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Components of Religion: The Case of Islam

Frederick M. Denny

Religion is a universal human phenomenon, with certain aspects that are both constant and pervasive. Yet it is not easy to provide a single definition of religion that does justice to the vast variety and richness of actual religious traditions and belief systems. The German-American scholar of the first half of this century, Joachim Wach, propounded a universal approach to understanding religion by postulating four indispensable criteria for genuine religious experience, upon which religions are based and from which they develop (1):

1. "Religious experience is a response to what is experienced as ultimate reality; that is, in religious experiences we react not to any single or finite phenomenon, material or otherwise, but to what we realize as under-girding and conditioning all that constitutes our world of experience."
2. "Religious experience is a total response of the total being to ultimate reality." The whole person—the body, the mind, the affections, the will—is involved.
3. "Religious experience is the most intense experience" of which humans are capable. "Religious loyalty, if it is religious loyalty, wins over all other loyalties."
4. "Religious experience is practical, that is to say it involves an imperative, a commitment. . . ." This fourth criterion distinguishes religious from merely

aesthetic experience. Nor is it simply moral judgment, which does not have to entail a response to ultimate reality. Yet there is a deep moral dimension to religious experience, particularly as it seeks expression in life.

Wach claims that the above criteria are universal. Moreover, he observes that religious experience tends always toward expression, that is, it takes on a concrete

There are three main forms of expression of religious experience: theoretical or conceptual, practical or cultic, and sociological or communal.

shape in the lives of believers. There are three main forms of expression of religious experience, which Wach characterized by different terms at different times, but which may conveniently be introduced under his general headings of one, theoretical; two, practical; and three, sociological. The first Wach also called the "conceptual," the second the "cultic," (2) and the third the "communal" level of religious expression, easily remembered as the three "c's."

The conceptual heading covers what we think and believe about religion, ex-

pressed by such means as symbols, signs, myths, stories, creeds, laws, doctrines, and theologies. This level could also be called the "creed and code" category, because it contains what is believed to be fundamentally true about the universe, humankind's place in it, and the laws and guides for authentic individual and collective life.

The cultic heading covers religious action, such as prayer, liturgies, pilgrimage, fasting, sacrifice, chanting, hymn singing, healing rituals, and sacraments. Not all these practices exist in every religion, but they all belong in the same universal category of religious action.

The communal heading includes specifically religious social and communal institutions and phenomena, as well as leadership roles. Among the former are churches, synagogues, congregations, monastic communities, clerical classes, status ranks such as castes, denominations, sects, cults, and other things. The latter—religious practitioners—includes priests, prayer leaders, liturgists, rabbis, preachers, scholars, theologians, sages, prophets, shamans, healers, exorcists, and other roles.

Just as all true religious experience is based on the four formal criteria set forth earlier, so are all specific religious traditions subject to analysis under the headings of conceptual bases, cult, and community. This holds true whether one examines ancient and pervasive religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; or relatively recent and more lim-

ited examples such as “Cargo Cults,” Christian Science, Mormonism, Bahaism, and Wicca. The three fundamental categories of religious expression—conceptual bases, cult, and community—do not exist in isolation each from the others. They are analytically distinguishable elements in any and every religion, operating in simultaneous and complementary ways and constantly overlapping and interweaving at the levels of thought, action, and social life. This may best be understood by focusing on a specific religious tradition. Because of its increasing importance in North American religious life as well as world events, and because it is my own scholarly specialization, I have chosen Islam as our case for discerning and understanding the main components of religion.

Islam: The Religion of Submission to Allah

The Arabic word *islam* means “submission” to Allah (the Arabic word for God). A “Muslim” is one who has submitted to Allah, embraced the tenets and prac-

tices of the religion of Islam, and joined the community of the faithful—known as the Umma—as a loyal adherent. Today there are approximately one billion Muslims in the world, making the Umma second in numbers only to Christianity. Although Muslim populations predominate in the Middle East, Indonesia, and parts of Africa and South and Central Asia, their numbers are also increasing in Europe and the Americas. There are as many as five million Muslims in the United States now.

The conceptual or creed/code dimension of Islam is easy to summarize yet profound and captivating. The basic beliefs and duties of Muslims were first set forth by the Arabian prophet Muhammad in the seventh century of the Common Era (3).

