is being offered to the deity is mentally identified with divine nectar. (The name of this mudrā is derived from the celestial cow Surabhi, whose milk is nectar.)

Ritual hand gestures are acts of elaborate mimesis. An act of warning toward any malevolent agent is played out either by imitating a weapon, for instance an arrow, or by making an explosive sound by snapping fingers or clapping hands. The ritual worshipper is an actor creating a totally supernatural world of religious reality through focused meditation, vivid imagination, and total understanding of his religious ideology and aims. That is why his gestures carry an authority invested by long religious tradition.

**SEE ALSO** Buddhism, Schools of; Hands; Mantra.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Sanjukta Gupta (2005)

**MUHAMMAD** ibn ‘Abdollāh (c. 570–632 CE) is revered by Muslims as the prophet to whom the Qurʾān, the sacred scripture of Islam, was revealed. Apart from the Qurʾān and the hadith, the main sources for his life history are the biographies written by four early Muslim historians: Muḥammad ibn Ishāq (d. c. 767), Muḥammad ibn Saʿd (d. c. 845), Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 923), and Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Waqīdī (d. c. 820).

**EARLY LIFE** (C. 570–610). Born in Mecca, in the Arabian Hijāz, in about 570, Muḥammad was a member of the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Mecca, but of the clan of Hāshim, one of its less influential family groups. Orphaned early in life, he was brought up by his uncle Abū Ṭalib, and although he was treated kindly, the experience of deprivation made an indelible impression on Muḥammad, who remained poor throughout his youth and a marginal figure in the thriving city of Mecca. Mecca had long been the holiest city in Arabia. The Kaʿbah, the cube-shaped shrine in the heart of the town, was of great antiquity. It was a place of pilgrimage. Each year, Arabs came from all over the peninsula to perform the arcane rites of the hajj pilgrimage, whose original significance had been forgotten but which still yielded a powerful religious experience. Because of the great sanctity of the Kaʿbah, all violence was forbidden in Mecca and its environs, and this made it possible for the Arabs to trade peacefully there, away from the endemic tribal warfare that engulfed the Arabian steppes. During the sixth century, the Quraysh had made Mecca a vital station in the spice trade, and they had become rich by trading in the surrounding countries.

Little is known about Muḥammad’s early years. After his death, legends developed that indicated that he had been marked out from birth for future greatness, but until he was about twenty-five there was little sign of this glorious future. He grew up to be a very able young man and was known in Mecca as al-Amin, the reliable one. He was handsome, with a compact, solid body of average height. His hair and beard were thick and curly, and he had a strikingly luminous expression. Yet his orphaned status held him back. He could get no position commensurate with his talents, but became a merchant, whose job it was to lead the trading caravans to Syria and Mesopotamia. But in about 595, his luck changed. Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a wealthy businesswoman, hired Muḥammad to take some merchandise into Syria, and she was so impressed that she proposed marriage. Even though she was considerably older than he, this was no mere marriage of convenience. Muḥammad sincerely loved Khadijah and together the couple bore a son, who died in infancy, and four daughters who survived: Fāṭimah, Zaynab, Ruqayyah, and Umm Kulṭūm.

But by the time he was forty years old, Muḥammad had become deeply concerned about the malaise that was apparent in Mecca. The Quraysh had become rich beyond their wildest dreams and had left the desperate nomadic life of the steppes behind. But in the new stampede for wealth some of the old tribal values had been lost. In the desert, most Arabs lived on the brink of malnutrition, taking their herds from one watering hole to another and competing desperately with the other tribes for food and sustenance. Throughout Arabia, one tribe fought another in a murderous cycle of vendetta and counter-vendetta. In this brutal existence, the unity of the tribe was essential for its very survival, and a strict nomadic code insisted upon the importance of protecting its weaker and more vulnerable members. But the aggressive capitalism of Mecca had resulted in some of the Quraysh making money at the expense of some of the tribe’s poorer clans, including Muḥammad’s own clan of Hāshim. The old values were disappearing, nothing new had yet appeared to take its place, and while the more successful members of the Quraysh were naturally happy with these developments, the weaker clans felt endangered and lost.

There was also spiritual restlessness in Mecca and throughout the peninsula. Arabs knew that Judaism and Christianity, which were practiced in the neighboring Byzantine and Persian empires, were more sophisticated than their own pagan traditions. Some had come to believe that the
high God of their pantheon, *al-Lāh* (whose name simply meant "the God"), was the deity worshiped by Jews and Christians, but he had sent the Arabs no prophet and no scripture in their own language. Indeed, the Jews and Christians often taunted the Arabs for being left out of the divine plan. Intent on finding a solution, Muhammad used to retire to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira', just outside Mecca, during the month of Ramadān, where he prayed, fasted, and gave alms to the poor. It was in this cave that on 17 Ramadān 610 Muhammad woke to find himself overwhelmed by a devastating presence, and heard the first words of a new Arabic scripture pouring from his lips.

