



## INTRODUCTION

**T**HERE IS KNOWN history and forgotten history, history that supports our sense of present and history that suggests other pathways. Here is the known: in A.D. 632, the Prophet Muhammad died in Mecca. He left a vibrant set of teachings, nine wives, a number of children, and several thousand Arab followers who called themselves Muslims. Less than two decades after his death, the adherents of this new faith had destroyed one empire and crippled another: the Persian shah was hunted down and killed on the banks of the Oxus River after a thousand-mile chase; Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, who had only a few years before retaken Jerusalem, saw his realm cut in half as the heirs of Muhammad occupied Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. The emperor collapsed and died when he learned that the city of Christ had fallen, even though the Muslims had spared the inhabitants the depredations normally inflicted by conquering armies.

With the Persians annihilated and the Byzantines crippled, the victorious Muslim armies were limited only by numbers and their own internal divisions. Had they stayed united, they might have continued on to India in the east and Europe in the west. As it was, they paused to fight two civil wars. Then the conquests began again, and Arab navies reached the walls of Constantinople before they were halted by a mysterious substance called Greek fire that set ships ablaze. Thousands of miles to the west, the general Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed from North Africa into the Iberian Peninsula and advanced to the Pyrenees. His armies might have continued all the way to the English Channel had he not been recalled by the caliph. He returned across the strait that now bears his name—



Jebel Tariq, the Mountain of Tariq, Gibraltar. Some years later, his vanguard met the stiff resistance of Charles Martel at the battle of Tours, in what would later become southern France, and the conquerors retreated from Europe, content with their new kingdom, al-Andalus, where they would remain for nearly a thousand years.

The sudden eruption of Islam left an indelible mark on Europe and established a template of conflict between Islam and the West. But conflict is not the only story: after the Muslims consolidated their gains, the Abbasid caliphate came to power in Baghdad in the middle of the eighth century. At its height, the Abbasid Empire stretched from present-day Morocco to the mountains of Afghanistan. The greatest of its caliphs was Harun al-Rashid, who ruled from Baghdad in a palace as ornate and romantic as subsequent imagination described it. He gathered the greatest musicians, poets, dancers, and, above all, theologians. Poets would appear at court and sing praises to the wonders of wine, while pious scholars, many of whom took the Quranic injunction against alcohol seriously, listened politely. A winning poem or a delightful song could earn a poet gold, or horses groomed in the caliph's stables, or a slave girl for the night.

On countless evenings, the court was transformed into an arena for theological debate. Muslim men of learning, schooled in sharia, the law derived from the Quran, offered their wisdom and drew on the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greeks. The works of Aristotle and Plato were translated into Arabic and used not only to enrich Islam but to create new science and new philosophy. And the caliph was not content simply to take the word of his learned men. He wanted to see how their ideas met opposing theologies, and he invited scholars and preachers of other faiths to his court. Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims engaged in spiritual and spirited jousts, and each tradition was enriched by knowledge of the others.

From the beginning of Islam, Muslims viewed Jews and Christians as distant, slightly errant, relatives. In honor of the fact that they worshiped the same God and had been given the same revelation as Muhammad, they were called *abl al-kitab*, the People of the Book. Muslims were expected to treat them honorably. Though Harun al-Rashid went further than most to embrace different faiths, he was fully within the Islamic tradition.

But Harun al-Rashid soon passed into myth, known in the West and

in the Muslim world mostly as a character in *A Thousand and One Nights*, along with Ali Baba, Sinbad the Sailor, and Scheherazade. Today, the notion that a Muslim ruler and a Muslim state might tolerate and even welcome other faiths is alien, not only to people in the Judeo-Christian West but to hundreds of millions of Muslims as well. The early-twenty-first-century world is polarized by the conflict between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Many Americans and Europeans see Islam as a religion of violence, especially toward those who do not share the faith, and millions of Muslims understand the history of Islam to be one of conquest and victory over nonbelievers, followed by defeat and setbacks. On all sides, this lens distorts the past, constricts our present, and endangers our future.

In truth, each of the three traditions has a core of peace. In churches throughout the world, worshipers turn to one another and say, "Peace be upon you." Walk into any store, home, or mosque anywhere in the Muslim world, and you will be greeted with *salaam alaykum*, "Peace be upon you." And the response is always the same: "And upon you, peace." Jews in Israel will begin and end a conversation with the simple salutation *shalom*, "peace." Each of the faiths teaches its followers to greet friends and strangers with the warm open arms of acceptance. Peace comes first and last.

