LIFE IN THE UMMAH: *SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND MORAL ORDER*

The *Ummah* provides the setting or context in which Muslims practice Islam. The practices described above are acts of individuals set in a context that enables each Muslim to interact with fellow Muslims. In addition to this interaction at the level of ritual observance, the Quranic and Islamic tradition also provide a framework within which other

TABLE 9–1.
*The Islamic Calendar**

Month		Special Days
Muharram	1	New Year
	10	'Āshūrā'
Safar		
Rabi al Awwal	12	Birthday of Muhammad
Rabbi al Thani		
Jumada al Awwal		
Jumada al Thani		
Rajab	27	The night of Mi'rāj
Shaban		
Ramadan		The month of fasting
Shawwal	1	'Īd al Fiṭr
Dhu-l-Qaddah		
Dhu-l-Hijjah	10	'Īd al Adḥā

* The Islamic year is a lunar year, with twelve months, each calculated from new moon to new moon. Thus, it has no fixed relation to other calendars like that of the Common Era.

social and personal aspects of daily life are defined. It is in this sense that Islam can be said to address the totality of human life, so that the *Ummah* is not merely a religious community in the strictest sense of the word, but also a political, economic, moral, and social order. The word most often used in the Quran to define this totality of religious perspective is *din*, translated as "religion." This *din* as expressed in Islam consists of responding to God's will in all spheres of human life; its formal aspects are encompassed in a concept that reflects the idea of the "right path" that fulfills these comprehensive goals of organizing society. This concept is that of the *Shariah*.

The Shariah

The basis of political, moral, and social life in Islam is defined by the *Shariah*, often translated as "law" but having the connotation of the total sum of duties, obligations, and guidelines for the *Ummah*. Within a century of Muhammad's death, Islam spread very quickly outside Arabia; it is therefore necessary to understand the process of growth before looking in detail at how the concept of *Shariah* came to be developed in the Muslim community.

The Muslim Conquests.   The conquests undertaken by Muslims after the death of the Prophet represent a spectacular military achievement. Within less than one hundred years, the area under Muslim rule stretched from the Atlantic to India, including most of what once was under Byzantine and Sassanian rule. The conquest of these territories carved out the central domain of what was to become the world of Islam. The initial period of conquest was followed by a long period during which Muslim rule was consolidated.

After the death of Muhammad, all territories were ruled from Medina by successors of Muhammad known as *caliphs*. The early Muslim community believed that such leadership was necessary to ensure continuity, preservation, and spread of the Islamic message. After the death of the first four caliphs, who are considered by most Muslims as model rulers, a series of Muslim dynasties came to

rule the various conquered territories. During these conquests Muslims also attempted to spread their faith. Quranic and Prophetic practice required that the people of conquered territories be offered the option of converting to Islam or remaining true to their own traditions. If they chose to remain in their traditions, they became *Ahl al Dhimma* (people protected under Muslim rule), and were given the right to practice their own faith in exchange for paying a tax.

The actual process of Islamization of people in these conquered territories took a long time and was effected mostly through the work of Muslim preachers, traders, or rulers. On the whole the process of conversion to Islam was a peaceful one, although many earlier Western writers on Islam tried to portray conversion to Islam as having been undertaken by force. There were occasions when zealous Muslim rulers destroyed places of worship in certain areas and persecuted non-Muslims, but this was generally an exception to the rule. Most Muslims followed the Quranic injunction, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and attempted to spread their faith more by example than by coercion.

The Formation of Islamic Institutions.   As the territories under Muslim rule grew, it became necessary to organize a common pattern of institutions and rules that would govern the lives of the people. Much of this early systematization and organization was carried out by Muslim thinkers and administrators who attempted to work largely within the framework defined by the Quran and the *Sunnah*. It is the resulting framework that is generally referred to as the *Shariah*—judicial in basis, but it has the wider connotation of a comprehensive system that regulated every aspect of life within the Muslim community and governed its relationship with non-Muslim subjects. At the political level the *Shariah* defined the nature of the Muslim state, the duties and responsibilities of the caliphs, the organization of institutions that would assure the security and well-being of its inhabitants, and the nature of relationships with both Muslim and non-Muslim states. At the social and personal level, it

provided for rules and regulations affecting economic, social, and family life. The *Shariah* also defined in detail the specifically religious duties incumbent on Muslims. For the *Shariah* to be implemented fully, the state had an organized system of courts and judges whose function it was to mediate disputes at all levels and to oversee the workings of the *Shariah* by administering justice through the courts. The individuals specializing in law were known as *fuqaha* or jurists (singular *faqih*), whose task was to define and systematize special legal prescriptions within the *Shariah*.