**The Message of Muhammad.** For the first two years, Muhammad kept quiet about this revelation, confiding only in his wife Khadijah and her cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who had converted to Christianity. Both encouraged him to believe that this was a genuine revelation from God, who had chosen him to bring the old religion of the Jews and the Christians to the Arabs. In 612, after another powerfully endorsing revelation, Muhammad began to preach in Mecca, and he gradually gained converts, including his young cousin ‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib, his friend Abū Bakr, and the young merchant ‘Uthmān ibn Ṭāffān from the powerful Umayyad family. Many of the converts, including a significant number of women, were members of the poorer clans; others were unhappy about the new inequality in Mecca, which was alien to the Arab spirit.

Muhammad’s message was simple. He taught the Arabs no new doctrines about God: like the Jews and Christians, most of the Quraysh already believed that Allāh had created the world and would judge humanity in the Last Days. Muhammad had no intention of founding a new religion, but saw himself as the latest in a long line of prophets that included Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Qurʿān 2:129–132). Muhammad was not attempting to contradict or supersede these prophets, and he never required Jews or Christians to convert to his new Arab faith, because they had received authentic revelations of their own. Constantly, the revelations that he received from God insist that Muhammad’s followers must respect the *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book). God commands them to speak to the Jews and Christians with courtesy: “Say to them: We believe what you believe; your God and our God is one” (Qurʿān 29:46). God had sent one prophet after another to every people on the face of the earth, each of which had expressed the divine message in its own language and cultural idiom (Qurʿān 35:22). In principle, one cult, one tradition, one scripture was as good as another (Qurʿān 6:160). What mattered was the quality of one’s surrender (*islām*) to God, not to any mere human expression of his will.

The essence of Muhammad’s message was, therefore, not doctrinal but social and ethical. It was wrong to build up a private fortune, but good to share wealth and create a society where the weak and vulnerable were treated with respect. If the Quraysh did not mend their ways, their society would collapse (like other unjust societies in the past) because they were violating the fundamental laws of existence.

**Muhammad and the Qurʾān.** This was the core teaching of the new scripture, which became known as the *qurʾān* (recitation) because it was an aural revelation, designed to be listened to for the music of its language, rather than perused page by page. Most of the believers, including Muhammad himself, were not learned, and they absorbed its teachings by listening to public recitation of its chapters (*ṣūrah*). The Qurʾān was revealed to Muhammad piecemeal, verse by verse, *ṣūrah* by *ṣūrah*, during the next twenty-one years, often in response to a crisis or a problem that had arisen in the little community of the faithful. These revelations were very painful to Muhammad, who used to say: “Never once did I receive a revelation without thinking that my soul had been torn away from my body.” In the early days, the impact was so frightening that his whole body was convulsed; he would sweat profusely, experience a peculiar heaviness, or hear strange sounds, such as the tolling of a bell. The great prophets of Israel also felt the divine impact as a near lethal blow and found it almost impossibly painful and difficult to utter the word of God.

Muhammad had perceived the great problems of his people at a deeper level than most of his contemporaries, and when he “listened” to events as they unfolded, he had to delve deeply into his inner self to find a solution that was not only politically viable but also spiritually sound. He was also communicating a new literary form and a masterpiece of Arab poetry and prose. The extraordinary beauty of the Qurʾān was in fact responsible for the conversion of many of Muhammad’s first disciples. One of the most dramatic of these conversions was that of Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was passionately devoted to the old paganism and initially opposed to Muhammad’s message. But he was also deeply versed in Arabic poetry, and the first time he heard the language of the Qurʾān, it broke down all his reservations. “When I heard the Qurʾān, my heart was softened and I wept, and Islam entered into me.”

**The Mission in Mecca (612–622).** The new teaching would eventually be called *islām* (surrender), and a *mūslijm* was a man or a woman who had made this existential submission of their entire selves to Allāh and his demand that human beings behave towards one another with justice and compassion. It was an attitude expressed in the prostrations of the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), which Muslims were required to make three times a day, facing Jerusalem, the city of the Jews and Christians. Thus at first Muslims were turning their backs on the pagan religion, symbolized by the Kaʾbah, and reaching out towards the monotheistic tradition that they were now determined to follow. The posture of their prayer was thus designed to change their fundamental attitude and orientation. The old tribal ethic had been egalitarian. Arabs did not approve of kingship, and it was abhorrent to them to grovel on the ground like a slave. But the prostrations were designed to teach their bodies, at a level deeper than the ra-
tional, to counter the hard arrogance and self-sufficiency that was rife in mercantile Mecca, to lay aside their selfishness, and to accept that before God they were as nothing. Muslims were also required to give a regular proportion of their income to the poor in alms (zakāt) and to fast during the month of Ramadān, reminding themselves of the privations of those who were too impoverished to eat and drink when they wished.

Social justice was, therefore, the cardinal virtue of Islam. Muslims were commanded, as their first duty, to build a community (ummah) in which wealth was fairly distributed. This was far more crucial than any doctrinal teaching about God. The political and social welfare of the ummah would have sacred value for Muslims, and would become the chief sign that Muslims were living according to God’s will. This habit of mind has persisted to the present day. Muslims would be profoundly affected by any misfortune or humiliation suffered by the ummah. Its spiritual and political health is as crucial to Muslims’ religious lives as theological doctrines have been to Christians.

