

Islam

as Political Religion

The future of an imperial faith

Shabbir Akhtar



Islam as Political Religion

This comprehensive survey of contemporary Islam provides a philosophical and theological approach to the issues faced by Muslims and the question of global secularization. Engaging with critics of modern Islam, Shabbir Akhtar sets out an agenda of what his religion is, and could be, as a political entity.

Exploring the views and arguments of philosophical, religious and political thinkers, the author covers a raft of issues faced by Muslims in an increasingly secular society. Chapters are devoted to the Quran and Islamic literature; the history of Islam; Sharia law; political Islam; Islamic ethics; and political Islam's evolving relationship with the West. Recommending changes which enable Muslims to move from their imperial past to a modest role in the power structures of today's society, Akhtar offers a detailed assessment of the limitations and possibilities of Islam in the modern world.

Providing a vision for an empowered yet rational Islam that distances itself from both Islamist factions and Western secularism, this book is an essential read for students and scholars of Islamic studies, religion, philosophy and politics.

Shabbir Akhtar is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. This political work is a sequel to his philosophical treatise *The Quran and the Secular Mind* (Routledge, 2007). He has written a number of articles and books on philosophy of religion, Christianity and Islam, and is currently working on a book on Islamic humanism.

First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2010.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

© 2011 Shabbir Akhtar

The right of Shabbir Akhtar to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Akhtar, Shabbir, 1960-

Islam as political religion : the future of an imperial faith / Shabbir Akhtar.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Islam and politics. 2. Islam and secularism. 3. Islam and culture.

4. Religion and politics. I. Title.

BP173.7.A4925 2011

297.2'72-dc22

2010017592

ISBN 0-203-84182-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 978-0-415-78146-6 (hbk)

ISBN 978-0-415-78147-3 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-203-84182-2 (ebk)

Contents

<i>A note on Arabic transliteration and Islamic dates</i>	vii
Introduction	1
PART I	
The prophetic consummation: Islam as original and final religion	13
1 A prophetic religion	15
2 A literary religion	39
3 A universal religion	63
PART II	
The twin birth: Islam as empowered religion	85
4 A political religion: Muhammad as statesman	87
5 A secular religion: faith or ideology?	125
6 A legal religion	146
7 An imperial religion	166
PART III	
The crucible of reason: Islam as contemporary religion	185
8 A rational religion	187

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
9	An ethical religion	201
10	A private religion	217
	PART IV	
	Epilogue	235
11	The future scope of an imperial faith	237
	<i>Notes</i>	273
	<i>Bibliography</i>	285
	<i>Index</i>	289

Introduction

I

Islam is associated with a misanthropic political vengeance and apparently motiveless malice exhibited daily in the world's crowded headlines. Its towering twin public countenances are a mystical faith of peace and a ferocious political ideology dedicated to world conquest through indiscriminate violence. Owing to this Janus-faced reputation, some European critics gave Islam the benefit of the doubt and were, as recently as 1989 when the Rushdie affair erupted, kind enough to eulogize it as potentially the best religion with the worst followers. Two decades later, practically all Westerners lament that Islam is the *worst* faith with the worst followers. Islam as political religion is now uniformly condemned as a resolutely intolerant, potentially totalitarian, unmanageably anarchic, dangerously subversive, irredeemably misogynistic, irrationally homophobic and avowedly imperialistic form of theocratic terrorism which aims to forcibly assimilate the secular and Christian worlds to its own obscurantist norms while rejecting offers of democratic compromise and eirenic accommodation.

Some Western extremists accuse Muslims of a new conquest of post-Christian Europe. Once God's continent, it is now renamed Eurabia or Europistan, conquered this time via immigrant infiltration and intimidation, not direct invasion. Such conspiratorial charges are supported by anxieties about the reach and purpose of Muslim, mainly Saudi, philanthropic donations to major Western universities. Is this a subtle attempt to monopolize and censor the study of Islam in the West, thus undermining secular freedoms of research, inquiry and speech?

