

suggesting that we are all one

UNITY: THE GOD OF ISLAM

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In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong explores the sociological and historical roots of the three great monotheistic traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In this selection Armstrong describes the political and social situation in which Muhammad rendered his revelation. Muhammad witnessed the breakdown of *muruwah*, a tribal ideology that oriented people to the good of their tribe and ensured a sharing of wealth and a strong egalitarianism. The rise of trade made Muhammad's home city of Mecca rich, but the ruthless capitalism it brought promoted an individualism that left the poor and elderly vulnerable. Additionally, the Christian doctrine of an afterlife was seeping into the culture, shifting attention from the good of the tribe to personal salvation.

Muhammad recognized Allah, the High God of the ancient Arabian pantheon, as identical to the God of Jews and Christians, but was painfully aware that the Arab people had never been given their own Arabic scripture. In the year 610 C.E., that lack of scripture changed when Muhammad felt a divine presence demanding him to recite. The collected recitations brought forth provided the *Qur'an* (or *Koran*, *The Recitation*). Not meant for personal study, the *Koran* was meant for communal recitation. Among other themes, it emphasizes the benevolence of God, the utter dependence of humanity on the Creator, and the importance of caring for the poor and vulnerable. Rather than providing an explicitly new understanding of God, the *Koran* claims to be a reminder of things already known.

As you read, consider the relation between Islam and Christianity. Islam regards Jesus as a prophet, not the Son of God. Is one religion correct and the other wrong? How should we deal with contradictory understandings of the sacred?

In about the year 610 an Arab merchant of the thriving city of Mecca in the Hijaz, who had never read the Bible and probably never heard of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, had an experience that was uncannily similar to theirs. Every year Muhammad ibn Abdallah, a member of the Meccan tribe of Quraysh, used to take his family to Mount Hira just outside the city to make a spiritual retreat during the month of Ramadan. This was quite a common practice among the

Arabs of the peninsula. Muhammad would have spent the time praying to the High God of the Arabs and distributing food and alms to the poor who came to visit him during this sacred period. He probably also spent much time in anxious thought. We know from his later career that Muhammad was acutely aware of a worrying malaise in Mecca, despite its recent spectacular success. Only two generations earlier, the Quraysh had lived a harsh nomadic life in the Arabian

steppes, like the other Bedouin tribes: each day had required a grim struggle for survival. During the last years of the sixth century, however, they had become extremely successful in trade and made Mecca the most important settlement in Arabia. They were now rich beyond their wildest dreams. Yet their drastically altered lifestyle meant that the old tribal values had been superseded by a rampant and ruthless capitalism. People felt obscurely disoriented and lost. Muhammad knew that the Quraysh were on a dangerous course and needed to find an ideology that would help them to adjust to their new conditions.

At this time, any political solution tended to be of a religious nature. Muhammad was aware that the Quraysh were making a new religion out of money. This was hardly surprising, because they must have felt that their new wealth had "saved" them from the perils of the nomadic life, cushioning them from the malnutrition and tribal violence that were endemic to the steppes of Arabia, where each Bedouin tribe daily faced the possibility of extinction. They now had almost enough to eat and were making Mecca an international center of trade and high finance. They felt that they had become the masters of their own fate, and some even seem to have believed that their wealth would give them a certain immortality. But Muhammad believed that this new cult of self-sufficiency (*istaqqa*) would mean the disintegration of the tribe. In the old nomadic days the tribe had had to come first and the individual second: each one of its members knew that they all depended upon one another for survival. Consequently they had a duty to take care of the poor and vulnerable people of their ethnic group. Now individualism had replaced the communal ideal and competition had become the norm. Individuals were starting to build personal fortunes and took no heed of the weaker Qurayshis. Each of the clans, or smaller family groups of the tribe, fought one another for a share of the wealth of Mecca, and some of the least successful clans (like Muhammad's own clan of Hashim) felt that their very survival was in jeopardy. Muhammad was convinced that unless the Quraysh learned to put another tran-

scendent value at the center of their lives and overcome their egotism and greed, his tribe would tear itself apart morally and politically in internecine strife.