Muhammad found the Christian preoccupation with doctrine difficult to understand. The Qur’ān tends to regard such speculation as self-indulgent guesswork (zannāh). It seemed pointless to argue about abstruse dogmas that nobody could prove one way or the other. He did have to take up certain theological positions, of course. By the sixth century, most of the Arabs were tending towards monotheism, and even though the Ka’bah was officially dedicated to Hubal, a Nabatean deity, and was surrounded by effigies of some 360 gods, many Arabs believed that it had originally been dedicated to Allāh. Indeed, those Arabs who had converted to Christianity felt comfortable making the ḥajj pilgrimage because they saw the Ka’bah as the shrine of their own God, and Muhammad and the Muslims continued to perform the old rites there. Some of the Quraysh, however, were still happy with the old paganism, and they were especially devoted to three Arabian goddesses: Manāt, Allāt, and al-’Uzzah. Muhammad forbade his followers to take part in their cults, comparing the pagan deities to weak tribal chiefs who were a liability for their people because they could no longer give them adequate protection. The Qur’ān put forward no philosophical arguments in favor of monotheism. Its approach was strictly practical, and appealed to the pragmatic Arabs. The old religion was simply not working (Qur’ān 25:3; 29:17; 44:47). This was evident in the spiritual malaise, the chronic tribal warfare that was tearing the peninsula apart, and an injustice that violated the highest Arab traditions. The way forward was to be found in the worship of a single God, the creation of a united ummah, and the pursuit of justice and equity that alone would bring peace to Arabia. But the Qur’ān insisted that it was teaching nothing new. Its message was simply a “reminder” of truths that everybody knew already (Qur’ān 80:11). This was the primordial faith that had been preached to the whole of humanity by all the prophets of thepast.

Muhammad gradually acquired a small following, and eventually about seventy families converted to Islam. At first the most powerful and successful men in Mecca ignored the Muslims, but by 616 they had become extremely angry with Muhammad, who, they claimed, reviled the faith of their fathers and was obviously a charlatan who only pretended to be a prophet. They were especially irritated by the Qur’ān’s description of the Last Judgment, which they dismissed as primitive fairy stories. But their greatest fear was its condemnation of their ruthless capitalism. On the Last Day, Arabs were warned that their wealth would not help them, nor would the power and influence of their family connections. Everybody would be tried on his or her own merits. Had they looked after the poor? Why had they built up private fortunes instead of sharing their money? The Quraysh, who had become rich and prosperous as a result of the new economy, did not appreciate this kind of talk, and an opposition party developed, led by Abū al-Ḥakam, who is called Abū Jahl (Father of Lies) in the Qur’ān. Muhammad’s old friend, Abū Sufyān, an extremely able and intelligent man, and the devout pagan Suhayl ibn ‘Amr also joined the opposition. All had relatives who had converted to Islam, and all feared that Muhammad was plotting to take over the leadership of Mecca. At this stage, the Qur’ān insisted that Muhammad should have no political function in the city; he was simply a nādhīr (a warner). But how long would it be before a man who claimed to receive instructions directly from Allāh would feel inspired to seize supreme power for himself?

Persecution in Mecca. By 617 the Muslims’ relationship with some of the Meccan establishment had deteriorated beyond repair. Abū Jahl imposed a boycott on Muhammad’s clan of Ḥāshim, forbidding the people of Mecca to marry or trade with the Muslims. This meant that nobody could sell them food. This ban lasted for two years, and the food shortages may have caused the death of Muhammad’s beloved wife Khadijah. The ban certainly ruined some of the Muslims, such as Abū Bakr, financially. Slaves who had converted to Islam were particularly badly treated, tied up, and left to burn in the blazing sun. Most seriously, in 619, after the ban had been lifted, Abū Tālib, Muhammad’s uncle and protector (wāli) died. This made Muhammad’s position untenable. As an orphan, he was now entirely without powerful family backing. According to the tribal laws of vendetta that still prevailed in Mecca, without a patron who could avenge his death, a man could be killed with impunity. It took Muhammad a long time to find a chieftain in the city who would become his wāli. Clearly he had to find a new solution for himself and the community of Muslims.

Tradition has it that it was during this dark period that Muhammad experienced his mystical flight (isrā’) to the Temple mount in Jerusalem. There he was welcomed by all the great prophets of the past, who invited him to preach to them. This vision represents Muḥammad’s longing to bring the Arabs, who had apparently been left off the map of salvation, from far-off Arabia into the heart of the monotheistic
family. After his sermon, Muhammad made the *mi‘râj*, ascending through the seven heavens to the throne of God.

In Mecca, however, the Muslims’ position had become so untenable that Muhammad was ready to listen to a delegation of chiefs from Yathrib, an agricultural settlement some 240 miles north of Mecca, who approached him in 620 with a novel proposal. A number of different tribes had settled in Yathrib, abandoning the nomadic lifestyle, but the habits of tribal warfare were so engrained that they found it impossible to live peacefully together. As a result, Yathrib was caught up in one deadly feud after another. Some of these tribes had either converted to Judaism or were of Jewish descent, and so the people of Yathrib were used to monotheistic ideas, were not so wedded to the old paganism as some of the Meccan families, and were desperate to find a means of living together in a single community. They had heard of the prophet in Mecca who claimed to be the messenger of the one God, and thought that he might be what they were looking for. During the *hâjîj of 620*, delegates from Yathrib approached Muhammad, converted to Islam, and made a pledge with the Muslims. Each side vowed that it would not fight the other, and they would defend each other from common enemies. There were further negotiations and discussions. Finally Muhammad reached a momentous decision. In 622, the Muslim families slipped quietly out of Mecca, one by one, and made the migration (*hijrah*) to Yathrib. Muhammad, whose new protector had recently died, narrowly escaped assassination, and he and Abu Bakr were the last of the Muslims to escape.

