

JIHĀD
The Origin of Holy War in Islam

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Introduction

Comprehensive scholarly study of the phenomenon of "holy war," or war that is understood by its adherents and warriors as divinely sanctioned, ¹ is surprisingly uncommon, this despite the ongoing prominence of news reports and discussion about militant groups and even leaders of nation-states threatening or claiming to engage in "holy war." The only exception to this rule is the study of war in the Hebrew Bible, a subdiscipline begun by Julius Wellhausen in his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* in 1885. Friedrich Schwally coined the now common term "holy war" (*heilige Krieg*) in his monograph by that name published in 1901, ² and a substantial volume and variety of excellent scholarship as well as popular works have been published on the topic to this day. ³ Some scholarly studies have been written also on holy war in the context of the medieval Christian Crusades, particularly as a possible deviation from the Western concept of the "just war." ⁴

Although a number of studies have been published on holy war as it appears in Islam as well, only a fraction may be considered scholarly. Much must be deemed journalistic and some polemical, despite their attempt at objective appearance or their publication in well-known journals and magazines. One such example is W. R. Gardner "Jihād", published in 1912 by *The Moslem World*, in which the author concludes: "That *jihād* is thus enjoined in the Koran for the establishment or extension of Islamic rule is, we have said, not surprising. One is almost inclined to say that it could scarcely have been otherwise with a Semitic race. Among all Semites, the idea that war was, or could be, dissociated from religion, may be said to have been almost unthinkable." ⁵

Such polemics, in conjunction with the overwhelming fact of modern Western political and military domination, inspired Islamic apologetics ranging from the writings of Maulawi Cheragh 'Alī ⁶ in India and Rashi/ Riḳā ⁷ in Egypt to Āyatullāh Aḥmad Jannati *Defence and Jihād in the Qur'ān* ⁸ and S. K. Malik *The Quranic Concept of War*. ⁹ A second school of Islamic responses to Western accusations and dominance, however, such as those of Abū al-A'lā al-Mawdūdī in Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, have tended to take a revivalist and more radical stance with regard to divinely sanctioned war than that of the apologists, further reworking classic medieval war ideas. ¹⁰ Such Islamic responses, whether apologist or revivalist, have in turn engendered further polemics ranging from John Laffin alarmist *Holy War: Islam Fights* to the Hindu revivalist, Suhas Majumdar's *Jihād: The Islamic Doctrine of Permanent War*. ¹¹ All of these approaches, whether polemical, apologetic, or revivalist, have distorted their representations by singling out only one trend or view among a broad range of thinking about war in Islamic civilization and by using it to generalize about Islam as a whole. A similar problem is evident in some recent attempts by Muslims in the West to challenge militant Islamic positions of war. The recent work edited by Abdel Haleem and others, for example, *The Crescent and the Cross: Muslim and Christian Approaches to War and Peace*, although commendable for its reexamination of Islamic texts and traditions, tends to avoid important but difficult traditional positions in its attempt to teach a unidimensional Islam promoting peace and reconciliation. ¹²

Notwithstanding the clear influence of politics and polemics on discussions of such a controversial topic as holy war in Islam, a few excellent studies have been published in the last fifty years, most of which are descriptive. These include Majid Khadduri *War and Peace in the Law of Islam*, which places Islam's legal tradition regarding war in the context of Islamic and international law. ¹³ Alfred Morabia 1974 doctoral dissertation, " *La notion de ġihad dans la'Islām medieval*," ¹⁴ is less analytical in its broad description of the phenomenon and its application in Islamic history, although it also organizes various aspects of holy war ideology and theory. Rudolph Peters translated sections treating war from the medieval philosopher and legalist Ibn Rushd (*Bidāyat al-mujahid*) and the modernist Maḥmūd Shaltūt (*Al-Qur'ān wal-qitāl*) and also published a study of holy war doctrine in modern Islamic movements, the latter of which especially includes some careful discussion of holy war notions in Islamic tradition. ¹⁵ Mention should also be made of two Arabic studies, both of which have been influenced by the appearance of Western writings on Islamic holy war . These are Wahba al -Zuḥaylii *Āthār al-ḥarb fiil-fiqh al-islāmii* ¹⁶ and Muḥammad Haykal 's *Al-jihād wal-qitāl fiil-siyāsa al-shar'yya*, ¹⁷ both of which describe the place of war in Islamic tradition and jurisprudence. A dozen or so excellent articles also have been written on various aspects of Islamic holy war, ranging

from portrayals of "classic" Islamic war ideas to specific "sectarian" formulations among Shiite and Ahmadi expressions, to modernist reworkings of medieval doctrine. [18](#)