In the rest of Arabia the situation was also bleak. For centuries the Bedouin tribes of the regions of the Hijaz and Najd had lived in fierce competition with one another for the basic necessities of life. To help the people cultivate the communal spirit that was essential for survival, the Arabs had evolved an ideology called *muruwah*, which fulfilled many of the functions of religion. In the conventional sense, the Arabs had little time for religion. There was a pagan pantheon of deities and the Arabs worshipped at their shrines, but they had not developed a mythology that explained the relevance of these gods and holy places to the life of the spirit. They had no notion of an afterlife but believed instead that *darb*, which can be translated as "time" or "fate," was supreme—an attitude that was probably essential in a society where the mortality rate was so high. Western scholars often translate *muruwah* as "manliness" but it had a far-wider range of significance: it meant courage in battle, patience and endurance in suffering and absolute dedication to the tribe. The virtues of *muruwah* required an Arab to obey his *sayyid* or chief at a second's notice, regardless of his personal safety; he had to dedicate himself to the chivalrous duties of avenging any wrong committed against the tribe and protecting its more vulnerable members. To ensure the survival of the tribe, the *sayyid* shared its wealth and possessions equally and avenged the death of a single one of his people by killing a member of the murderer's tribe. It is here that we see the communal ethic most clearly: there was no duty to punish the killer himself because an individual could vanish without trace in a society like pre-Islamic Arabia. Instead one member of the enemy tribe was equivalent to another for such purposes. The vendetta or blood feud was the only way of ensuring a modicum of social security in a region where there was no central authority, where every tribal group was a law unto itself and where there was nothing comparable to a mod-

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ern police force. If a chief failed to retaliate, his tribe would lose respect and others would feel free to kill its members with impunity. The vendetta was thus a rough-and-ready form of justice which meant that no one tribe could easily gain ascendancy over any of the others. It also meant that the various tribes could easily become involved in an unstoppable cycle of violence, in which one vendetta would lead to another if people felt that the revenge taken was disproportionate to the original offense.

Brutal as it undoubtedly was, however, muruwah had many strengths. It encouraged a deep and strong egalitarianism and an indifference to material goods which, again, was probably essential in a region where there were not enough of the essentials to go round: the cults of largesse and generosity were important virtues and taught the Arabs to take no heed for the morrow. These qualities would become very important in Islam, as we shall see. *Muruwah* had served the Arabs well for centuries, but by the sixth century it was no longer able to answer the conditions of modernity. During the last phase of the pre-Islamic period, which Muslims call the *jabiliyyah* (the time of ignorance), there seems to have been widespread dissatisfaction and spiritual restlessness. The Arabs were surrounded on all sides by the two mighty empires of Sassanid Persia and Byzantium. Modern ideas were beginning to penetrate Arabia from the settled lands; merchants who traveled into Syria or Iraq brought back stories of the wonders of civilization.

Yet it seemed that the Arabs were doomed to perpetual barbarism. The tribes were involved in constant warfare, which made it impossible for them to pool their meager resources and become the united Arab people that they were dimly aware of being. They could not take their destiny into their own hands and found a civilization of their own. Instead they were constantly open to exploitation by the great powers: indeed, the more fertile and sophisticated region of Southern Arabia in what is now Yemen (which had the benefit of the monsoon rains) had become a mere province of Persia. At the same time, the new ideas that were infiltrating the region

brought intimations of individualism that undermined the old communal ethos. The Christian doctrine of the afterlife, for example, made the eternal fate of each individual a sacred value; how could that be squared with the tribal ideal which subordinated the individual to the group and insisted that a man or woman's sole immortality lay in the survival of the tribe?

Muhammad was a man of exceptional genius. When he died in 632, he had managed to bring nearly all the tribes of Arabia into a new united community, or *ummah*. He had brought the Arabs a spirituality that was uniquely suited to their own traditions and which unlocked such reserves of power that within a hundred years they had established their own great empire, which stretched from the Himalayas to the Pyrenees, and founded a unique civilization. Yet as Muhammad sat in prayer in the tiny cave at the summit of Mount Hira during his Ramadan retreat of 610, he could not have envisaged such phenomenal success. Like many of the Arabs, Muhammad had come to believe that al-Lah, the High God of the ancient Arabian pantheon, whose name simply meant "the God," was identical to the God worshipped by the Jews and the Christians. He also believed that only a prophet of this God could solve the problems of his people, but he never believed for one moment that *he* was going to be that prophet. Indeed, the Arabs were unhappily aware that al-Lah had never sent them a prophet or a scripture of their own, even though they had had his shrine in their midst from time immemorial. By the seventh century, most Arabs had come to believe that the Kabah, the massive cube-shaped shrine in the heart of Mecca was clearly of great antiquity, had originally been dedicated to al-Lah, even though at present the Nabatean deity Hubal presided there. All Meccans were fiercely proud of the Kabah, which was the most important holy place in Arabia. Each year Arabs from all over the peninsula made the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, performing the traditional rites over a period of several days. All violence was forbidden in the sanctuary, the sacred area around the Kabah, so that in Mecca the Arabs could trade with one