**The Hijrah (622).** The *hijrah* marks the start of the Muslim era, because it was at this point that Muhammad was able to implement the Qur’anic ideal fully in a social setting. It was a revolutionary step. The *hijrah* was no mere change of address. In Arabia, the tribe was the most sacred value of all. To abandon your own kin to join forces with another group, with whom you had no blood relationship, was not only absolutely unheard of, it violated a strong taboo and was essentially treasonable. The Quraysh, shocked to the core by this extraordinary defection, were outraged, and they had no means of accommodating a development that had no precedent in their world. They vowed to exterminate the *ummah* in Yathrib, which had flouted the deepest and strongest sanctities of Arabia.

The Muslims themselves found the migration a wrenching, painful experience. They were not going forward eagerly into a new life, like other emigrants, but were primarily aware only of the trauma of severance. This is clear in the word they used to describe their radical departure from their tribe. The first stem of the Arabic root word *HJR, bajaran-ban*, can be translated: “he cut himself off from friendly or loving communion or intercourse. He ceased to associate with them.” The people of Yathrib were also aware that they were engaged in a highly controversial and precarious experiment in promising to give protection (*awliyah*) and help (*nâkr*) on a permanent basis to people who were not kin. Henceforth, they would be known as the Anšâr, the “helpers” of the Prophet, but the English translation gives rather a feeble impression of what was involved. *Nâkhr* meant that one had to be ready to back up one’s “help” with force, if necessary. The pledge that the Anšâr had made with the Muslims was therefore called the “Pledge of War.”

Muhammad had not expected to hold political office, and initially had no intention of founding a new polity. But the force of circumstances that he could not have foreseen meant that overnight he had become the head of a collection of tribal groups that had no blood ties but were bound together by a shared ideology—an astonishing innovation in Arabia. Nobody in Yathrib was forced to convert to the religion of the Qur’ân, which forbids any coercion in religious matters in the strongest terms (2:256). But on his arrival, Muhammad drew the people of Yathrib together in a covenant. The Muslims, Jewish tribes, and those who preferred to stay with the old paganism all belonged to a single *ummah*, could not attack one another, and vowed to give one another protection. They were all to be “helpers” to each other. News of this extraordinary new “supertribe” spread, and though at the outset nobody in Arabia believed that it would survive, it proved to be the inspiration that would bring peace to Arabia, just ten years after the *hijrah*.

Yathrib would become known as al-Madinah (*the City*) because it became the archetype of the perfect Muslim society in Islamic thought. Throughout history, many Muslims have looked back on the Prophet’s sojourn in Medina as a golden age, when the ideals of Islam were fully incarnated in society. They have idealized this period, much as Christians have idealized the primitive church. In fact, however, these were hard and difficult years, full of darkness and danger for Muhammad. When he arrived in Medina, one of his first actions was to build a simple mosque (*masjid*; literally, a place of prostration). It was a rough building, which expressed the austerity of the early Islamic ideal. The roof was supported by tree trunks, a stone marked the *qiblah* (the direction of prayer), and the Prophet stood on a tree trunk to preach. Future mosques would be inspired by this model. There was also a courtyard where Muslims met to discuss all the concerns of the *ummah*—social, political, and military, as well as religious. Muhammad and his wives lived in small huts around the edge of the courtyard. Unlike holy places in other traditions, the mosque was not separated from secular activities and devoted only to worship. In the Qur’anic vision, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political, sexuality and ritual. The whole of life is potentially holy and must be brought into the ambit of the divine. From the start, the aim was *tawhîd* (making one), a holistic vision that would give Muslims intimations of the unity that is God.

**Muhammad’s Wives.** In Mecca, Muhammad had remained monogamous, married only to Khadijah, even though polygamy was common in Arabia. In Medina, however, Muhammad became a great *sayyid* (chief) and was ex-
pected to have multiple wives, but most of the marriages he contracted were politically motivated. The tie of blood was still important, and as he formed his supertribe, Muhammad bound some of his closest companions to him by marriage. His favorite new wife was 'A'ishah, the daughter of Abū Bakr. He also married Ḥafṣah, the daughter of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, and arranged the marriages of two of his own daughters to 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān and 'Ali ibn Abī Ṭalib, his cousins. Many of his other wives were older women who were without protectors or were related to the chiefs of tribes that became the allies of the ummānah. None of these wives bore the Prophet any children.

In the West, Muḥammad’s wives have occasioned a good deal of prurient interest, but they were sometimes more of a worry than a pleasure. On one occasion, when he found them quarrelling about the division of booty after a raid, he threatened to divorce them all unless they lived more strictly in accordance with Islamic values (Qurʾān 33:28–29). Muḥammad was no chauvinist, but he genuinely enjoyed women’s company. ‘Umar and some of his other companions were shocked by the way he allowed his wives to stand up to him and answer him back. Muḥammad regularly helped with household chores, mended his own clothes, and took his wives’ advice very seriously. On one occasion Umm Salāmah, the most intelligent of his wives, helped him to prevent a mutiny.