As noted above, however, the scholarly studies tend to be descriptive, attempting to characterize rather than explain the phenomenon of holy war in Islamic civilization. [19](#) Little has been done to study the formation and evolution of the notion of divinely sanctioned war in Islam or to critically examine the spectrum of Islamic views on the subject. Classical Islamic tradition has developed its own canonical view on the formation and evolution of holy war and, with some small variation among the legal schools, a more or less standard view on the meaning and application of divinely sanctioned war in general. Scholarly studies of holy war in Islamic civilization have tended to accept uncritically, or at least not challenge, these standard views. The purpose of the present volume is to critically examine the origin of the holy war phenomenon in Islam, to test whether the traditional Islamic position on its origin and development is sound, and to employ methodologies and assumptions current in the social sciences as well as philology in order to describe and explain the early importance of holy war ideas and their implementation in primitive Islam.

The term "holy war" suggests a great many things to different people. Perhaps it is best, then, in defining the scope of this study, to begin with what this book does not attempt to accomplish. This book is not about warfare in Islam. It does not treat tactics, rules of engagement, weaponry, or legal justification, nor does it examine why the early Muslims were so successful militarily during their great conquest beginning in the seventh century. Neither is it a study of the morality of war, religiously sanctified or otherwise. It does not engage in "justwar" theory as defined by Western tradition, and it does not attempt to find parallels in Islam and in no way attempts to justify or condemn the engagement in war by Muslims at any point in history, ancient or modern. It will treat neither legal issues, political expressions, nor developments of religiously sanctioned warring that evolved after the earliest period, such as those directed against apostatizing or dissenting Muslim groups.

It is, rather, simply a study of the origins of the concept and application of warring that we now define as "holy war" in the earliest period of Islamic history. Questions are posed, such as: When and under what circumstances did the concept first appear in Islam, and as a result of what historical, political, religious, and sociological stimuli did it mature into its classical expressions? What were its antecedents in pre-Islamic Arabian civilization? Might it have been influenced by parallel concepts in neighboring civilizations?

Underlying such questions is the indisputable fact that divinely justified war became an item of major importance in the earliest Islamic period, [20](#) and that the concept of holy war quickly became a powerful motivator that has had an

extremely important impact on the extent of Islamic empires and spheres of influence, on personal religious behavior, political and religious policy, international economics and law, and the self-perception of individual Muslims and the universal Muslim community as a whole. The study of the holy war phenomenon in early Islam is all the more interesting when we take into account the overwhelming evidence that pre-Islamic Arabia knew of no notion of ideological war of any kind, let alone religiously sanctioned war. How and why, then, did "holy war" become such a major component of early Islam?

Equally important questions regarding the origin of Islamic holy war are, What are the contexts for discussion about war in the early literature, and what are the authoritative sources for positions taken in later legal literature? How was warring understood by the earliest Muslim warriors? Was the early Muslim community of one mind on the matter, or were there different positions on warring and its justification in early Islam?

The problem may be stated most clearly as follows: while there is no evidence of any pre-Islamic expression of religiously sanctioned war, it appears very early in Islam as a highly developed and applied concept. How and why did holy war become such an important item in Islam?

This very question raises more general questions about the appearance of religiously sanctioned war in human cultures. How universal is the phenomenon? For how long in the history of human civilization have "holy war" concepts functioned? Does holy war exist more readily in complex, stratified societies than in more "primitive," less-stratified cultures? Is there a corresponding relationship between the existence of holy war concepts in any given culture and the structure or ideas of its religious system? Its economic system? Its leadership structure? Its gender roles? Can we postulate a transitional period in human cultures during which religiously sanctioned war might have evolved out of materially driven war? Can the existence of holy war ideas be explained through an objective "social Darwinist" theory? ²¹

Answers to such big questions can hardly be guessed at in this stage of our knowledge about holy war phenomena. Additional study of the topic in the fields of anthropology, social psychology, and the academic study of religion is a desideratum and might yet bring us closer to understanding one of the more perplexing phenomena that has endured from ancient times well into the modern and postmodern ²² age.