Many non-Muslims sincerely wonder why Muslims, alone among religious believers, refuse to become citizens of a global political and economic order. This is a fair question. While we belong to many faiths, we remain a single humanity and share the planet. For those of goodwill who affirm the beatitude, 'Blessed are the peace-makers', the Islamic question is urgent, not merely theological. As an organic amalgam of secular and religious concerns, Islam resists secularization at a time when the gods of other faiths are competing to fall prostrate at the altar of secularism.

II

Two decades ago, during the Rushdie affair, I publicly argued that Islamic reform derives its authority from the attempt to resist and confront, not assimilate secular, political and artistic modernity. Religious reformers need religious, not intellectual, authority, in order to be credible to their co-religionists. That is why Sayyid Qutb and Ayatollah Khomeini and other activists succeeded in influencing the Islamic world while the exiled ‘Muslim’ intellectuals who plan to reform Islam, from the safety of their apartments in London and Paris, are ridiculed in the Muslim world. They are seen as resident stooges and puppets of the West as opposed to the Western-appointed puppets governing the Muslim masses in their own homelands. Western-based Muslim thinkers who labour hard to create a so-called moderate – that is, politically impotent – Islam fully acceptable to the West, are dismissed as agents of the West.

Only a Muslim reformer who argues for strengthening Islam, not emasculating it, carries any weight with ordinary Muslims both in the East and West. Western non-Muslim readers should ask themselves whether they would prefer a legitimately empowered Islam which, historically at least, gave us peace, scholarship, political security and stability for millennia in several parts of the world or an impotent Islam that has recently given us terrorism and extremism as a substitute for politics and policies.

If this shocks you as a Western non-Muslim reader, ask yourself whether mediaeval Christian reformers would have been taken seriously if they had proposed that Christianity should be reformed by becoming more secular. Or, alternatively, if they had pleaded that Christian dogmas should be liberalized through interaction and irenic dialogue with Islam, then a powerful presence on European frontiers. If these had been their proposals, they would have been laughed out of court by the theologians of the Catholic Church. Instead, Protestant reformers showed that they were more truly conservative and committed Christians than their Catholic opponents. Moreover, the West’s secular thinkers are suspect in the Muslim world today just as Muslim thinkers, especially Averroës and Avicenna, who virtually created the Renaissance in Christian Europe, were anathematized by mediaeval Europeans.

The type of reform proposed by westernized Muslims, including Muslim women who claim that the Quran gives women more rights and liberties than those secured by modern secular feminism, is tragically misguided. The West should support an organic, not an imposed ‘colonial’ reformation. For that to happen, Islam must confront secular culture, morality and philosophy. The crucial question is about the motivation and limits of such confrontation. Only such a stance could give Islamic reform, emanating from the West, any kind of religious authenticity in the West itself and perhaps some religious authority in the Islamic world. Like Daniel in the den, Muslims must face the lion, take on modernity on modernity’s intellectual terms but without relinquishing the authority of the best of their tradition.

In this book, I recommend changes which enable Muslims to move graciously from their imperial past to a modest role in the power structures of a world in

which their aspirations, even lives and property, mean little. I present proposals that modern Muslims, as conscientious and intelligent heirs of their imperial tradition, can implement. I recognize that my theme is academic and professional but also urgent and practical. Therefore, I write as a polymath who rejects the academic subdivisions of specialization which kill perspective by giving everyone a piece of the jigsaw puzzle but no-one the whole picture. By moving beyond mere scholarship and research towards insight and wisdom, a thinker can sometimes awaken a whole generation of his people. It is an open question, however, in which direction the awakened ones will march. In the absence of a clerical hierarchy in (Sunni) Islam, a Muslim thinker is always only an individual voice, crying in the wilderness unless that voice were to be amplified by reputation for personal piety and learning. Even if one had such advantages, genuinely innovative ideas take time to take root and seldom blossom within the life-span of those who propose them.