The totality of political, moral, and social order in Islam was thus given specific definition. It was not meant, however, to be a fixed system of rigid rules and regulations. Within the *Shariah* there was always a wider purpose of *maslah* (the public good), which enabled Muslim scholars to interpret and apply the *Shariah* in relation to existing conditions and places. Several schools of thought developed in various parts of the Muslim world, which applied the *Shariah* differently in cases where human and geographical conditions varied. Some scholars tended to be stricter in their interpretations than others, but on the whole the *Shariah* continued to provide for the world of Islam through its various schools, a common framework and code that gave that world much of its sense of unity until modern times.

The "Model" Muslim City

One way to understand the influence of such an all-embracing system on daily life within society is to study the traditional Muslim city. Urban environments in Islam have varied according to time, place, and human condition, but it is possible by looking at the city to isolate those common aspects that illustrate Islam's role at the social and human levels. Such environments, though undergoing erosion at present, may still be recognized in the older, traditional parts of Muslim cities.

The Muslim city is by definition the space for an integration of Islamic values in the context of daily life. Its beginnings lay in the organization of a place of worship, which would constitute its center.

Within this mosque, the *qiblah* established the point of orientation—toward the *Ka'ba,* the heart of Islam. Each city thus in its initial phase was an attempt to create an environment in which Muslims could put their faith into practice. The mosque was not just a place of worship; it became by extension a place of learning. Adjacent to most mosques were schools or, in the case of larger mosques, more elaborate centers of learning. Learning thus complemented worship, and encompassed a variety of disciplines. Some of these Muslim cities became seats of learning that attracted scholars from medieval European and Byzantine states. These institutions provided accommodation for the students and the teachers, both of whom were paid stipends. Students went through an organized program of study, which varied according to the subjects in which the institution specialized. The famous Al-Azhar mosque and university in Cairo, founded in the tenth century and still flourishing, offered a comprehensive curriculum and recognized students for their achievements by granting them titles. It has even been suggested that the system of gowns worn by teachers and students today in the West developed at this time.

Radiating from the mosque was a vast array of streets, which led to the commercial or market sector known as the *bazaar,* or branched off into dead-end streets that ended in houses. The *bazaar*, often covered, was organized in such a way that shops or boutiques dealing in common products were grouped together. Some commercial products, like meat, fish, or perishables, were kept as far from the center as possible to avoid an unpleasant environment around the mosque. Other products were not found in the *bazaar* because certain categories of food and drink are prohibited in the Quran; among these are pork, the meat of carrion, and all forms of alcoholic drink and intoxicants. The Quran also recommends that the name of God be pronounced when animals are being slaughtered for food.

Besides shops, there were also studios and workshops for artisans and craftsmen. Economic life was represented by the flow of human life, which was a
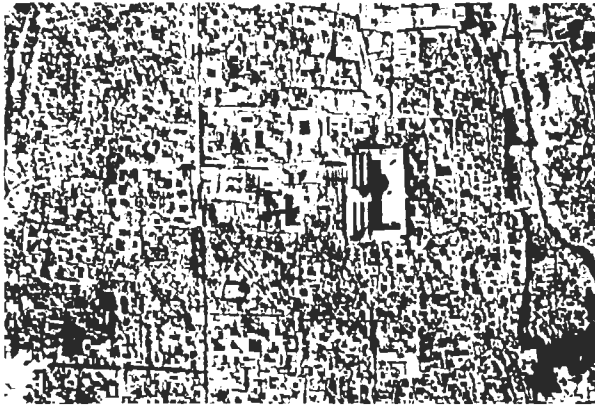
Old City of Damascus. *Aerial view of the traditional port, showing an urban form linking religious, social, and residential spaces.* (I. Serageldin and S. El-Sadek)

dominant part of city life during the daytime. The rules and regulations governing commercial activity were also defined in the *Shariah* and implemented by officials whose function it was to see that rules were applied. Certain practices such as gambling and games of chance are prohibited in the Quran, and the function of such officials was to see that these prohibitions were followed. Offenders, if found guilty by the courts, were liable to punishment.