At this point, an introduction to the data is in order, which in a study of this sort means a few words on sources and methodological approaches. Sources for this study are taken largely from Islamic literature itself, and they may be divided into three sometimes overlapping categories: sources that provide information about pre-Islamic Arabian cultures and worldviews, the Qur'ān, and the Hadiith, the

tradition literature. A discussion about each category and the methodologies applied to their examination is provided in each chapter in which the specific genre of sources is studied. It should be noted here, however, that wherever feasible, the sources are cited both in their original languages and in translation in order to provide access to the nonspecialist in Islamic studies.

The three categories of sources from which the data for this study are extracted parallel the threefold division of this book. Part I centers on Arabia, particularly in the pre-Islamic period, and sets the parameters for the study of the early Islamic period by examining pre-Islamic cultural paradigms that may have influenced ideas about war during the transition into Islam. Chapter 1 examines preconceived notions about the various topics and subtopics to be studied and establishes the approach employed here. Chapter 2 examines the sources and provides an outline of pre-Islamic thinking about issues related to warring in order to establish paradigms against which developing Islamic views are analyzed.

Part II centers on the Qur'ān as the earliest Islamic text and transition marker from pre-Islamic Arabian civilization to the religio-cultural civilization that became Islam. Chapter 3 critically analyzes the canonical Islamic reading of the Qurān on the origin of holy war based on early commentaries (*tafāsiir*) and early historical and analytical studies (*asbāb al-nuzūl* and *naskh* collections). Chapter 4 provides a new reading based on a different method of analysis.

Part III centers on the tradition literature of Islam in the prophetic *sunna* and the biographical literature of Muḥammad . Chapter 5 concentrates on the Ḥadīth par excellence, the *sunna* of the Prophet , extracting information that might shed light on early beliefs and attitudes about warring during the mission of Muḥammad . Chapter 6 examines biographical (*siira*) writings about Muḥammad from which cultural and historical data are extracted for comparison with that retrieved from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth and for examining the relationship between formation of the new Muslim community (Umma) out of the old social systems of pre-Islamic Arabia and the development of religiously sanctioned war. Chapter 7 summarizes the prior findings and places them in historical context by linking the conceptual development of the Islamic holy war idea with the changes in the social structure and worldview of the new Muslim community.

PART I

Imaging Arabia

The term " Middle East" still conjures up images of adventure and romance, violence and intrigue, dusty bazaars and smoke-filled cafes. To the Westerner, it has been a region of mystery, the cradle of Western religion or perhaps even Western civilization itself, depending on how we define the extent of its borders and legacy -- yet it is different from "us." The Middle East is not the West, the Orient not the Occident. We romantically acknowledge our intellectual and spiritual roots in the region, yet we deny any claim that the Middle East makes on us. It is adjacent to Europe, affects Europe, and has, in a way, given birth to Europe. It is perhaps because of this intimacy amid variance that Europe has so consistently used the Middle East as a paradigmatic means of defining the Other. The West considers the Middle East romantic, violent, and mysterious. It represents the extreme for which our civilization epitomizes the mean. As Edward Said has pointed out in somewhat broader terms, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." ¹

Western views of the Middle East tend to fold up regions, periods, cultures, and religions into an accordion bellows of overlapping images. Hammurabi, Moses, perhaps even Zoroaster , and certainly Muhammad conflate into images of the ancient holy man, prophet, and lawgiver of our primitive forebears. Jesus, who represents the European escape from these primal images, is often left out of the picture among Christian believers, but even he cannot escape this primeval soup of ancient history among most postreligious Western intellectuals.