III

Western readers might be tempted to skip the bulk of the text and read only the chapters entitled 'A political religion' and 'An imperial religion'. Experts on Islam include an army of academic specialists (whose voice is sometimes wholly academic and hence practically irrelevant) but also veteran observers, including generalists such as journalists, with new wisdom to retail to their apprentices. These experts, like the drug companies, typically isolate one element from the whole plant. Invariably, they choose the opposed poles of political or mystical and then explain the remaining dimensions. In the pharmaceutical case, nature has the patent on the whole and wholesome plant while the artificial extract has toxic side-effects. The same applies to books, academic and general, featuring a uni-dimensional Islam. The attenuated faith bewilders Muslims since they are instinctively (if not intellectually) aware of their religion's complexity. They are forced to witness daily the biased vivisection of their sacred beliefs as they endure the prejudicial rigour of sensationalist analysis which spares all other faiths under a patronizing lenience.

We cannot comprehend the continuing *political* appeal of Islam without understanding it as the *moral* compass guiding a major segment of humanity. Moreover, Islam has intellectually challenging and appealing foundations; sympathetic non-Muslims recognize its early and classical history as exemplifying a successful experiment in creating and sponsoring a multicultural civilization. This is seen as proof of an empowered Islam's ability to be a force for the common good. Islam has patronized learning and scholarship: Muslim polymaths transmitted and amplified Europe's lost Hellenic heritage after recognizing and saluting it as one of the glories of the intellectual record of our shared humanity.

In view of several political alternatives, especially liberal secular humanism with its democratic underpinnings, why choose Islam? Western readers and scholars typically view Islam's political potential with alarm and do so in isolation from its appealing spiritual and moral aspects. They see this faith as a political nuisance, a religion that contains an elaborate ideological disguise for world domination.

4 Introduction

'Islamofascism' best captures this Western exasperation, making Muhammad's faith resemble the totalitarian party's manifesto in George Orwell's dystopia *1984*. Some Muslim activists do fervently seek to establish a state where they can wield power over other Muslims. Their hidden love of absolute power is gilded with a veneer of justice and decency. Their secret aim is not to serve the interests of Muslim peoples but rather to pay homage to an abstract ideology marked by puritanical obsessions with social control of an imagined anarchic sexuality. Many are unable to cope with the free-ranging caprices of a modern world freed of ancient and often irrational strictures and inhibitions.

Our concern, however, is with ordinary and fallible Muslims who look up to Islam and identify it with moral good and political righteousness. We must assess this estimate of Islam as a conspicuously decent way of coping with life's pressures. Westerners dismiss *a priori* any suggestion that political Islam may contribute anything valuable to alleviate modern injustices and tyrannies. Dialogue with Muslims is often a monologue in which Westerners dictate their will. The West gave the world communism, fascism and now advanced capitalism disguised as secular liberal humanism, all in quick succession within one century. The next great global political paradigm may well be inspired by Islam's notions of political humility and economic justice.

IV

I clarify the aims and scope of this book through two substantive comments on defining Islam and two remarks about temperament and mood of inquiry.

Islam defies classification as a Western monotheism or even as a religion rather than an ideology. We know this from the invention of unnecessary words such as 'Islamism' or 'Islamist', created by analogy with ideological -isms such as Marxism (with Marxist acolytes). For other world faiths, we have no ideologically motivated neologisms such as 'Christianism' and 'Christianists'. (Judaism has an -ism suffix but is never classed as an ideology.)

I identify 10 features of Islam which jointly characterize it as a religion but as one distinguished by its political and ideological facets. Its originating (Meccan) facets are prophetic-historical, literary and potentially universal. At Medina, the faith enters its public and explicitly empowered phase: hence it's political, secular, legal and imperial facets. At both locations, for believers, it remains rational, ethical, and private (including mystical). These last three qualities, prominent in the initial Meccan phase, now re-emerge after the colonial onslaught that began three centuries ago. The first three (prophetic, literary and universal) endure as the essence of Islam's self-image. The political, legal and imperial dimensions, synthesized in secular power, actively fed the Muslim imagination from the time of Muhammad's establishment of an empowered community in Medina in the first third of the seventh century until the end of the Ottoman caliphate in the early twentieth century. The future of this trio remains uncertain.