That is not the common view. Scholars have rarely lost sight of the legacy of coexistence, and a student at almost any university can take courses or read one of the thousands of books and articles that illuminate it. Yet somehow that awareness has remained locked away in university libraries or confined to college courses. As a result, in America and in Europe, all that most people hear is the echo of the Arab conquests that followed Muhammad's death. And in the Muslim world, the memory of imperialism and Western aggression obscures memories of cooperation.

I have spent much of my life asking why this is. The reason may be simple: perhaps times of death and war leave a more lasting impression than periods of peace and calm. Maybe turmoil and confrontation sear the memory more deeply. But there are consequences to our selective readings of the past, in both the Muslim world and the Western world. As much as we want history to say something definitive about the present, it does not. History is a vast canvas, where it is possible to find support for nearly every belief, every statement about human nature, and



every possible outcome of the present. That doesn't make history any less important, but it is up to each of us to use it well.

My first political memories were shaped by growing up in the 1970s, when the Arab-Israeli conflict was a focus of American foreign policy and the cause of unending international tension. With the exception of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Arab-Israeli conflict seemed to be the most likely candidate for plunging the world into chaos, and the phrase "peace in the Middle East" was always met by a derisive laugh. But while the Israeli side of the story was well represented in the media and in classrooms, the Arab side was not. That was the side I wanted to learn about.

That led to more than a decade of study, first as an undergraduate in New York and then as a graduate student in England and in Boston. I studied Arabic, traveled throughout the Middle East, and began to teach the history of the region and the history of Islam. I found that my students usually viewed Islam through a dark prism of Muslim hordes threatening to deluge Christendom. The actual stories might have been blurry in their minds, but each time they saw a picture of a mosque or of an imam leading prayer, it struck a deep negative chord: Islam is a religion of war and violence, and Muslims have clashed with Christians and Jews forever. Those beliefs were hardly limited to my students. They are part of our culture.

Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, I encountered a similar prejudice toward the West. Well before the events of September 11, 2001, there was an entrenched belief that the West is the enemy of Islam. That has only intensified in recent years. Images of an aggressive, imperialist West from the time of the Crusades through the twentieth century animate angry Pakistani preachers in Peshawar, indignant Saudi clerics in Medina, and of course Osama bin Laden. Not only is the court of Harun al-Rashid forgotten, but so too is medieval Iberia, where the Jewish polymath Maimonides, the Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi, and a phalanx of Christian monks helped one another unravel the meaning of God and the universe; so too is the twelfth-century Levant, where the inhabitants of Crusader city-states and Muslim emirates traded, bartered, and intermarried; so is the Ottoman Empire, where each religious community, whether Greek Orthodox, Jewish, or Maronite Christian, was allowed almost complete autonomy save for the payment of annual taxes. The

Ottoman system, in fact, was a form of religious freedom nearly as expansive as what existed in the early United States.

But while anti-Western prejudice was part of the culture of the Middle East, it was only one part. The Islam I encountered barely resembled the images I grew up with and that continue to surround us today. The Islam of a cabdriver who helped me navigate Cairo, who stopped to pray and then played his bootleg Madonna cassette, who wanted to know about New York and looked at me as a good way to get a week's worth of pay to feed his family, didn't fit the narrow images that surround us in the West. The Islam of village mosques in Egypt or of a Saudi truck driver who gave me a lift in Jordan and then took an hour-long detour just so I could gaze over the Sea of Galilee; the Islam of Ahmed the hairdresser on a bus to Syria, who did his best to convince a twenty-something me to go to his salon in Damascus; and the Islam of the Kurdish family that sold me a kilim near Lake Van, in eastern Turkey—none of that was familiar.

But what was perhaps most unexpected was how infrequently I encountered Islam in the Muslim world. We have heard so often that there is no separation of church and state in Islam, and that religion is at the heart of everyday life. It is for some, but it shares space with the ebb and flow of daily existence. A man might pray at a mosque, spend a quiet moment submitting to God, and then be plunged into his workaday world, squabbling with neighbors, speaking with friends, watching the soccer game on television, going home to his children. The uneventful reality of everyday life should be obvious, so obvious that it shouldn't even bear mentioning. But what is so startling is that it isn't obvious to us, nor is the prosaic quality of our daily lives obvious to them.