What stands out among the images of the Middle East is often the blood and gore or the anxiety of its potential: the story of the Flood, Pharaoh and the children of Israel and the destruction of the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea, Joshua at Jericho, John the Baptist's head on a platter, the Crucifixion, the destruction

of the Jerusalem Temple, the intrigue and sudden death in *The Arabian Nights*, the Arab hordes riding out to the Conquest -- and now the hijacker and suicide bomber. The Middle East is conjured up as the cradle of civilization, but it is nowhere the mature representative. It represents the potential that has been realized only elsewhere.

Our images of the Middle East are formed from movies and novels, storybooks and legends, television programs, news broadcasts, and newspapers. They are formed through these media and influenced by cultural and personal filtering mechanisms until they establish themselves in our psyches and become building blocks of our worldview. These are folk images, stereotypes that, although often consistent, hardly provide an accurate portrayal. The Middle East lies in our consciousness as the cradle of holy war. If our knowledge of the region provides us mental images for extremely ancient history, we may imagine Mesopotamian armies marching off to battle past the ziggurats of Babylon. We can certainly recall the biblical war images from illustrated Bibles, from such classic films as *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben Hur*, and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and perhaps from sermons and homilies at religious services. But among our most secure images are those of the Arabs: dark warriors grasping scimitars in one hand and Qurāns in the other, a close-up of a swarthy giant, robed and bearded, brandishing a curved blade while breaking into a cunning grin -- or a guerrilla aiming his Kalachnikov at innocent bystanders, a lone figure wired with explosives boarding an airplane or a city bus.

Stereotypical images of war in the Middle East often conflate a huge geographical area and thousands of years into an ongoing stream of warring and violence. In fact, however, the Middle East has been no more war-torn and perhaps a lot less so than many other regions of the world. To provide some perspective, the great historian of war Quincy Wright assembled a tally of 278 wars fought throughout the world from 1484 to 1945 based on a consistent set of criteria. Of those, 187 were fought mainly in Europe and 91 were fought everywhere else.²

Similar to the way in which we almost cannot help but distort the Middle East through our stereotypical images, so we in the West regularly misapply the term "holy war" when we so readily employ it to describe bloodshed between nonWestern peoples and states. The Iran of Khomeini or the Iraq of Saddam Hussein have been regularly criticized as manipulating their populations into fighting wars by being told that they are fighting a holy war. But we do not apply the same criteria when our own presidents rally American citizens to be ready to engage the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union or destroy the satanic Saddam Hussein.³ All governments when making the decision to go to war must rally their citizens to the cause. Because war has carried such a universally negative image in the twentieth century, political leaders and diplomats invariably articulate their coun-

tries' willingness to engage in war by using rhetoric that borders on the religious, particularly when describing "sacred duties" or in demonizing the enemy.

In fact, the motivations for engaging in war are complex and many, from the economic to the psychological, political, juridical, and ideological. Holy war, as will be seen below, is a subcategory of ideological war in which aggression is carried out against threats to the sacred values of a worldview, but no single motivation sends off armies to engage in battle. The reasons for war are multifaceted, complex, and fluid. One of the many categories that has been applied to warring and its justification is that of holy war, and holy war has been closely associated with Islam as it has with the Hebrew Bible and medieval Christendom. What follows is an examination of the provenance of holy war in its Islamic environment.

ONE

Islam and Holy War

Generalizations about Islam

Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood religion to the West, and many stereotypes still hinder clarity about its tenets and practices. Western prejudice toward Islam is as old as Islam itself. Even before Muhammad, the nearly inaccessible Arabian Peninsula became a haven for practitioners of heterodox forms of Christianity that sought refuge from persecution by the Orthodox church. The church, in response, considered Arabia a "breeding ground of heresies" (*haeresium ferax*) even before the great Islamic Conquest began in the seventh century C.E. ¹The incredible success of the Conquest and the great civilization that arose along with it represented Europe's greatest threat, both politically and intellectually, for a thousand years. From the conquest of Spain in the early eighth century to the siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Turks in 1683, Islam represented a threat to the very physical existence of Christendom. This and Islam's achievement in all scientific and intellectual fields during its heyday in the Middle Ages caused a reaction in the West that epitomized Islam as cruel, evil, and uncivilized. This negative characterization began when Islam was powerful and Christianity weak but has continued into our own day.