This 'decimal' characterization of Islam equips us to predict its future development while defusing its currently tense relationships with rival faiths and ideologies.

I am not, however, defining religion as such. Thus, for example, Islam's political dimension is akin to the organizational one, common to all religions. Not all organization is coercively political: all faiths form communities but not necessarily states or empires. As for the standard facets of ethical, artistic (aesthetic), ritual, doctrinal and mythological, identified empirically by scholars of religions, Islam, no less than Christianity or Buddhism, has an accompanying art (including architecture), doctrinal scheme, mythology and rituals. But these do not distinguish Islam. Reading this book will help readers decide which facets are, were historically, and might therefore remain unique to Islam. Which are characteristic, distinctive or essential to it? Which are incidental and peripheral to it? This analysis of the evolving profile of an antique Islam as it moves into late modernity has practical and policy implications. Which facets of Islam's originating political axioms must continue to characterize it in the future? Might some of these evolve into apolitical forms?

Second, Islam is fully and authoritatively defined at its source. This is done inside the Quran, self-described as scripture rather than canonized centuries later. Islam was successfully established by the man who conveyed the Quran's message. Muhammad's meticulous and scrupulous attention to detail has left little scope for later developments that might radically alter his faith; no second patrons or secondary founders have arisen in later history. So defined are the originating axioms of the faith that no subsequent reformation has successfully undermined its original integrity.

The 10 facets of Islam mentioned above can be located in Quranic verses. Scriptural references will be given since competitive intra-religious hermeneutics merge into the political, not merely literary or theological, context of modern Islam as Muslims struggle among themselves and with outsiders to define and own their faith. The kind of Islam that Muslims want differs from the kind that Westerners and other non-Muslims would like to see emerging. This book negotiates between these opposed political aspirations for the future of a universal faith.

Third, I reject triumphalism and apologetic ambitions. Despite being a book with political and inter-faith relevance, I do not indulge the love of controversy for its own sake in order to score points. All faiths, in their origins and subsequent developments, have strengths and weaknesses. Thus, for example, Islam's early political successes became liabilities in later ages. The recession of fragmented late Islamic empires left exposed several Muslim minorities whose sufferings now constitute some two thirds of the daily world news coverage. About four fifths of all refugees are Muslims. By contrast, Christianity, born in weakness and persecution, later prospered and eventually become the most widely distributed and empowered faith on our planet, partly courtesy of Western colonialism.

Finally, the correct temperament of inquiry into the role of power is a subtlety we defer to the opening of Part II. Suffice it to say here that this work is neither detached philosophical reflection nor committed apology. I have tried to write a book that is strong but not strident, factually and historically accurate but not stale or predictable, precise but not pedantic, theoretical without being utopian or idealistic about practical implementation. The chapters dealing exclusively with

6 Introduction

power are scholarly and combative and some unsympathetic critics may judge their tone rather strident. I mention this here lest the occasional vehemence of my idiom be mistaken for dramatic dogmatism. Urgent themes do not admit of wholly academic discussion. Such inquiries are never merely professional and relaxed but rather sincere and urgent. Academic controversy is itself often translatable into practical forms, especially in the case of Islam. While Western commentators and publicists reject Islam as a false religion with a uniquely dangerous political potential, Muslim apologists defend it root and branch. I steer between Muslim activists' relentlessly polemical, abusively critical, zealously defensive perspectives on all alien convictions, on the one hand, and those of liberal Muslims, on the other, who write primarily to appease and please Anglo-American audiences and are therefore elated by Western praise and depressed by Western rejection.