The Qurʾān gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before women in other cultures, including the West, were accorded such legal status. The emancipation of women was one of Muḥammad’s objectives. In pre-Islamic Arabia, elite women, like Khadijah, enjoyed a degree of power and independence, but the vast majority of women had virtually no human rights and were treated little better than slaves or animals. The Qurʾān prescribes some degree of segregation for the Prophet’s wives, as a matter of protocol, but there is nothing in the Qurʾān that commands the veiling and segregation of all women in a separate part of the house. These customs were adopted some three or four generations after Muḥammad’s death, when Muslims imitated the customs of the Greek Orthodox Christians of Byzantium (also Iran), who had long veiled and segregated their women in this way. The Qurʾān is an egalitarian faith, and sees men and women as partners before God, with identical duties and responsibilities (Qurʾān 33:35). The women of Medina played an active role in public life, and some even fought alongside the men in battle. It was only later that Muslim men dragged the faith back to the old patriarchy (the same process happened in Christianity).

**The Change of the Qiblah from Jerusalem to Mecca.**

When he arrived in Medina, Muḥammad eagerly anticipated the prospect of working alongside the Jewish tribes, believing that they would welcome him as a prophet in their own tradition. Shortly before the hijrah, he had introduced some practices that would make the connection with Judaism more explicit, such as communal prayer on Friday afternoon, while Jews would be preparing for the Sabbath, and a fast on Yom Kippur. He was therefore greatly disappointed when the Jews of Medina refused to accept him as an authentic prophet. Some of the Qurʾānic accounts of such figures as Noah or Moses were different from the biblical stories, and many of the Jews scoffed when these were recited in the mosque. Like many of the pagan Arabs of Medina, the three main Jewish tribes also resented Muḥammad’s political ascendency. They had formed a powerful bloc before his arrival, and now felt their position threatened.

But some Jews in the smaller clans were friendly and increased Muḥammad’s knowledge of their scriptures. He was especially excited to hear that in the book of Genesis, Abraham had two sons, and that Ishmael, the child of his concubine Hagar, was said to be the father of the Arab nation (Gn. 16; 18:18–20). Abraham had cast Ishmael and Hagar out into the wilderness at God’s command, and the Jews and Christians of Arabia believed that they had settled in Mecca, that Abraham had visited them there, and that together Abraham and Ismā’il had built the Kaʾbah. Muḥammad was delighted to hear this, since it showed that Arabs had not been left out of the divine plan after all, and that the Kaʾbah was not really a pagan shrine, but had been the first temple of the true God in Arabia.

By 624 it was clear that most of Medina’s Jews would never accept Muḥammad, who was also shocked to learn that Jews and Christians, whom he had assumed to belong to a single faith, actually had serious theological disagreements. It seemed disgraceful to split the unity of God’s religion into warring sects because of abstruse speculations that nobody could prove definitively. Such sectarianism was idolatrous in erecting a human theological system to the unity that was essential to the faith of Allāh. It made people quarrelsome and unkind, and Muḥammad wanted no part of this sectarianism. So, in January 624, he made one of his most creative innovations. During prayers, he told the congregation to turn around so that they faced Mecca rather than Jerusalem. This change of qiblah was a declaration of independence. By turning towards the Kaʾbah, which had been built by Abra-ham, who had lived before the revelation of the Torah and the Gospels, Muslims were tacitly reverting to the original pure monotheism that had prevailed before the divisions in God’s religion. Muslims were turning to God alone, not to one of the established faiths; they were abjuring divisive sectarianism and would take their own direct route to God (Qurʾān 6:159; 161–162).

**Jihād.** A few weeks after the change of the qiblah, Muhammad took yet another decisive step. The Emigrants who had made the hijrah had no means of earning a living in Medina. There was no land left for them to farm, and most of them were merchants and businessmen, with no experience of date cultivation. The Ansār, as the helpers in Medina were called, could not be expected to feed and support this large community, because their own resources were stretched to the limit, so Muḥammad resorted to the tradi-
tion of the ghazw (colloquial, ghazu¯; “raid”). The ghazu¯ was rather like a national sport and a crude means of redistributing resources in a region where there were simply not enough of the necessities of life to go round. Raiding parties would attack the herds or trading caravans of a rival tribe and carry off booty and livestock. The trick was to avoid taking human life, because this would automatically trigger a vendetta, and nobody wanted that. It was forbidden to conduct a ghazu¯ against a tribe that had become an ally or “client” (a weaker tribal group that had sought protection from one of the stronger tribes).