That is true not just for our present but for the past. Today more than ever, bringing the panoply of the past into sharper focus is vital. That means clearing away the cobwebs and paying attention to the long periods where coexistence was more prominent, and also examining the reasons for war and violence that had little to do with religion, even when it was Muslims fighting Christians or Muslims fighting Jews.

Like any prejudice, the mutual animosity between Islam and the West is fueled by ignorance and selective memory. If we emphasize hate, scorn, war, and conquest, we are unlikely to perceive that any other path is viable. If we assume that religion is the primary source of conflict, we



are unlikely to address factors that have nothing to do with religion. Unaware of the history of coexistence between Islam and the West, Americans tend to believe, though perhaps not say, that until the Muslim world becomes less Muslim and more Western, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and war are inevitable. The same myopia about the past inclines Muslims from Rabat to Jakarta to dismiss talk of democracy and freedom as simply the latest Western, not to mention Christian and Jewish, assault on their independence and dignity.

Reclaiming the legacy of coexistence may not make the world whole, but it does show that Islam and the West need not be locked in a death dance. To the degree that each creed holds that it alone has the key to truth and salvation, there will always be a degree of tension. But rivalry and competition do not lead inexorably to war and violence. Christians, Jews, and Muslims have lived constructively with one another. They have taught one another and they have learned from one another. Judaism was central to the formation of Islam, and for a millennium and a half, until the end of World War II, Jews under Muslim rule enjoyed more safety, freedom, and autonomy than they ever did under Christian rule. Muslim states over the course of fourteen centuries have allowed for religious diversity and not insisted on trying to convert those who follow a different creed. From the beginning of Islam, Christian and Muslim states traded with one another. For fourteen centuries, Christians fought as soldiers in Muslim armies, and in the twentieth century, Arab Christians were instrumental in creating the states of the modern Middle East.

Focusing only on conflict is like skipping every other page while reading a book. It isn't just incomplete; it is misleading to the point of incoherence. At the same time, it is important to avoid the opposite temptation and not replace one distorted reading of the past with another. Too often, those who attempt to rectify the imbalance provide the missing pages but delete the others. The result is just as skewed. The tolerance of Muslim society is praised and moments of concord are highlighted, but the violence and animosity are downplayed. Coexistence is treated as the norm and conflict as the anomaly, when in truth, both are threaded through the past and our present. Also overlooked is the fact that not all cooperation is good cooperation. Alliances between Muslim and Christian states were often the result of "the enemy of my

enemy is my friend," concluded for the purposes of war, not peace. That should temper any optimism that we can all just get along.

So as not to substitute one skewed version of the past with another, the pages that follow present stories of both conflict and cooperation. This book is not meant to be a comprehensive history of the past fourteen hundred years, and most of the stories have been told elsewhere by others in more depth. However, because the periods of concord are less known to most people, the lesson for the present and the future naturally seems optimistic: there is a possibility of peace and constructive coexistence between Muslims, Christians, and Jews—and more to the point, between believing Muslims, Christians, and Jews who, in their heart of hearts, think that their creed and their creed alone reflects God's will. Given today's realities, that is a hopeful message.

This book is, of course, framed by the events of the early twenty-first century. Muslim societies have been their most tolerant when they have been secure. That is hardly unusual in human affairs, but for most of the past century, few Muslim communities have felt secure. One of the results of September 11 is that Western societies have also become insecure, rationally or not. The result is a rise of intolerance on all sides. Increasingly, more people throughout the world believe that Muslim and Western societies are destined to clash and that they will always clash until one or the other triumphs. That belief is poisonous, and one antidote is the rich historical tradition that says other paths are not only possible but have been taken time and again.

By historical standards, today's fissure between Islam and the West is not exceptional, but because of the technologies of death and because of weapons of mass destruction, that fissure has the potential to undo us. That is reason enough to take a look back and recognize that while the relationship between Islam and the West can be fratricidal, it can also be fraternal. Retrieving the forgotten history of relations between Islam and the West isn't a panacea, but it is a vital ingredient to a more stable, secure world. The story begins in the seventh century, on the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, in the city of Mecca, where a man named Muhammad, born of the tribe of Quraysh, heard the voice of God. "Recite!" he was told, and he did. And the world changed forever.