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another peacefully, knowing that old tribal hostilities were temporarily in abeyance. The Quraysh knew that without the sanctuary they could never have achieved their mercantile success and that a great deal of their prestige among the other tribes depended upon their guardianship of the Kabah and upon their preservation of its ancient sanctities. Yet though al-Lah had clearly singled the Quraysh out for his special favor, he had never sent them a messenger like Abraham, Moses or Jesus, and the Arabs had no scripture in their own language.

There was, therefore, a widespread feeling of spiritual inferiority. Those Jews and Christians with whom the Arabs came in contact used to taunt them for being a barbarous people who had received no revelation from God. The Arabs felt a mingled resentment and respect for these people who had knowledge that they did not. Judaism and Christianity had made little headway in the region, even though the Arabs acknowledged that this progressive form of religion was superior to their own traditional paganism. There were some Jewish tribes of doubtful provenance in the settlements of Yathrib (later Medina) and Fadak, to the north of Mecca, and some of the northern tribes on the borderland between the Persian and Byzantine empires had converted to Monophysite or Nestorian Christianity. Yet the Bedouin were fiercely independent, were determined not to come under the rule of the great powers like their brethren in Yemen and were acutely aware that both the Persians and the Byzantines had used the religions of Judaism and Christianity to promote their imperial designs in the region. They were probably also instinctively aware that they had suffered enough cultural dislocation, as their own traditions eroded. The last thing they needed was a foreign ideology, couched in alien languages and traditions.

Some Arabs seem to have attempted to discover a more neutral form of monotheism not tainted by imperialistic associations. As early as the fifth century, the Palestinian Christian historian Sozomenos tells us that some of the Arabs in Syria had rediscovered what they called the authentic religion of Abraham, who had lived

before God had sent either the Torah or the Gospel and who was, therefore, neither a Jew nor a Christian. Shortly before Muhammad received his own prophetic call, his first biographer, Muhammad ibn Ishaq (d. 767), tells us that four of the Quraysh of Mecca had decided to seek the *hanifiyyah*, the true religion of Abraham. Some Western scholars have argued that this little *hanifiyyah* sect is a pious fiction, symbolizing the spiritual restlessness of the *jabiliyyah*, but it must have some factual basis. Three of the four *hanifs* were well known to the first Muslims: Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh was Muhammad's cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who eventually became a Christian, was one of his earliest spiritual advisers, and Zayd ibn Amr was the uncle of Umar ibn al-Khattab, one of Muhammad's closest companions and the second caliph of the Islamic empire. There is a story that one day, before he had left Mecca to search in Syria and Iraq for the religion of Abraham, Zayd had been standing by the Kabah, leaning against the shrine and telling the Quraysh who were making the ritual circumambulations around it in the time-honored way: "O Quraysh, by him in whose hand is the soul of Zayd, not one of you follows the religion of Abraham but I." Then he added sadly, "O God, if I knew how you wish to be worshipped I would so worship you; but I do not know."

Zayd's longing for a divine revelation was fulfilled on Mount Hira in 610 on the seventeenth night of Ramadan, when Muhammad was torn from sleep and felt himself enveloped by a devastating divine presence. Later he explained this ineffable experience in distinctively Arabian terms. He said that an angel had appeared to him and given him a curt command: "Recite!" (*iqra!*) Like the Hebrew prophets who were often reluctant to utter the Word of God, Muhammad refused, protesting, "I am not a reciter!" He was no *kabin*, one of the ecstatic soothsayers of Arabia who claimed to recite inspired oracles. But, Muhammad said, the angel simply enveloped him in an overpowering embrace, so that he felt as if all the breath was being squeezed from his body. Just as he felt he could bear it no longer, the angel released him and again com-

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manded him to "Recite!" (*iqra!*). Again Muhammad refused and again the angel embraced him until he felt he had reached the limits of his endurance. Finally, at the end of a third terrifying embrace, Muhammad found the first words of a new scripture pouring from his mouth:

Recite in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created—created man out of a germ-cell!
Recite—for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful,
One who has taught [man] the use of the pen—taught him what he did not know!