Islam, as all religious civilizations, represents a complex system of values and ritual, theology and folklore, law and faith. Like all religions, it contains within it both the deep and the simple, the sublime and the cruel, the exalted and the ignoble. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is multifaceted, offering a variety of responses to the questions and perplexities of the human condition. It cannot

fairly be forced into a single wrapping. Just as Judaism and Christianity rarely have a single view on issues of religious import, whether they be in the areas of theology, ritual, or epistemology, as well as the more commonly known issues of law and interpretation, so, too, Islam offers a range of views. Not only are there differences between Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Sufis, of which some educated Westerners may be generally familiar, within each of these and other Muslim groups may be found an abundance of subgroups expressing differing views and trends. As Aziz al-Azmeh articulates it, there are many "Islams." ²

It is possible, nevertheless, and is indeed a desideratum in the field of religious studies, to speak of Islam as a coherent system, just as it is in relation to Judaism or Christianity -- but only as long as we are willing to note the conflicting voices that may be found within it. The "Islam" that is the subject of analysis for the purposes of this study is the Islam in formation of the earliest period, during and immediately after the mission of Muḥammad, before the splits that eventuated in the division between Sunnis, Shi'is, Khārijis, and Sufis. It took generations for Qur'ānic studies, theology, and law to evolve from the days of Muḥammad into the disciplines of the classic period of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, and it was during these generations that the "classical" or "orthodox" views and foundational concepts of a mainstream religious tradition were formed. ³ Our mission shall be to examine a portion of the complex early history of nascent Islam in order to reconstruct the conceptual development of its views on war.

The Meaning of Holy War

The study of war is a vast field comprising historical, phenomenological, legal, tactical, and psychological approaches, along with those in the fields of economics, political science, international relations, ethics, religious studies, anthropology, history, and so on. In these various disciplines, definitions must be established in order to limit and quantify the topic of study, but because of the great variety of interest and approach between them, even the definition of war itself finds no universal acceptance. ⁴ In most general terms, however, war may be defined as an organized, purposeful activity directed by one established group against a rival group that involves actual or potential application of lethal force. ⁵ The importance of distinguishing between the in-group and the "other" cannot be overstressed as the particular vehemence and tragedy of "civil war" suggests, for organized and sanctioned mass violence and killing can be conducted only against those who are identified, even if only temporarily, as outside the group against "the enemy." ⁶

War does not always mean combat. It may be a state of condition between human groups even when warfare is not actually being conducted. The cold war,

for example, represented a state of affairs in which actual and direct combat between the principal parties never took place, and the doctrine of *jihād* in Islamic legal literature likewise defines a state of relationship between the Islamic world and the non-Islamic world.⁷

The term "holy war" is a European invention and derives from the study of war in its European context. It does not define types of warfare, such as "primitive" or "modern," nor does it define whether a specific engagement is defensive, preemptive, or initiatory. Rather, in its most broad definition, the term defines a form of justification for engaging in war by providing religious legitimization.⁸ The question of justification is one that occupies many areas of scholarship on war, from anthropology to ethics, and it is the key issue in theories of "just war" that treat the *jus ad bellum*, a statement on the right or justification for making war.⁹ Modern just-war theory relies on natural-law causes as justification for war, but medieval European just-war theory relied on religious justification as well, and such religious justification was ideological, based on religious doctrine. Today there is an attempt among international organs and, to a certain extent, in the West in general, to distinguish between legal and ideological justifications for warring, with the legal receiving greater legitimacy. Nonetheless, the distinction between holy war and just war is not always clear. Such distinction did not exist before the seventeenth century in Europe and has often been blurred since.