Family Life and Housing in the City

Family life is a vital part of the Muslim social order and, based on Quranic injunctions, the *Shariah* defines in great detail the rules affecting marriage, orphans, inheritance, and other aspects of family life.

One of the major changes brought about in the status of the family from pre-Islamic Arab times was the provision of legal rights and status for women; these rights were defined in the context of family life. Female infanticide and unrestricted polygamy, practiced by certain pre-Islamic Bedouin tribes, were abolished.

The Quran permits a man to have a maximum of four wives at one time. However, equality in the treatment of wives is made a strict condition in

such cases, as is a due recognition of each person's rights within a polygamous household (4:129). These strictures imply for many modern Muslims that monogamy is preferable. The Quran also recognizes the possibility of marriages breaking down, and allows for divorce after reasonable attempts have been made at reconciling the parties. Marriages are to be accompanied by the signing of contracts in which the husband is asked to specify the amount of settlement to be made to the wife in the event of a divorce. Divorced persons, widows, and widowers are also encouraged to remarry. Another area of family life touched upon in the Quran is that of inheritance.

> From that left by parents and close relations, there is a share for the men and a share for the women. Each one has a designated share, whether it be small or great. (4:7)

A particular concern is expressed for orphans and the disadvantaged. The overriding factor at all levels of personal and social life is a strong sense of justice:

> O you who believe
> Be firm in justice and as witnesses
> for God even though it be against
> yourselves, your parents or those close to you—
> rich or poor.
>   (4:135)

It is the notion of intimacy and privacy, however, that dictates the way in which traditional Muslim dwellings are built and organized. Housing is set off from the commercial sector of the city. The concept of *haram* (and *harim,* meaning sanctuary), vulgarized in European literature as the "harem," is essentially a notion of protection because of the recognition that family life and personal life are private but vulnerable. The covering of the interior courtyards of traditional Muslim houses and the traditional clothing worn by Muslim men and women are means of protecting this vulnerability. In urban centers the system of *purdah* or veiling, a practice adapted by Muslims from cultures such as those of ancient Persia (present-day Iran), often became extensions of such practices, marginalizing women and, among certain classes of people in ur-

ban centers, effectively segregating them from public life and activity.

Beyond the mosques, the places of learning, the *bazaar,* and housing, there were fortifications, which exist now as monuments or have disappeared over time. Traditionally, the walls around cities acted as a layer of protection from outside attack and as a definition for those who lived within them. The city also maintained contact with the Bedouins, the farmers, and visitors through way-stations built especially to provide rest and refreshment for those from the outside. Nomadic life, fast disappearing in the contemporary world, was a significant part of traditional Muslim life. The city often provided a point of contact between the nomadic and urban life-styles, enabling both to nourish and revitalize each other through a mutual exchange of ideas and energies.

Cemeteries generally fringe the edges of the city. At death, the body is carefully washed and wrapped in a seamless white shroud. The body is placed in a grave with its head facing Mecca and special prayers are said for the soul of the deceased.

Another distinguishing feature of the traditional Muslim city is the presence in it of nature. Most cities are endowed with gardens and fountains, which provide a welcome retreat in arid climates as well as places for social gatherings and family strolls. This quality of the presence of nature also lends the city a certain serenity and a congruence with the natural environment. The city does not appear to dominate its surroundings; rather, it seems to blend into them. The city is also enlivened by the festivities celebrating Muslim holidays and the joyous gatherings that mark weddings, births, and the circumcision of male children, which is a required practice in Islam.

In ideal terms, the physical form of the city in Islam—including the places of worship, work, family habitation, and institutions serving the city—can be said to symbolize the vision of unity in Islam. The architecture and the design, the gardens and the parks all echo the promises of the hereafter described by the Quranic paradise. The physical structures in a Muslim city are therefore meant to reflect the spiritual quality of life and the social and personal values enjoined by Islam.

For many Muslims in Asia and Africa, however, rural and village life still constitute a dominant pattern. In recent times, owing to a combination of neglect and natural disasters (such as droughts), desertification, and deforestation these small villages and nomadic populations have suffered increasing hardship, damaging community life and institutions, sometimes irreparably. Confronted with the deterioration in their built and natural environments, Muslim societies have begun to address specifically ways in which their conceptions of traditional aspects of law and ethics can be broadened to include issues of faith and environment and their impact on Muslim society.