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space > The word of God had been spoken for the first time in the Arabic language, and this scripture would ultimately be called the *qur'an*: the Recitation.

Muhammad came to himself in terror and revulsion, horrified to think that he might have become a mere disreputable kahin whom people consulted if one of their camels went missing. A *kahin* was supposedly possessed by a *jinni*, one of the sprites who were thought to haunt the landscape and who could be capricious and lead people into error. Poets also believed that they were possessed by their personal *jinni*. Thus Hassan ibn Thabit, a poet of Yathrib who later became a Muslim, says that when he received his poetic vocation his *jinni* had appeared to him, thrown him to the ground and forced the inspired words from his mouth. This was the only form of inspiration that was familiar to Muhammad, and the thought that he might have become *majnun*, *jinni*-possessed, filled him with such despair that he no longer wished to live. He thoroughly despised the *kahins*, whose oracles were usually unintelligible mumbo jumbo, and was always very careful to distinguish the Koran from conventional Arabic poetry. Now, rushing from the cave, he resolved to fling himself from the summit to his death. But on the mountainside he had another vision of a being which, later, he identified with the angel Gabriel:

When I was midway on the mountain, I heard a voice from heaven saying, "O Muhammad! thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel. "I raised my head towards

heaven to see who was speaking, and lo, Gabriel in the form of a man with feet astride the horizon. . . . I stood gazing at him, moving neither backward or forward; then I began to turn my face away from him, but towards whatever region of the sky I looked, I saw him as before.

In Islam Gabriel is often identified with the Holy Spirit of revelation, the means by which God communicates with men. This was no pretty naturalistic angel, but an overwhelming ubiquitous presence from which escape was impossible. Muhammad had had that overpowering apprehension of numinous reality, which the Hebrew prophets had called *kaddosh*, holiness, the terrifying otherness of God. They too had felt near to death and at a physical and psychological extremity when they experienced it. But unlike Isaiah or Jeremiah, Muhammad had none of the consolations of an established tradition to support him. The terrifying experience seemed to have fallen upon him out of the blue and left him in a state of profound shock. In his anguish, he turned instinctively to his wife, Khadija.

Crawling on his hands and knees, trembling violently, Muhammad flung himself into her lap. "Cover me! cover me!" he cried, begging her to shield him from the divine presence. When the fear had abated somewhat, Muhammad asked her whether he really had become *majnun*, and Khadija hastened to reassure him: "You are kind and considerate towards your kin. You help the poor and forlorn and bear their burdens. You are striving to restore the high moral qualities that your people have lost. You honor the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. This cannot be, my dear!" God did not act in such an arbitrary way. Khadija suggested that they consult her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, now a Christian and learned in the scriptures. Waraqa had no doubts at all: Muhammad had received a revelation from the God of Moses and the prophets and had become the divine envoy to the Arabs. Eventually, after a period of several years, Muhammad was convinced that this was indeed the case and began to preach to the Quraysh, bringing them a scripture in their own language.

Unlike the Torah, however, which according to the biblical account was revealed to Moses in one session on Mount Sinai, the Koran was revealed to Muhammad bit by bit, line by line and verse by verse over a period of twenty-three years. The revelations continued to be a painful experience. "Never once did I receive a revelation without feeling that my soul was being torn away from me," Muhammad said in later years. He had to listen to the divine words intently, struggling to make sense of a vision and significance that did not always come to him in a clear, verbal form. Sometimes, he said, the content of the divine message was clear: he seemed to see Gabriel and heard what he was saying. But at other times the revelation was distressingly inarticulate: "Sometimes it comes unto me like the reverberations of a bell, and that is the hardest upon me; the reverberations abate when I am aware of their message." The early biographers of the classical period often show him listening intently to what we should perhaps call the unconscious, rather as a poet describes the process of "listening" to a poem that is gradually surfacing from the hidden recesses of his mind, declaring itself with an authority and integrity that seem mysteriously separate from him. In the Koran, God tells Muhammad to listen to the incoherent meaning carefully and with what Wordsworth would call "a wise passiveness." He must not rush to force words or a particular conceptual significance upon it until the true meaning revealed itself in its own good time:

Move not thy tongue in haste [repeating the words of the revelation]; for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in thy heart], and cause it to be recited [as it ought to be recited].