Western just-war ideas developed out of an amalgamation of Greco-Roman thought with Christian dogma and ethics and Teutonic cultural traditions.¹⁰ The development of thinking that resulted in Western just-war doctrine includes holy war ideas and justifications as well, but the European expressions of holy war arose within historical and religio-cultural circumstances that were unique and certainly different from the equally unique Arabian context out of which arose the Islamic expressions of holy war. The two nevertheless share the ideological nature of justification for resorting to war. Both expressions therefore represent a subset of ideological war, which James Turner Johnson defines as "armed struggle against threats to the highest values accepted in the culture and against the values represented by the enemy."¹¹

Although holy war is defined most broadly as any religious justification for engaging in war, it does not necessarily presume a connection of military activity to religious purposes, though this is often the case. Some expression of holy war exists in virtually all religious traditions and is certainly the most common and persistent expression of ideological war. Its representation across religious and cultural strata has taken many different forms and produced many different results. All, however, can be said to represent divinely justified engagement in war. Such justification contrasts most starkly with material justification for warring, which among ecological materialists has been said to lie at the bottom

of many if not most decisions to engage in war. ¹² Despite the continuing discussion between the various disciplines over the primary motivators for warring, it has become far more accepted in recent years to acknowledge that a multiplicity of motivations factor into any decision to go to war. Whatever the complexity of the motivational circumstances, however, justification -- if not sanction -- for embarking on a program in which many of one's own group are likely to be killed is a necessity. ¹³ As societies become more complex and hierarchical, justification based on material enhancement seems to decline, while ideological justification seems to rise. In the fully developed Islamic system, as will be demonstrated below, religious justification is provided along with the assurance that material enhancement or, in the event of death, heavenly reward will also accrue to the religious warrior. All expressions of holy war provide religious justification for engaging in war, whether or not a multiplicity of other factors affect the decision or likelihood of warring.

As might be expected given the variety of human religious experience, there are many different expressions of holy war. The divinity may gird its human warriors with extraordinary strength, determine the outcome before the beginning of the battle, or even fight on behalf of the people. Or the people might fight on behalf of the deity (or what it symbolizes), the ideals of religion, or against the false ideas of opposing religions or peoples. Divine authority for warring is established directly by the divine word communicated through speech or writ or indirectly through a prophet, priest, or religious functionary who determines the divine sanction through oracular means. Such a broad spectrum of holy war paradigms reflects the varied cultural and religious settings in which they may be found. Parallels may be found between the various expressions because of historical influence or simply because of phenomenological similarities. Yet the particular religious and cultural configurations of every individual tradition produce a unique expression of holy war that accurately reflects its history, theology, and anthropology. The particular expressions of holy war found in the Islamic world tend to be referred to in the West as *jihād*.

The Meaning of Jihād

The semantic meaning of the Arabic term *jihād* has no relation to holy war or even war in general. It derives, rather from the root *j.h.d.*, the meaning of which is to strive, exert oneself, or take extraordinary pains. *Jihād* is a verbal noun of the third Arabic form of the root *jahada*, which is defined classically as "exerting one's utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation." ¹⁴ Such an object is often categorized in the literature as deriving from one of three sources: a visible enemy, the devil, and aspects of one's

own self. There are, therefore, many kinds of *jihād*, and most have nothing to do with warfare. "*Jihād* of the heart," for example, denotes struggle against one's own sinful inclinations, while "*jihād* of the tongue" requires speaking on behalf of the good and forbidding evil. ¹⁵ Various activities subsumed under *jihād* are said by Muḥammad to distinguish true believers who are loyal to God's Prophet:

Every prophet sent by God to a nation (*umma*) before me has had disciples and followers who followed his ways (*sunna*) and obeyed his commands. But after them came successors who preached what they did not practice and practiced what they were not commanded. Whoever strives (*jāhada*) against them with one's hand is a believer, whoever strives against them with one's tongue is a believer, whoever strives against them with one's heart is a believer. There is nothing greater than [the size of] a mustard seed beyond that in the way of faith. ¹⁶

Muḥammad is also credited with saying : "The best *jihād* is [speaking] a word of justice to a tyrannical ruler." ¹⁷

The qualifying phrase "in the path of God" (*fi sabīl Allah*) specifically distinguishes the activity of *jihād* as furthering or promoting God's kingdom on earth. It can be done, for example, by simply striving to behave ethically and by speaking without causing harm to others or by actively defending Islam and propagating the faith. *Jihād* as religiously grounded warfare, sometimes referred to as "*jihād* of the sword" (*jihād al-sayf*), is subsumed under the last two categories of defending Islam and propagating the faith, though these need not be accomplished only through war. When the term is used without qualifiers such as "of the heart" or "of the tongue," however, it is universally understood as war on behalf of Islam (equivalent to "*jihād* of the sword"), and the merits of engaging in such *jihād* are described plentifully in the most-respected religious works. ¹⁸ Nevertheless, Muslim thinkers, and particularly ascetics and mystics, often differentiate between the "greater *jihād*" (*al-jihād al-akbar*) and the "lesser *jihād*" (*al-jihād al-aṣghar*), with the former representing the struggle against the self and only the "lesser *jihād*" referring to warring in the path of God. ¹⁹