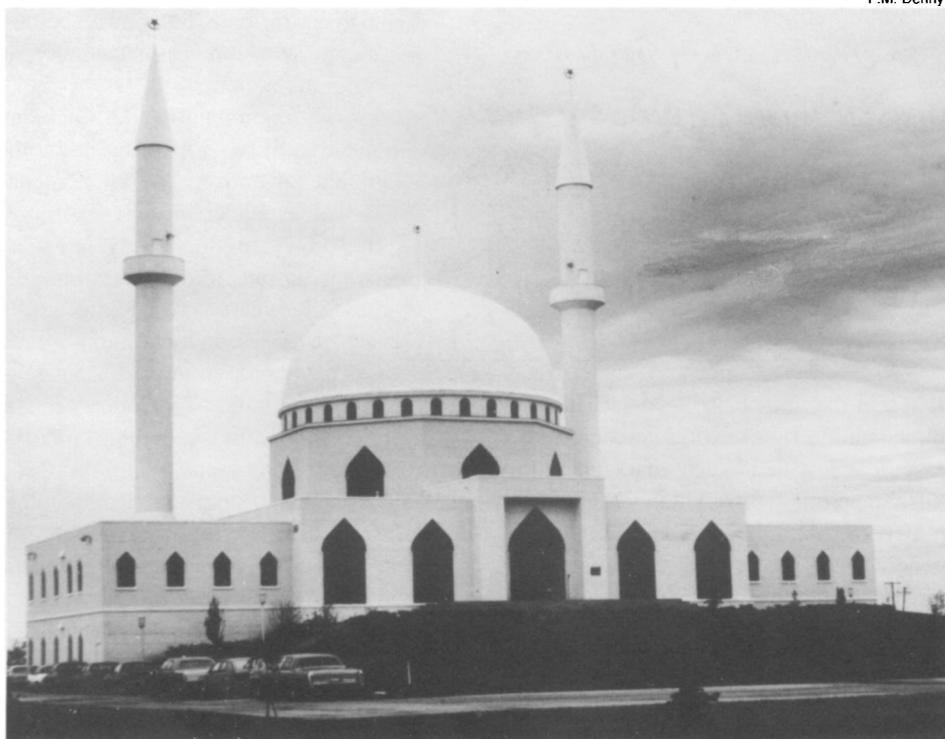
Muhammad was born around 570 C.E. in Mecca, an important trading and caravan center in the western central region of the Arabian peninsula, some forty-five miles inland from the Red Sea. Since earliest times, Mecca had also been an important religious center, with a famous sanctuary known as the Ka’ba. Although

Christianity and Judaism and other religions were known to the ancient Arabs, most of the native inhabitants of the Hejaz (the region roughly from Mecca north to Medina) observed a polytheistic religious life that included veneration of tribal lineages, animal sacrifices, propitiation of spirits residing in rocks, springs, and trees, and ritual circling of holy shrines, such as the Ka’ba in Mecca, with its famous black stone.

Muhammad was orphaned early and brought up by relatives. As a boy he earned a reputation for honesty and was called al-Amin, “The Trustworthy.” As a young man Muhammad managed the caravan business of Khadija, a widow considerably older than himself. After successes in trade, Khadija and Muhammad were married and over the years had several children, although only the females survived childhood. One of these daughters, Fati-ma, would in time become an important spiritual personage, along with her husband, ‘Ali, the founder of the Shi’ite branch of Islam.