Thus when We recite it, follow thou its wordings [with all thy mind]: and then, behold, it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.

Like all creativity, it was a difficult process. Muhammad used to enter a trance state and sometimes seemed to lose consciousness; he used to sweat profusely, even on a cold day, and often felt an interior heaviness like grief that

impelled him to lower his head between his knees, a position adopted by some contemporary Jewish mystics when they entered an alternative state of consciousness—though Muhammad could not have known this.

It is not surprising that Muhammad found the revelations such an immense strain: not only was he working through to an entirely new political solution for his people, but he was composing one of the great spiritual and literary classics of all time. He believed that he was putting the ineffable Word of God into Arabic, for the Koran is as central to the spirituality of Islam as Jesus, the Logos, is to Christianity. We know more about Muhammad than about the founder of any other major religion, and in the Koran, whose various suras or chapters can be dated with reasonable accuracy, we can see how his vision gradually evolved and developed, becoming ever more universal in scope. He did not see at the outset all that he had to accomplish, but this was revealed to him little by little, as he responded to the inner logic of events. In the Koran we have, as it were, a contemporaneous commentary on the beginnings of Islam that is unique in the history of religion. In this sacred book, God seems to comment on the developing situation: he answers some of Muhammad's critics, explains the significance of a battle or a conflict within the early Muslim community and points to the divine dimension of human life. It did not come to Muhammad in the order we read today but in a more random manner, as events dictated and as he listened to their deeper meaning. As each new segment was revealed, Muhammad, who could neither read nor write, recited it aloud, the Muslims learned it by heart and those few who were literate wrote it down. Some twenty years after Muhammad's death, the first official compilation of the revelations was made. The editors put the longest suras at the beginning and the shortest at the end. This arrangement is not as arbitrary as it might appear, because the Koran is neither a narrative or an argument that needs a sequential order. Instead, it reflects on various themes: God's presence in the natural world, the lives of the prophets or the

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Last Judgment. To a Westerner, who cannot appreciate the extraordinary beauty of the Arabic, the Koran seems boring and repetitive. It seems to go over the same ground again and again. But the Koran was not meant for private perusal but for liturgical recitation. When Muslims hear a sura chanted in the mosque they are reminded of all the central tenets of their faith.

When Muhammad began to preach in Mecca, he had only a modest conception of his role. He did not believe that he was founding a new universal religion but saw himself bringing the old religion of the one God to the Quraysh. At first he did not even think that he should preach to the other Arab tribes but only to the people of Mecca and its environs. He had no dreams of founding a theocracy and would probably not have known what a theocracy was: he himself should have no political function in the city but was simply its *nadhir*, the Warner. Al-Lah had sent him to warn the Quraysh of the perils of their situation. His early message was not doom-laden, however. It was a joyful message of hope. Muhammad did not have to prove the existence of God to the Quraysh. They all believed implicitly in al-Lah, who was the creator of heaven and earth, and most believed him to be the God worshipped by the Jews and Christians. His existence was taken for granted. As God says to Muhammad in an early sura of the Koran:

And thus it is [with most people]: if thou ask them, "Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth and made the sun and moon subservient [to his laws]?"—they will surely answer al-Lah.

And thus it is, if thou ask them, "Who is it that sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless?" they will surely answer "al-Lah."

The trouble was that the Quraysh were not thinking through the implications of this belief. God had created each one of them from a drop of semen, as the very first revelation had made clear; they depended upon God for their food and sustenance, and yet they still regarded themselves as the center of the universe in an unre-

alistic presumption (*yatqa*) and self-sufficiency (*istaqa*) that took no account of their responsibilities as members of a decent Arab society.

Consequently the early verses of the Koran all encourage the Quraysh to become aware of God's benevolence, which they can see wherever they look. They will then realize how many things they still owe to him, despite their new success, and appreciate their utter dependency upon the Creator of the natural order:

[Only too often] man destroys himself: how stubbornly does he deny the truth!