In order to earn their keep in Medina, some of the Emigrants began to conduct raids, attacking the rich caravans from Mecca. But this was a shocking departure from tradition, because it was unheard of to initiate a ghazu¯ against your own tribe. But the Emigrants saw themselves as the victims of the Quraysh, who had persecuted them and forced them to leave their homes. The traumatic breach of the hijrah meant that they had been cast out of their tribe. The Anśar, who had no quarrel with the Quraysh, took no part in these first raids. At first the raiding parties enjoyed some success, but in March 624 Muhammad led a large band of Emigrants to the coast in order to intercept the largest Mec- can caravan of the year. When the Quraysh heard of this shocking project they dispatched an army to defend the car- van, but even though they were heavily outnumbered, the Muslims were able to inflict a defeat on the Meccans at the well of Badr. The Quraysh fought in the old Arab style, with careless bravado, and had no overall strategy, but the Mus- lims fought under Muhammad’s unified command with greater discipline. The victory made a great impression on the nomadic tribes, who were not displeased to see the haughty Quraysh humiliated in this way. They began to look with interest at the prophet who seemed to be the coming man in Arabia.

But the Quraysh were certain to retaliate, and Muḥammad now found himself engaged in a full-scale war with Mecca. During the five years of hostilities, the Qur’ān gives instructions about proper conduct on the battlefield, and develops a theory of warfare that is similar to the Chris- tian ideal of the just war. The Qur’ān permits only a war of self-defense; Muslims must never initiate hostilities (2:191). Warfare is always abhorrent (2:217), but sometimes it is neces- sary to fight in order to bring the kind of persecution the Muslims had endured in Mecca to an end or to preserve de- cent values (2:217:22:40). As long as the fighting continues, Muslims must dedicate themselves to the war wholeheartedly in order to bring hostilities to a speedy conclusion, but the second the enemy makes a peaceful overture, all hostilities must cease (2:192). But it is always better to avoid warfare, to forgive injuries, to talk rather than to fight, and to forgive (5:45).

The word jihād does not mean “holy war,” as Western people often imagine. It means “struggle” or “effort.” It is difficult to put God’s will into practice in a flawed and vio- lent world, and Islam demands that Muslims make an effort on all fronts: physical, moral, political, social, spiritual, and intellectual. Sometimes it may be necessary to fight, but far more important is the interior jihād, the personal struggle to eradicate greed, hatred, and egotism from one’s own heart. Thus, after the Battle of Badr, Muḥammad is said to have told his companions: “We are returning from the lesser jihād (the battle) to the greater jihād,” the more crucial and de- manding effort to reform one’s own society and one’s own self.

But for five years after the Battle of Badr, the Muslims had to fight in order to survive. Abu Sufyān launched two major offensives against the Muslims in Medina, vowing not merely to defeat the Muslims but also to exterminate the entire community, as Arab tradition demanded. Muḥammad also had to contend with hostility within Medina, since some of the pagans in Medina resented the power of the Emigrants and were determined to expel them. In 625, Mecca inflicted a severe defeat on the ummah at the Battle of Ḫuhud, but two years later the Muslims overcame the numerically superior Meccan army at the Battle of the Trench, so called because Muhammad had protected the settlement by digging a ditch around it. This victory was a turning point because it con- vinced most of the nomadic tribes that the supremacy of the Quraysh was over. The old religion seemed discredited because the gods were clearly unable or unwilling to come to the aid of Mecca. Many of the tribes allied themselves to Muḥammad, who began to build a powerful confederacy whose members swore not to attack one another and to avenge attacks on one another. Some of the Meccans also began to defect and made the hijrah to Medina. After five years of deadly danger, it seemed that the ummah would survive.

The Massacre of the Jewish Tribe of Qurayzah.

Three of the most powerful Jewish tribes of Medina—Qaynuqā’, Nadīr, and Qurayzah—had joined the disaffected pagans of the settlement and plotted the over- throw of Muḥammad. To this end, the Jewish tribes had formed alliances with Mecca. They were a security threat, since the location of their territory meant that they could easily join a besieging Meccan army and attack the ummah from within. When the Qaynuqā’ staged an unsuccessful coup against Muḥammad in 625, they were expelled from Med- ina. Muḥammad tried to reassure the Nadīr and made a special alliance with them, but when they attempted to assassi- nate him, he sent them into exile too. The exiles joined the nearby Jewish settlement of Khaybar, and helped to build support for Abū Sufyān from the northern Arab tribes. When the remaining tribe of Qurayzah sided with Mecca during the Battle of the Trench, Muḥammad showed no mercy. The seven hundred men of Qurayzah were killed and their women and children sold as slaves.

This was an appalling incident, and Muḥammad was acting exactly like a traditional Arab chieftain, retaliating mercilessly to ensure the survival of his own people. An Arab
sayyid was not expected to spare surviving enemies. Had Muhammad simply exiled the Qurayyah, they would have swelled the Jewish opposition in Khaybar and brought another war upon the ummah. The executions sent a grim message to Khaybar and helped to quell pagan opposition in Medina. Muhammad acted according to the old tribal ethic in an attempt to bring hostilities to an end as soon as possible. This had been a fight to the death, and both sides had understood that the stakes were high.

The struggle did not indicate any hostility towards Jews in general, however, and showed no antipathy to Jewish religion. The Jews of Medina who had not sided with Mecca continued to be a part of the ummah and to enjoy Muslim protection. The Qur’ān continued to command Muslims to respect the People of the Book and to revere the Jewish prophets. Later, Jews, like Christians, enjoyed full religious liberty in the Islamic empires. Hatred of Jews became marked in the Muslim world only after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent loss of Arab Palestine. As a result of this originally secular conflict, some Muslims now quote the passages in the Qur’ān that refer to Muhammad’s struggle with the three rebellious Jewish tribes, thus distorting both the message of the Qur’ān and the attitude of the Prophet himself, who felt no antagonism toward the Jewish people.