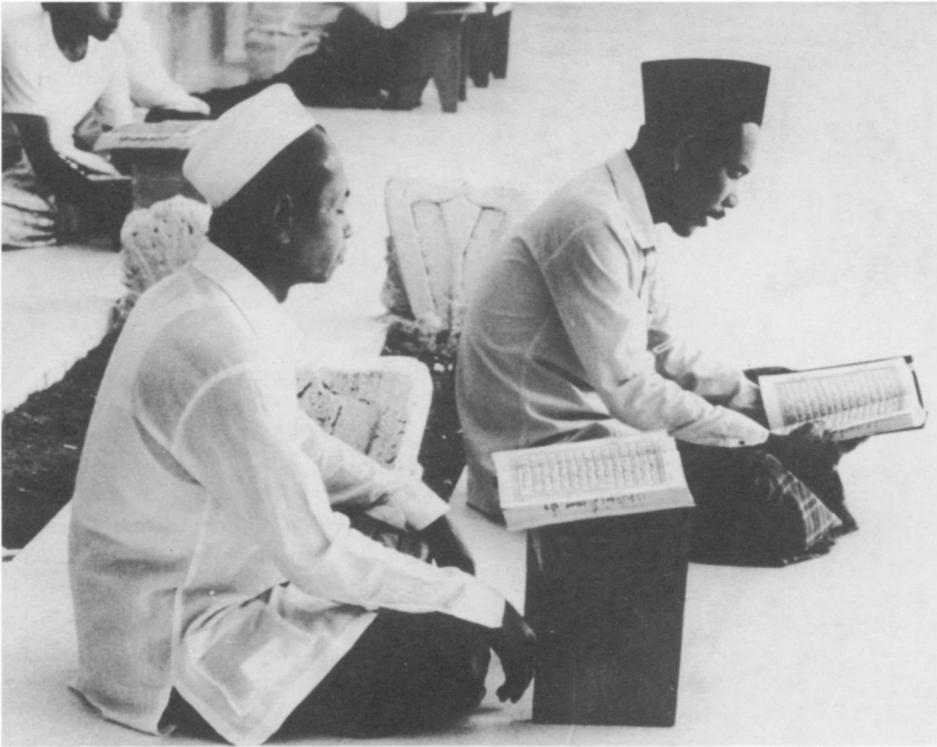
Muhammad devoted himself often to reflection on spiritual and moral questions and cultivated a form of personal meditation as well. One night while observing a solitary retreat in a mountainside cave outside Mecca, he received a spiritual vision calling him to be a prophet of Allah. The experience was a terrifying one, but its upshot was the beginning of the revelation of a divine message to Muhammad by means of the archangel Gabriel. The Arabic word *qur’an* means “recitation” and that is what the sacred message revealed to Muhammad is called. The process of revelation is believed by Muslims to have been a sort of direct inspiration of Muhammad’s consciousness enabling him to recite the sacred verses and commit them to memory. Muhammad was illiterate and thus could not have penned the contents of the message, it is thought, thus supporting its divine origin.

Muhammad was empowered by the receiving and then preaching of the Qur’an to become a great prophet and statesman. The Qur’anic passages came to him from time to time in a cumulative fashion from



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Mosque and minarets of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo (Ohio).



Qur'an recitation during a festival at the Mosque of Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia.

610 until his death in 632. The contents of the Qur'an are arranged approximately according to the length of the 114 chapters—known as suras—that make up the volume which is roughly equal in length to the New Testament. There are two basic divisions of the suras: those revealed at Mecca, when the religion was in its formative process, and those revealed in Medina, after Muhammad and the Muslims had emigrated there in 622 in the *hijra* to establish the Umma (“religious community”) as a religio-political venture that would soon extend across vast regions of the Afro-Eurasian landmass.

Muslims believe that every word in the collected Qur'an originated with God and that the final product contains no human ideas whatsoever. Muhammad's purity of heart and integrity of life may be thought of as a parallel to the virginity that Christians attribute to Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is often said by scholars of the two religions that in Christianity the Word of God was made flesh whereas in Islam the Divine Word came down in the form of a living recitation preserved both in a book and in

the hearts of Muslims, many of whom memorize the Qur'an. Thus Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, is a parallel to the Noble Qur'an.

Muhammad never claimed to have performed miracles but declared that the only kind of miracle he was ever party to was the receiving and proclaiming of the message of the Qur'an. The Qur'an contains what Wach would call the “theoretical” or “conceptual” or “creed/code” elements of Islam. And it sets forth, as well, the basic ritual duties of Muslims, the “cultic” aspects of the religion. Finally, the Qur'an teaches what kind of community the Muslims should have and how it is to be cultivated and maintained.

The Qur'an teaches that *islam*—submission—is the threshold of the religion, but that there is a deeper and more demanding level known as *iman*—faith. All believers are submitters, but not all submitters have yet received God's gift of faith. The essential doctrinal beliefs set forth in the Qur'an, and generally referred to as *iman*, are as follows:

1. Belief in the one and only God of the universe, Allah, who has created all that is but utterly transcends His creation and can in no way be truly described in terms of it. This is a profound mystery with paradoxical dimensions that elude a human rational explanation. This doctrine of the divine unity is known by Muslims as *tawhid*, an Arabic word that has some verbal force and means “unification” or “unifying” as well as “unity.” Thus Muslims believe that, just as Allah is one, so also should the Muslims be: in their worship, their law, their customs, and their community life. This ideal of unity is expressed at the level of ritual practice in ways that are more nearly uniform worldwide than in any other major religion. *Tawhid* is not a simple arithmetical notion of unity; rather it is a divine reality by which Muslims are empowered to order, integrate, and harmonize the rich complexity of the created realm in the service of God.