[Does man ever consider] out of what substance [God] creates him?

Out of a drop of sperm he creates him, and then determines his nature and then makes it easy for him to go through life; and in the end he causes him to die and brings him to the grave; and then, if it be his will, he shall raise him again to life.

Nay but [man] has never yet fulfilled what he has enjoined upon him.

Let man, then, consider [the sources of] his food: [how it is] that we pour down waters, pouring it down abundantly; and then we cleave the earth [with new growth] cleaving it asunder, and thereupon we cause grain to grow out of it, and vines and edible plants, and olive trees and date palms, and gardens dense with foliage, and fruits and herbage, for you and for your animals to enjoy.

The existence of God is not in question, therefore. In the Koran an "unbeliever" (*kafir bi namat al-Lah*) is not an atheist in our sense of the word, somebody who does not believe in God, but one who is ungrateful to him, who can see quite clearly what is owing to God but refuses to honor him in a spirit of perverse ingratitude.

The Koran was not teaching the Quraysh anything new. Indeed, it constantly claims to be "a reminder" of things known already, which it throws into more lucid belief. Frequently the Koran introduces a topic with a phrase like: "Have you not seen . . . ?" or "Have you not considered . . . ?" The Word of God was not issuing

arbitrary commands from on high but was entering into a dialogue with the Quraysh. It reminds them, for example, that the Kabah, the House of al-Lah, accounted in large measure for their success, which was really in some sense owing to God. The Quraysh loved to make the ritual circumambulations around the shrine, but when they put themselves and their own material success into the center of their lives they had forgotten the meaning of these ancient rites of orientation. They should look at the "signs" (ayat) of God's goodness and power in the natural world. If they failed to reproduce God's benevolence in their own society, they would be out of touch with the true nature of things. Consequently, Muhammad made his converts bow down in ritual prayer (salat) twice a day. This external gesture would help Muslims to cultivate the internal posture and reorient their lives. Eventually Muhammad's religion would be known as islam, the act of existential surrender that each convert was expected to make to al-Lah: a muslim was a man or woman who has surrendered his or her whole being to the Creator. The Quraysh were horrified when they saw these first Muslims making the salat; they found it unacceptable that a member of the haughty clan of Quraysh with centuries of proud Bedouin independence behind him should be prepared to grovel on the ground like a slave, and the Muslims had to retire to the glens around the city to make their prayer in secret. The reaction of the Quraysh showed that Muhammad had diagnosed their spirit with unerring accuracy.

In practical terms, islam meant that Muslims had a duty to create a just, equitable society where the poor and vulnerable are treated decently. The early moral message of the Koran is simple: it is wrong to stockpile wealth and to build a private fortune, and good to share the wealth of society fairly by giving a regular proportion of one's wealth to the poor. Alms-giving (zakat) accompanied by prayer (salat) represented two of the five essential "pillars" (rukhn) or practices of Islam. Like the Hebrew prophets, Muhammad preached an ethic that we might call socialist as a consequence of his worship of

the one God. There were no obligatory doctrines about God: indeed, the Koran is highly suspicious of theological speculation, dismissing it as zanna, self-indulgent guesswork about things that nobody can possibly know or prove. The Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity seemed prime examples of zanna and, not surprisingly, the Muslims found these notions blasphemous. Instead, as in Judaism, God was experienced as a moral imperative. Having practically no contact with either Jews or Christians and their scriptures, Muhammad had cut straight into the essence of historical monotheism.

In the Koran, however, al-Lah is more impersonal than YHWH. He lacks the pathos and passion of the biblical God. We can only glimpse something of God in the "signs" of nature, and so transcendent is he that we can only talk about him in "parables." Constantly, therefore, the Koran urges Muslims to see the world as an epiphany; they must make the imaginative effort to see through the fragmentary world to the full power of original being, to the transcendent reality that infuses all things. Muslims were to cultivate a sacramental or symbolic attitude:

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Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth and the succession of night and day and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages (ayat) indeed for a people who use their reason.

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The Koran constantly stresses the need for intelligence in deciphering the "signs" or "messages" of God. Muslims are not to abdicate their reason but to look at the world attentively and with curiosity. It was this attitude that later enabled Muslims to build a fine tradition of natural science, which has never been seen as such a danger to religion as in Christianity. . . .