V

I characterize Islam by identifying its five metaphysical pillars and its rejection of two other dimensions. The faith is grounded in an original *protology*: a doctrine of first things, including creation and nature, partly resembling the pre-historical materials in *Genesis*. A supplementary Islamic *anthropology* is embedded in the scripture. This pair constitutes an unverifiable metaphysical scheme which underlies a universal religious outlook with concealed moral, legal, political and imperial consequences. Third, a distinctive *eschatology* supplies sanctions to enforce the Quran's legal charter while also motivating believers to be privately virtuous. A *sui generis* Quranic *prophetology*, radically different from anything found in rival monotheisms, establishes a descriptive and normative *ontology* with combined ethical and political implications. Countless prophets have guided us in our daily moral conduct and encouraged us to struggle to establish a prosperous and just order on earth. Muhammad's enduring success as prophet and statesman ensures the stability of the building he constructed with these five pillars.

Islam has no *theology* and no *soteriology*. For theology, it substitutes law and ethics: we are given only to understand the moral and legal will of God, not to speculate about his nature. We are permitted to know what we need to know, not to know everything we wish to know. This simple arrangement offers salvation without a messiah; it requires no abstruse theology or saviour, only a prophet to warn us about the consequences of faith and rejection as we live out our probationary period on earth.

In Part I, we examine Islam as universal prophetic faith supported by revealed literary foundations. Chapter 1 portrays Islam as a prophetic faith in which confessing Muhammad as God's apostle gives anyone and everyone immediate access to membership of a universal community. Our account of Islam, a faith founded in the full light of history, seeks to sharpen and correct a vague and astigmatic view of its founder's political and sexual lives. In Chapter 2 we explore the Quran, the book which frames Muhammad's prophetic calling and makes Islam a literary faith. We summarize the teachings of this incalculably influential book, a manifesto for every Islamic utopia.

In Chapter 3, we probe Islam as religious globalization project engineered by Muhammad when he aimed to finalize religion as such. As the earliest historical attempt to take a perspective on the totality of previous faiths, Islam is a meta-religion which seeks to restore the world's original faith dating to Noah if not Adam. Muhammad finalizes sacred history in the seventh century; he supplies the missing brick whose placement completes the edifice and hence God's favour on humankind. We identify enduring tensions with earlier peoples of scripture, Jews and Christians, who resist Islamic claims to finality, concretely expressed in the early twin birth of a comprehensive legal charter supported by an empire. Islamic rulers relegated Jews and Christians to their corner as privileged communities of errant monotheists. In its phase of post-imperial decline, this view of fellow monotheists needs re-assessment.

A religion which claims to comprehensively direct human affairs cannot avoid entanglement, possibly conflict, with the modern political sector consisting of plural faiths in the framework of a separation of politics from religion. The theoretical and theological explorations of Part I secrete pragmatic, political and practical implications which are identified and assessed in the rest of the book.

VI

As we shall see in Part II, Islam is a secular, not a religious religion. Muhammad's temperament was neither ascetic nor inclined to tragedy. Therefore he succeeded religiously while enjoying life with a zest thought to be incompatible with faith. His behaviour with women alone, let alone his political adventures, disqualifies him in the eyes of his Christian critics. The Quran engages with the totality of life and the things of this world, a prerequisite of any politically active management of experience. This secular facet of Islam explains its sincerely but compulsively political, legal and imperial impulses.

Muhammad and his successors intended to conquer the world for Islam. In Chapter 4, we examine the twin birth of faith and empire which enabled Muslims to create a multi-cultural religious empire rather than, as in the case of Christianity, inherit a pagan empire and spiritualize it. Chapter 4 opens this inquiry into Islam's ineradicably political nature by examining the Prophet Muhammad's embrace of the power wing. The discussion aims to assess Muhammad's role as a statesman who established a nomo-theocratic utopia in Medina. We examine Christian and liberal critiques of Muhammad's Medinan ministry where the quest for power was incorporated into his faith's founding axioms. The Prophet's behaviour supplied the source of imitative piety for rulers in later centuries. Is this a problematic feature of original Islam? If so, for whom is it so? These questions are addressed conscientiously and not reduced to simplistic concerns for those Western policy-makers who seek to uphold their economic and ideological interests in Muslim lands, often under the pretext of philanthropy and world peace.

