAH-buhr]. The Persian (modern Iran) mathematician al-Khwarizmi developed algebra in the 800s CE and wrote a math text that was translated into Latin and used in Europe.

Muhammad al-Razi was a Persian physician who compiled a medical encyclopedia. Along with his own observations of disease were the opinions of Greek, Syrian, Persian, and Indian scientists. Al-Razi’s work was translated into Latin and used for centuries in Europe.

Avicenna, whose Arabic name was Ibn Sina, was a Persian physician and philosopher. In the 1000s CE, he compiled Canon of Medicine, which, when translated into Latin, became a standard medical text in Europe and remained the standard until the 17th century. A medical encyclopedia, the Canon of Medicine contained many useful observations; for instance, Ibn Sina noted that contaminated soil and water caused disease and that proper diet was important to good health. He also adapted Aristotelian philosophy to Islam. His philosophical works, and those of Spanish Muslim Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes in Europe), were the first source of Europe’s knowledge of the ancient Greek philosophers’ works.
Preservation of Greek and Roman Writings

By the time of the Muslim conquests, western Europe had broken up into small feudal states with economies based on agricultural labor. There was little time for education and the arts during the Middle Ages.

However, through conquests, various Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit writings came into Muslim possession. Rather than destroy them, Muslim scholars carefully preserved these works, translating them into Arabic, studying them, and, in many cases, incorporating these ideas into their own work. It should be noted that Jewish scholars in Muslim-held areas, such as Spain and Egypt, also studied and used Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit writings in their work. One of the best known is Moses Maimonides, who lived in Cordoba, Spain, but then fled religious persecution after the fall of Cordoba to a fanatical Islamic sect called the Almohads. Maimonides and his family moved to Morocco, then Palestine, and finally settled in Cairo, Egypt. There, Maimonides was a physician and philosopher who tried in his writings to reconcile science and religion. He was also appointed to be the court physician to Sultan Salah al-Din and his family. Had it not been for the effort of these scholars writing in Arabic, many works of the ancient Greeks and Romans would not have been preserved for later Europeans.

Cities as Centers of Islamic Art and Learning

Artists and scholars were working in many Muslim cities—Baghdad, Istanbul, Timbuktu, Esfahan, Samarkand, Damascus, and Cairo, for example. The cities of Andalusia in southern Spain were especially rich centers of scientific work and artistic development. Spain was a major route by which Muslim scholarship reached Europeans.

Cordoba

Of the main cities of Andalusia—Cordoba, Granada, and Seville—Cordoba is perhaps best known for its intellectual and cultural contributions. Known throughout Europe as a great city, Cordoba had a population of about 250,000 at the end of the 10th century, and its library was by far the largest in Europe. It had over 400,000 books, compared to the average collection of fewer than 100 books in most monastery libraries at the time.

Any resident of Paris, Rome, or London in the 1000s would have marveled at Cordoba’s paved and lighted streets, and its mosques, palaces, and other beautiful buildings. Columns, arches, and domes became characteristic of Islamic architecture. The Great Mosque in Cordoba is an excellent example of Islamic architecture.

Islamic art is highly stylized. Islam did not allow the use of human or animal forms in art out of concern that people may begin to worship statues (idols) and because it was perceived that man should not attempt to depict the likenesses of God’s creations with their imperfect abilities. Muslim artists used curvilinear patterns, as well as Arabic script—often passages from the Qur’an—as decorative motifs. The curvilinear form of design featuring floral and vegetal plants became known as arabesque. However, it should be noted that despite the prohibition against using human and animal figures in Islamic art dating back to the early
III. The Spread of Islam and the “Holy Wars”

days of Islam, these prohibitions varied from place to place and from time to time. For example, Iranian artists and artists in the Mughal Empire in India developed a style of miniature painting that included humans as subjects. The buildings in Cordoba, like the Great Mosque, reflect the traditional Islamic style.

The architecture of Islamic civilization produced two of the most beautiful buildings in the world. In Granada, Spain, the Alhambra is a palace and fortress built in the 13th century that still astonishes visitors. The Mughal Empire in India produced the Taj Mahal. For more information on these buildings, see the Visual Arts section.

The citizens and visitors of Cordoba included the poet and theologian Ibn Hazim and the philosopher Ibn Arabi, as well as the Jewish poet Judah ha-Levi and philosopher and poet Ibn Gabrial.

C. Wars Between Muslims and Christians

The Holy Land and Jerusalem

The term Holy Land refers to an area off the eastern Mediterranean Sea that comprises parts of the West Bank of the Jordan River (Palestinian territory) and the modern nations of Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider this area sacred because it contains many sites associated with events described in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scripture. Jerusalem, one of Islam’s three holy cities, is located in the Holy Land and is also considered sacred by Jews and Christians because it is the location of many monuments associated with scriptural events, such as the Wailing Wall (all that is left of the Second Temple), which is sacred to Jews, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, containing the tomb of Jesus, which is sacred to Christians. These sites are also sacred to Muslims, who accept the Jewish and Christian figures as great Islamic prophets. Muslims also cherish the Dome of the Rock and other sites in Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock is a sanctuary over a spot visited by Muhammad on his spiritual night journey (see “Islamic Art and Architecture,” pp. 258–268).

The Crusades

The Crusades were invasions of the Middle East by European Christians from the 11th–13th centuries and beyond. There were eight major Crusades fought over 200 years. The ultimate goal of the Crusades was to free the Holy Land from Islamic control. The First Crusade was begun by Pope Urban II to answer the Byzantine emperor’s appeal for help in ensuring safe passage for Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem (discussed earlier on p. 135). The Seljuk Turks had captured the Holy Land, and there was concern that they would bar Christians.

The Crusades were unsuccessful in achieving their original goal, but they did result in increased trade between Europe and the Middle East. Many Crusaders remained in the Middle East and established lucrative businesses. The remains of many Crusaders’ castles can still be seen in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. However, the Crusades are also controversial, since they resulted in many atrocities, including attacks on Jews and Christians, as well as Muslims.