A Peace Offensive (628–630). The massacre of the Qurayyah may have been a personal watershed for Muhammad himself. His struggle with Mecca had followed the old patterns of violence in Arabia. The persecution of Muslims in Mecca had led to the hijrah and subsequent Muslim raids on the Meccan caravans. Ghazāḍ hid to full-scale warfare. Attack had led to counterattack, injury to reprisal and retaliation. There had been atrocities on both sides. This had long been the chronic problem of Arabia. As long as Muhammad continued to behave like a traditional Arab chieftain, he and his Muslims would be caught in an escalating spiral of violence, vendetta, and counter-vendetta. After his victory at the Battle of the Trench in 627, therefore, Muhammad felt that it was time to break this vicious cycle.

In March 628, Muhammad initiated an audacious campaign of nonviolence that eventually brought the conflict to an end. He announced that he was going to make the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and asked for volunteers to accompany him. Since pilgrims were forbidden to bear arms during the hajj, the Muslims would be walking directly into the lions’ den and putting themselves at the mercy of the Quraysh. Nevertheless about a thousand Muslims set out for Mecca with the Prophet, attired in the traditional white pilgrim robes and performing the rites of the hajj meticulously. Muhammad was well aware that he was putting the Quraysh in a difficult position. If they attacked unarmed Arab pilgrims, they would violate the most sacred principles of Arabia and would be reviled as unworthy guardians of the Ka’bah. The Quraysh did dispatch their cavalry to attack the pilgrims, but with the help of friendly local tribes the Proph-
them to episodes in the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. Therefore, when Muslims make the hajj, which is the peak experience of their religious lives, they are not reminded of Muhammad but symbolically reenact their relationship with the whole monotheistic family, returning to the roots of this faith. Shortly after this last pilgrimage, Muhammad died in ‘A’ishah’s arms on June 8, 632. He was buried in her little hut in the courtyard of the mosque of Medina by members of his immediate family.

**MUHAMMAD IN MUSLIM PIETY.** The Qur’ân warns Muslims against the dangers of idolatry (shirk); they must not give to any mere creature the honor due to God alone. Constantly Muhammad had warned the ummah against deifying him, as the Christians had deified Jesus. Muhammad was a mere mortal, like themselves. Nevertheless, devotion to the Prophet is crucial to Muslim spirituality. Muslims call him the “perfect man” because his life represents the ideal of islām, a wholehearted surrender to God. Just as Christians attempt to imitate Christ, Muslims imitate Muhammad in their lives in order to approximate as far as possible this perfection, and to come as close as they can to God himself. The shari‘a, the corpus of Islamic law, was developed on the basis of the Qur’ân and the daily practice of the Prophet. During the ninth century, scholars began a process of research and compiled the great collections of Muhammad’s maxims (hadīth) and accounts of his customary behavior, traveling throughout the Islamic empire to discover as much evidence as they could.

The sunnah (i.e., the model conduct of the Prophet) and shari‘a taught Muslims to imitate the way Muhammad spoke, ate, loved, washed, and worshiped, so that in the smallest details of their external lives they reproduce his actions in the hope of attaining his interior submission to God. This means that throughout the Islamic world, Muslims have acquired a clear identity, which draws them together. The way they pray or wash, as well as their table manners and personal hygiene, follow a common distinctive pattern. Muslims from China, Indonesia, and the Middle East, for example, all perform the prostrations of salāt in the same way. This devotion also means that Muslims internalize the Prophet at a profound level and identify with him deeply. As a result, if Muhammad is attacked or denigrated in any way, Muslims may feel personally violated.

The imitation of Muḥammad has also influenced many of the various political movements in Islam. Muhammad did not retire to a cave or mountaintop, but was a man of the world, who worked incessantly to change his society. The society of Medina in Muhammad’s time has become the blueprint of the ideal Muslim society and has always been the starting point of political science in Islam. Because of the Qur’ân’s emphasis on the paramount importance of social justice, politics has an inescapably religious dimension in Islam, and from a very early date Muslims have followed the example of Muhammad’s own life when they have sought to reform the ummah. From the early seventh century to the present day, Muslim reformers have first withdrawn from mainstream society in imitation of the Prophet’s hijrah, and then engaged in a jihaḍ, a struggle that may or may not include military action, to bring their fellow Muslims back to the Islamic ideal. The pattern of migration and struggle has become an archetypal form of engaging in political action. Most recently, the Egyptian activist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) developed a fundamentalist ideology based entirely on Muhammad’s life, and he followed this archetypal pattern closely in his seminal book *Milestones* (1964). Qutb’s vision has inspired almost every single fundamentalist movement in the Sunni world. Usāmah bin Lādīn, the founder of the terrorist organization al-Qa‘iddah, whose members attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, is a disciple of Qutb. Unfortunately, Qutb’s ideology has distorted the Prophet’s life by reducing the meaning of jihaḍ to “holy war” and making this the climax of Muḥammad’s career, forgetting that the Prophet finally abjured armed struggle and won victory by an ingenious policy of nonviolence.