In Chapter 5, we explore questions about the correct scope of modern Islam as private faith or public ideology. The theoretical and academic discussion in Chapters 4 and 5 contains a complete conceptual framework for an Islamic

8 *Introduction*

liberation theology. Although we briefly discuss the ideal Islamic state here, relevant pragmatic and policy implications are deferred until Chapters 6, 7, 10 and 11.

As we see in Chapter 6, Islam's political and legal aspects make it a secular faith concerned with, to use Christian terminology, the things of Caesar. These aspects continue to define Muhammadan Islam's aboriginal nature as the most pragmatic of world faiths. The law codes of the mediaeval past are no longer wholly applicable in any place but the canons are still in principle revered. In this chapter we assess classical Islamic jurisprudence as a preface to ways of moving beyond the inherited imperial tradition marked by its reliance on a holy law (Shariah) of total comprehensiveness operating in an empire constantly on the verge of expansion. This hardly reflects the situation of modern Muslims seeking to survive, with self-respect, in the face of an all-encompassing Western hegemony in which one goes west wherever one goes.

It has been about a century since the demise of the last Islamic dynasty, the Ottomans, history's longest lasting dynasty. In Chapter 7, we examine Islamic imperial history during the millennium when Muslim rule competed with Christian imperialism. After Muhammad, the world was divided between the circumcized and the baptized. At the dawn of the third Christian millennium, we note a resurgence of the rivalry between the crescent and the cross. We explore the justifications for religious imperialism and contrast it with the secular outreach for power and economic aggrandizement. Traditionally, Muslims developed only a theology of power since Muhammad left an undiluted legacy of success. We assess the classical caliphate and its limitations as we move away from empires based on religion into a world of nation-states administered on secular principles. This discussion sets the context for a final probing of modern issues of power and democracy in Chapters 10 and 11.

Let me mention why we examine these three facets in this order. Although Islam was potentially a political faith in Mecca, it found political expression only after Muhammad migrated to Medina. It emerged as a legal faith when he enacted laws and administered an empowered community there. The Quran's imperial insinuation is contemporary with Muhammad's apostolate but became explicit after his death. He ruled only the Arab peninsula but instructed his successors to create a universal empire of faith.

VII

In Part III we consider how modern Islam seeks to maintain its rational appeal, ethical authority and spiritual grace in a sceptical, increasingly vulgar, shallow, cynical and materialistic age. Apolitical facets of the faith derivable from the Quran – the pedagogic, rational, ethical, aesthetic, mystical and philosophical – will become increasingly prominent as Muslim minorities world-wide interpret their Islam as a private faith devoid of the sanction of public power. How will modern Muslims living as minorities in Western democratic states, educating their children in the secular state sector, reconcile the duties of their faith with the obligations of citizenship? Can the liberal state accommodate Muslim needs – especially

the urgent need for protection against gratuitous artistic provocation, itself a prerequisite of attaining communal religious dignity?

In Part III, we move into the seductive world created by Western colonial modernity. This world, alien and alienating for Muslims, was born out of the Christian capitulation to secularism over the past three centuries when Western nations accommodated a politically truncated Christianity solely on secular terms. Though located in the ideologically defined west, the burden of the new secular condition falls on all peoples everywhere. Islam is emerging, in its post-imperial phase, as a religion in the Western sense of a private source of solace in the face of public adversity, as simply one more offer of self-help and spiritual hygiene. We examine the rational appeal and the ethical foundations of the sanity it provides for Muslims in a global, westernized and advanced capitalist world which values little except material possessions and the proximate promises of pleasure. Three chapters examine Islam as a privately practised rational and ethical faith.