2. Belief in the reality and important activities of angels, God's messengers and helpers. Muslims believe that the archangel Gabriel served as the revelatory intermediary of the Qur'an, bringing it down from God to Muhammad. Other angels are also recognized by name, including Michael. The angels exist in different ranks and with different tasks, including the constant praise and glorification of God, the guarding of the gates of heaven, and the watching over the deeds of humans and their invisible, morally accountable counterparts, the *jinn* (“genies”).

3. Belief in revealed scriptures and prophethood. Muhammad is believed by Muslims to be the world's last prophet, who conveyed to humankind God's final message. Earlier prophets and books are recognized by Islam, especially the Torah of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus, known as the Injil. The Qur'an claims to be bringing down the same essential message as the earlier books, reaffirming what is true to them and correcting errors and misreadings that the Jews and Christians had introduced over the generations. Islam affirms that a great number of prophets have been ap-



Friday prayers at the Masjid Jame, Kuala Lumpur. The grass courtyard accomodates an overflow congregation.

pointed by God, but the twenty-five mentioned by name in the Qur'an are especially important in the eyes of Muslims. Most of these also appear in the Bible, such as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, and Jesus, all of whom Muslims esteem greatly and honor with benedictions.

4. Belief in a Last Judgment. History is a forward directed, non-repeatable reality with an eventual ending whose time and outcome are known only to God. Every human being is accountable for his or her actions while on earth and will be brought before a final judgment when the graves are opened and the resurrection occurs. The God-fearing and just will be rewarded

with eternal bliss in heaven with God and His angels, while the evil, the unjust, and the idolaters will be cast down into hellfire. Many of the details of the Islamic doctrine of the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell are shared with Judaism and Christianity, but the Islamic system as a whole is distinctive.

5. Belief in the Divine Decree and Predestination. This is one of the most difficult doctrines, because it sets forth human moral responsibility while it also asserts God's all-knowingness and determining authority and power over all things and events. Muslims accept God's overwhelming power in their lives while acknowledging that their response to God and their actions in life are somehow their own

doing, too.

Such are the basic beliefs of Islam, which belong under the heading *iman*. Notice that the Islamic category parallels Wach's category of "theoretical" or "creed/code." The Wachian category of "practical" or "cult" also parallels Islam's own model, which classifies religious duties under the heading of *islam*, "submission." The religious duties of Muslims are often called the "pillars of Islam." They number five:

1. The first pillar is testifying that "There is no god but Allah" and that "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." This is actually a confession of faith, but its utterance is a potent act, opening the threshold of the religion for the one who would enter Islam and take on the complete way of life that this relation entails. Upon uttering the "Testimony" (known to Muslims as *shahada*) believingly, one is from that time on a Muslim. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, some scholars began to realize that religious expression and experience cut across cultural lines, that in their own context all religions had internal integrity, and that religion manifested itself in similar patterns wherever it occurred.

2. The second pillar is prayer, performed five times each day in a regulated manner. The prayer service, known as *salat*, requires ritual purification beforehand. Although it is permissible to perform the Salat alone, it is recommended that it be performed with others in a congregation. The Friday noon Salat must be performed in congregation, with a sermon preached from atop a special pulpit. The times for prayer are dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, just after sunset, and in the evening. When Muslims worship together in a congregation, one of the company serves as *imam*—a leader—for the rest. They all line up in neat parallel rows facing toward Mecca and perform a number of cycles of prayer, containing set litanies, recitation from the Qur'an, and the bodily postures for standing, bowing, sitting, and full prostration with forehead touching the prayer carpet or other clean surface.

Muslim prayers are held in a quiet, clean place set aside from normal activities. The word “mosque” comes from the Arabic word *masjid*, “place of prostration.” A mosque, thus, is preeminently a space for worship and not an architectural structure. However, the word *masjid* also applies to buildings, whether humble or magnificent, where Muslims congregate for worship.