The example of Muhammad also informs Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. From the eighth century, Muslims who were disturbed by the growing wealth and luxury of the Islamic empire withdrew from the mainstream and imitated the simple lifestyle of the Prophet. The Šūfīs may even derive their name from their practice of wearing the kind of coarse woolen cloth (ta‘awwuf) preferred by Muhammad. In their spiritual exercises, Šūfīs hope to put themselves into the same receptive state of mind as the Prophet when he received the revelations of the Qur’ân, and they see the story of the mi‘rāj as the archetype of the return that everybody must make to God, the source of their being. The mi‘rāj is regarded as the supreme example of Muḥammad’s surrender to the divine. But Šūfīs do not withdraw from the world in the same way as Christian or Buddhist monks. Their mystic call is often experienced as an inner rebellion against social or political injustices, and like Muḥammad they engage in a campaign of spiritual effort, which they call the “greater jihaḍ.” To this day, an intense spirituality modulates easily into political activism in the Muslim world. Šūfīs have often been at the forefront of many reform movements or in the vanguard of opposition to anything that threatens the ummah, externally or internally.

The prophet Muḥammad is equally venerated in the Shi‘a. Indeed, because of their devotion to the Prophet they also venerate his descendants, whom they believe should be the political leaders of the Muslim community. According to the traditional ethos of Arabia, the special gifts of a chieftain was handed down to his sons and descendants, and after the Prophet’s death many of the Muslims believed that Muḥammad’s prophetic quality would have been inherited by his male descendants. Because he had no surviving sons, these Muslims believed that some of his prophetic charisma had passed to ‘Alī, Muḥammad’s cousin and son-in-law, to
his sons—Hasan and Husayn—and, following Husayn's tragic murder by the Umayyad caliph, to the descendants of Husayn, until the line finally died out in the ninth century. Each of these inspired imams were the spiritual "leaders" of their people; each had inherited a secret knowledge (‘ilm) of divine truth. Each, as it were, kept some of Muhammad’s unique prophetic qualities alive, and in some mysterious way, kept the Prophet alive in each generation.

**SEE ALSO** Hadith; Islam, overview article; Islamic Law, article on Shari‘ah; Mi‘raj; Qur’ān, overview article; Shi‘ism, overview article; Sunnah.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**KAREN ARMSTRONG (2005)**

**MUHAMMAD AHMAD** (AH 1260–1302/1844–1885 CE), Sudanese preacher and mystic who claimed to be the Mahdi of Islam. Muhammad Ahmad ibn ‘Abd Allāh was born at Labab Island on the Nile in Dongola province of a Nubian family claiming descent from the Prophet and was brought up at Karari, just north of Omdurman. He received a traditional Islamic education and at age seventeen became apprenticed to Muhammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dā‘īm, a shaykh of the Sammānīyah Ṣūfī order. He spent seven years serving and imbibing mystical wisdom from his master who then authorized him to teach the doctrines of the order and to initiate others.

In 1870 he took up residence on Aba Island on the White Nile just north of Kosti, along with his three brothers, who were engaged in the family trade of boat building. Once settled there his growing reputation as a Ṣūfī teacher and ascetic began to gain him a considerable following among the local peoples. His teacher, Muhammad Sharīf, also established himself nearby in 1288/1872, but before long the two men fell out, perhaps because of the elder man’s jealousy at this pupil’s acclaim. Muhammad Sharīf announced Muhammad Ahmad’s expulsion from the Sammānīyah order, whereupon the latter declared his allegiance to a rival shaykh of the order and denounced his former shaykh as a man who flouted the shari‘ah.

In 1878 his new shaykh, al-Qurashī wad al-Zayn, died, and Muhammad Ahmad was immediately recognized as his successor. Shortly afterward he received a visit from the man who was to be his political successor, the khalīfah ‘Abd Allāh (‘Abdullāh) ibn Muhammad Ādam. ‘Abd Allāh’s attachment to Muhammad Ahmad, however, was more than that of a Ṣūfī disciple to his master. He recognized him as the expected Mahdi, the final regenerator of Islam who, it was believed, would appear shortly before the end time to usher in a period of justice and Sammānīyah equity and unite the whole world under the banner of Islam.

Up to this point there is no indication that Muhammad Ahmad had considered the possibility that he might be the Mahdi, though he must have been aware of the widespread belief in the Sudan and West Africa that the Mahdi would appear in the thirteenth century of the Hijrah (1785–1882 CE). Even now he hesitated, but following a series of visions he became convinced in 1881 that God had designated him as the Mahdi. For three months his Mahdihood was a secret, revealed at first only to trusted disciples and then, on a visit to al-Ubayyid (El Obeid) in Kordofan, to religious scholars and finally, to the common people. Finally, on June 29, 1881, his public manifestation (ṣuḥūr) as the expected Mahdi took place on Aba Island, and he called upon his adherents to rally to him.

Events now moved rapidly. In keeping with the Prophet’s practice to muster his followers and distinguish the true believers, he undertook an “emigration” (ḥijrah) from Aba Island to Jabal Qadīr in the Nuba Mountains of southern Kordofan, naming those who rallied to him the “helpers”