In the Epilogue, we sketch Islam's political profile and predict its future evolution. We examine the faith's contours in international politics, especially in conflict with some Western powers. How should Muslims deal with their current predicament of powerlessness? Is an apolitical Islam an acceptable compromise with the modern world or a betrayal of the faith's true nature? We note the emergence of democracies in Muslim nations. Is there a distinctively Western, particularly European, Islam about to be born? For non-Muslims, Islam's transition from public to private faith is wholly a matter of policy. For Muslims, it involves an agonizing, consequential and conscientious decision about the essence of their faith.

VIII

Although we analyze Islam's political-ideological facet, from various angles in the entire book, we focus on it in Part II. In its origins, theology and history, Islam is a proudly political religion. I therefore select 'political' to qualify it in the title of this book. For Muslims, juxtaposing 'political' and 'Islam' is redundant. The message of Muhammad was liberation: Muslims are militantly opposed to injustice and oppression.

The qualifier 'universal' could have been used instead since Islam is the last universal faith. As I argue in Part II, the religious universality of Muhammad's mission justifies its political and legal charter for society and not vice versa: Islam's moral ambition to unite the human family in God's name is more fundamental than its quest for political power. However, calling Islam a universal faith does not highlight the link between its religious aspiration to universal appeal and its unique choice of coercively imperial option for achieving it. Other faiths, especially Christianity and Buddhism, cannot be classed as political faiths: even though their adherents aspire to universal missionary outreach, their *originating* dogmas are strenuously apolitical and pacifist. Therefore, despite the known risk of entrenching existing stereotypes, I feel obliged to underline Islam's political facet. I do not wish to mislead the reader about the dominant stress in this faith and in this book.

In Part I, the emphasis is theological and abstractly religious rather than political and practical though in Islam one cannot sharpen these distinctions. We explore the bases of Islam as a metaphysical and theological enterprise sustaining distinctively Islamic political embodiment. In terms of private versus public facets, Islam is characterized in Part II as public (secular, temporal, political, ideological, legal and imperial). In Part III, it emerges as private (rational, ethical, philosophical, mystical, ritual and artistic). As the Epilogue shows, however, a communal or political sense nestles beneath the surface of Islam even as privately practised, as opposed to publicly enforced, faith.

IX

The role of Muhammad is a major theme of this book. Although Islam is incorrectly called Muhammadanism, the centrality of Muhammad is fundamental to Islam despite the fact that he is, unlike the Buddha or Christ, not deified by his followers. We acknowledge his correct status by examining his life in the very first chapter. Throughout Part I, he is the bearer of an Arabic scripture with universal imperial import. Armed with his book, he becomes the architect of the first Islamic utopia. By exploring his standing as ‘seal of the prophets’, we note his contribution to the universality and finality of Islam.

In Part II, we examine Muhammad’s credentials. These were, from the start, queried by Christians and Jews who are now joined in their doubts by liberals, agnostics and atheists. Those who reject all religion often single out Muhammad’s faith as the world’s most resolute enemy of art and free thought, an accusation made openly often enough but also sometimes hidden behind the veil of literature and media documentary. It is hard to imagine a more despised founder of a world faith. Muhammad’s alleged delinquencies, through the faith he brought, outrage many Westerners and indeed adherents of other faiths who share ‘bloody borders’ with Islamic peoples. Muslims must acknowledge Muhammad’s role as legislator-prophet entertaining an imperial vision of a single society under God. He was a general who led armies and, like Alexander before him, planned the conquest of the known world.

In Part III, Muhammad’s role decreases as Islam becomes a private faith in which the Quran, Muhammad’s legacy, becomes a guide to Islam as rational religion. He remains an ethical exemplar for believers but few can successfully imitate him in the modern world. His role is attenuated and residual although he continues to attract mystical devotion. In the Epilogue, we note the revival of Muhammad’s role as just warrior-prophet, a role that appeals to Islamic activists enraged by determined, unprovoked and continuing Western aggression against Muslims. The Western animus against *Islam* is, as I argued during the Rushdie affair, mainly against *Muhammad’s* posthumous influence. His role as statesman has a limited appeal but everyone must pretend to wear his insignia. As varied advocacies claim him, he emerges both as an activist who intended to conquer the world for Islam and also as a mystic who accidentally made the mistake of founding a world empire.