3. The third pillar is almsgiving, known as *zakat*. This is a kind of religious tax paid at the end of each year as a set portion of different kinds of wealth, provided a certain minimum is owned. *Zakat* is not meant to be a hardship, but a moderate kind of sacrifice of wealth for God’s work in the world, which the Qur’an promises will be repaid manifold. *Zakat* giving also purifies the wealth remaining to the giver. Notice the strong social ethical dimension of this pillar. It should be understood that *Zakat* is not considered to be charity. Charity should be dispensed as often as the need arises, without formality, and with proper consideration of the recipient’s feelings and dignity.

4. The fourth pillar is fasting *ṣaum* during the sacred month of Ramadan. During the daylight hours, no food, drink, smoking, or other sensual pleasures may be enjoyed. If a person is ill, pregnant, very young, aged, or otherwise indisposed, the fast is either excused or postponed. Fasting enables people to reflect on their common humanity and to ponder their possessions and well-being as gifts from God. The wealthy donate money for feeding the poor. All Muslims are encouraged to visit the mosques in the evening for special litanies and prayers. The fast is broken each evening with a meal and then a light meal is taken toward dawn.

5. The final pillar is Pilgrimage—known as *hajj*—to Mecca during the special month set aside. The Hajj is the most dramatic and emotionally moving of all the pillars, when Muslims actually visit the center of their ritual focus, toward which they had faced during the preceding years of *Salat*. This

pillar is required only of Muslims who have the necessary means and are in appropriate circumstances to perform it. There is no negative judgment of Muslims—the vast majority—who are unable to make the costly and sometimes even hazardous journey.

The ritual details of the Hajj are elaborate and technical, but the following will give some sense of the whole. Pilgrims must enter a state of ritual purification before performing the rites. They may not cut their hair or shave, engage in sexual relations, wear gold or silver jewelry, hunt, uproot living plants, speak angrily, and other things. The males don a simple, white two-piece seamless cotton garment. Females wear clean, modest clothing, which may and often does indicate the styles and designs of their diverse home countries. Thus we have in the men’s pilgrimage garb a symbol of the unity, equality, and solidarity of the Muslim Umma worldwide, and in the women’s clothing we see something of its rich, festive, and creative diversity.

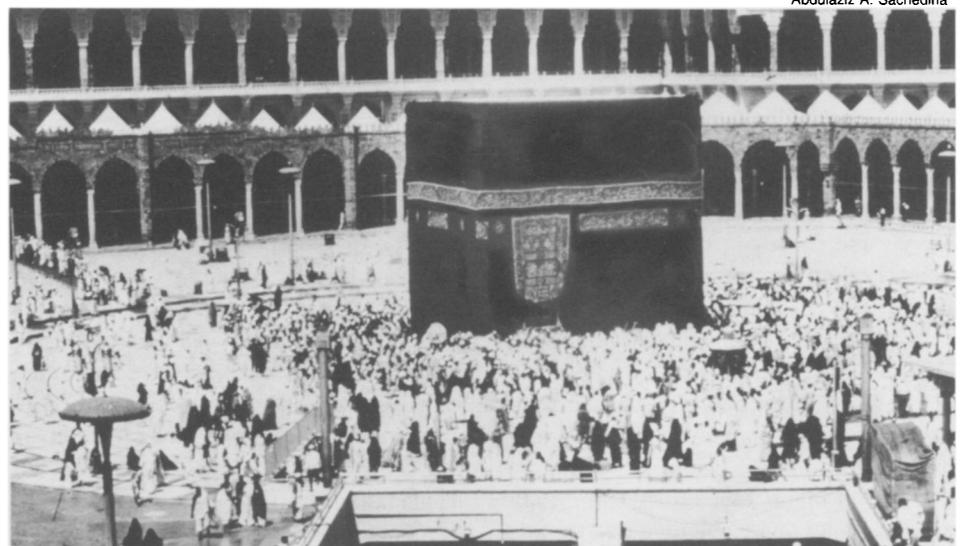
The pilgrims circumambulate the holy Ka’ba, the cubical structure in the middle of Mecca’s Grand Mosque, which antedates Islam and is thought to have been built by the prophet Abraham, the “father” of the three Middle Eastern monotheistic

religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There are special prayers and observances along the pilgrimage route, which extends several miles outside Mecca. The climax is the feast of sacrifice, which Muslims simultaneously observe all over the world. This feast celebrates God’s providing of a sacrificial ram when he tested Abraham’s faith and obedience by commanding him to sacrifice his own son (which in Muslims’ understanding was Ishmael, not Isaac, as the Bible has it).