No-one can understand modern Islam without inquiring into the nature, extent and future of Muhammad's grip on Islam, from beyond the grave. Physically dead but ideologically alive, his influence will subside in some areas and increase in others. Is he dispensable to any facet of the faith? No Muslim reformer can intelligently address the problem of change and modernity without engaging with this anxiety. Rival Muslim apologists instinctively link to the mind and policy of their Prophet opposed modern advocacies, sifted through the Quranic filter: democracy or dictatorship, pacifism or militant radicalism, enslavement of women or their emancipation. They look for prophetic and scriptural touchstones of ancient pedigree while reading the newspaper headlines crowded with modern anguish. Nothing contemporary has any intrinsic integrity. It must gain its imprimatur, its seal of worth, from the revered past. The scripture can be convincingly read as supporting the classical tendency to condemn religious innovation as heretical while endorsing as normative the path trodden by Muhammad and the first and only perfect community.

X

This book contains a complete introduction to Islam, the life of its founder and the contents of its scripture. It also threads a schematic history of Islam into the entire book. Tracing this history will help the reader to see how Islam evolved from an empowered, legal and imperial faith into a private ethical and rational faith with residual legal and political features. Islam has a continuous history despite the trauma of colonialism which culminated in the significant wound inflicted on its body politic with the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey in March 1924 (1342 AH).

I divide Islamic history into two phases. The first and most politically empowered phase originates in 622 CE, the first year of Islam as political religion. It terminates in 1571. We explore Islam's version of ancient sacred history which culminated in the mission of 'Prophet-General' Muhammad whose legacy subsequently flowered into Islam's early (caliphal) and classical history. This phase contains the vicissitudes of the rightly guided patriarchal caliphates and the classical dynasties of the Umayyads and Abbasids. In 1258, the Mongols devastated Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid dynasty. The next three centuries witnessed continuous disintegration culminating in the emergence of competing dynasties against the larger context supplied by Christianity's competitive colonial ambitions. Although the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, it was the expulsion of Muslims from Spain a mere 40 years later in 1492 that would finally decide the trajectory of modern Islam. Less than a century after the expulsion of Muslims from Western Europe, Ottoman maritime supremacy began to flounder. In 1517, an Ottoman fleet was decisively defeated at Lepanto at the entrance of the Gulf of Corinth. Islamic history from 622 to 1571 (through the Spanish trauma of 1492) supplies the hinterland to Chapters 1 and 3 of Part I and to all of Part II.

Observations about the second phase from 1571 to the present – the continuing encounter with the potent and colonizing Christian and secular liberal west – are

12 *Introduction*

dispersed into the final chapter of Part III and carried forward into the Epilogue. This second phase is subdivided into four periods, beginning with one of continuous decline from 1571 to 1798 when Napoleon's army occupied Egypt. The second period lasts from 1798 to 1924 when the last Ottoman sultan-caliph, Abd Al-Majid II, was deposed. The rise of anti-colonial Islamic radicalism dates to the aftermath of the abolition of the caliphate, a time of abject humiliation felt by Muslims worldwide. The third period lasts from 1924 to 1978 when a decisive reversal demonstrated the resilience of political Islam: Iran's Islamic Revolution.

Events since 1978, to turn to the final period of the second phase, are harder to assess since no period of history is as remote as the recent past. We note Muslim retreat and decay mixed with defensive militancy and resurgence. Islam shall remain a deeply held if private faith in Islamic heartlands and in the secularized democratic West. Indeed it thrives even in a secular world order. Interspersed with Islam's ad hoc participation and influence in international politics since 1978, we witness its periodic public revival inside Muslim societies. Provided that we are moving into a fairer world order in the near future, we shall witness, in the next 25 years, the complete domestication of political Islam as it subsides into a faith located mainly in the private sector.