After the pilgrimage, the participants, if it is their first Hajj, may thenceforth use the honorific title “Hajji” before their names. If they have not done so previous to the Hajj, pilgrims usually travel north the Medina, the “City of the Prophet,” to pay respects to the memory of Muhammad and other notables of the religion’s origins.

We have reviewed the creed and cult dimensions of Islam. At the same time, it can be seen that both have a strong community emphasis as well. *Tawḥīd* requires a loyal, unified Umma in order for Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations. The final judgment is a deeply moral matter that implies human inter-connectedness and mutual concern, as well as reward or punishment of individuals. Prophets and their revealed scriptures have been sent to specific human communities in order to

Abdulaziz A. Sachedina



The Holy Ka’ba, marking the center of Islam’s ritual focus in the Grand Mosque, Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

bring God's good news and warning about the requirements and rewards of religious life. The pillars of salat, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage, all have powerful community references and requirements. It is impossible to be a Muslim all by oneself, for God has made humans for community life in which the sharing of responsibilities and the opportunities for success in this life and the next are central concerns. The facing toward Mecca of all Muslims at prayer is a potent symbol of the centeredness of the community as it focuses on its ritual axis.

reports known as *hadith*. A hadith conveys a story about what Muhammad said or did on a particular occasion—in answer to a question, as an edifying tale, in description of his habits, and many other things. There are thousands of hadiths that are considered to be sound and reliable; there are vast numbers, in addition, that are thought to be weak or even fabricated. This is testimony to the powerful and pervasive veneration of the Prophet and his example that Muslims have maintained since early Islamic times.

Muhammad's Sunna, his "custom" or

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The Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem, where Muhammad is believed to have prayed during his "Night Journey" and "ascent to Heaven." The site also holds special significance for Jews because the temple is located there.

The Umma is the Muslim community beyond national, ethnic, cultural, political, and geographical distinctions. Muslims everywhere learn and obey their Qur'an, which in the first instance is also learned and recited in Arabic (although translations are permitted to help non-native Arabic speakers). The Arabic Qur'an has had an enormous, even definitive influence in molding Muslim community life and ideals down through the centuries. But there is a second major source of Islamic faith and order, and that is the revered example of the Prophet Muhammad, which is recalled and cultivated by means of literary

exemplary ways, are contained in the literary form of hadith as well as in the ongoing imitation by Muslims of Muhammad's patterns of thinking, believing, worshipping, and living. So fundamental to Muslims' sense of identity and self-worth is this patterning of life on the model of Muhammad, that we can say that the Umma is in a real sense of "Muhammadan" reality as well as a Qur'anic one, while remembering that Muslims in no way worship Muhammad or regard him as divine. And the Qur'an itself teaches its hearers to obey God and his prophet, that in Muhammad "ye have indeed a good pattern (of con-

duct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah." (Sura 33, vs. 21)

It must be understood that this brief survey of Islamic creed, cult, and community has covered only a minimum of what is a vast and complex tradition of belief and life. One hopes that it will inspire further reading and the development of an instructional approach for school students in need of understanding both the components of religion and the ways in which they may be discerned in a specific case. The components that have been adapted from Joachim Wach in this essay can also be easily applied to other traditions, as well, for they are as nearly universal as a scholarly model can be. □

Endnotes

1. Joachim Wach, "Universal Religion," in the author's collection of essays *Types of Religious Experience: Christian and Non-Christian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 30-47. The summary of Wach's four criteria is based on pp. 32-33.
2. The words "cult" and "cultic" often have negative connotations in popular usage. Wach and other specialists in the comparative study of religion use the terms in their fundamental sense as referring to religious ritual systems, with no evaluation implied.
3. Religion scholars and others are increasingly using "common era" instead of A.D. so as to be inclusive of people who are not Christians. Much of the world uses the dating system starting from the time of Jesus of Nazareth, not because of religious conviction but for convenience and uniformity. Islam has its own calendar dating from the Hijra of Muhammad and his follower from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E.; but Muslims also recognize the Common Era calendar for commercial, political, and diplomatic purposes.

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