Even within its range of meaning as war on behalf of Islam, the term is often used in relation to conflicts between Muslims. Such examples of *jihād* include wars fought against groups of apostates rebelling against proper Islamic authority (*murtaddūn*), dissenting groups denouncing legitimate Muslim leadership (*baghī*), highway robbers and other violent people, and deviant or un-Islamic leadership. ²⁰ The determination of when Muslim leaders may call for *jihād* and the requisite demands that such a call makes on the Muslim populace is developed in the legal literature. Because such religiously authorized war is determined in part by legal criteria that parallel Western Christendom's concerns identified

with just-war thinking, John Kelsay has led other students of religious ethics in exploring Islamic legal thought associated with *jihād* in terms of just-war theory. ²¹

Jihād thus cannot be equated semantically with holy war, for its meaning is much broader, includes many activities unrelated to warfare, and is determined in part by legal criteria that parallel modern just-war thinking in the West. It would not be inaccurate, however, to suggest a definition of the subcategory of "*jihād* of the sword" as any act of warring authorized by legitimate Muslim authorities on behalf of the religious community and determined to contribute to the greater good of Islam or the community of Muslims, either in part or as a whole. Because such a definition is framed by both ideological and legal criteria, even "*jihād* of the sword" is not quite equivalent to the common Western understanding of holy war.

The present volume centers on the origins of holy war in Islam, while not intending to provide a full understanding of the meaning of the term in classical Islam. It does not treat all of its meanings in the Qur'ān, for example, nor does it treat the newer interpretations of *jihād* that have developed in the twentieth century. ²² My purpose, rather, is to trace the genesis and development of religiously sanctified war in the earliest Islamic period, whether that is categorized in Islamic parlance as *jihād* or referred to through other terminology.

The issue of terminology finds some importance in a study of this sort, for just as it is impossible to equate *jihād* directly with holy war, Islam does not limit religiously authorized war to the term *jihād*. The terms *qitāl* (fighting) and *ḥarb* (war) found in the Qur'ān and in post-qur'ānic religious literature also treat warring. *Ḥarb* is a generic term for war and refers usually to wars that are not legitimized by religious authority, while *qitāl* and particularly *qitāl* in the path of God (*fī sabīl Allah*) is virtually synonymous with *jihād* when it is understood as warring in the path of God. ²³

TWO

The Pre-Islamic World

Holy war has been a well-known phenomenon in human civilization from long before the genesis of Islam. The Hebrew Bible contains many examples of warring on behalf of God or religion, and even the deity itself is depicted on occasion as engaging in the fray. ¹The Bible, in turn, reflects or parallels ideas of other peoples and religions in the ancient Near East, and the view that the tribal or national deity is actively involved in battle was common. ²The prominent expression of holy war in the Bible subsequently influenced Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as well, so that ideas of fighting on behalf of God's religion or God's people had been well established in the popular monotheistic religious traditions contemporary to the formative period of earliest Islam. ³So, too, was divine association with warring and its outcome a part of Hindu religions and Zoroastrianism, with the latter certainly having an influence on the indigenous populations of Arabia before and during the early Islamic period. ⁴

These great religious civilizations all had an impact on the new religious civilization of Islam, and scholarship on the question of their influence on early Islam continues to this day. ⁵There is no doubt that foreign religious ideas and practices, particularly from Judaism and Christianity, had a profound effect on the development of Islam, ⁶but in the case of holy war, the parallels that exist are phenomenological and not due to influence by the biblical traditions. ⁷Notwithstanding the popularity of Western comparative studies between Islam and the biblical traditions, indigenous pre-Islamic cultural and religious concepts and ritual had an impact that was at least as powerful. Perhaps the most obvious example is that of pilgrimage to the *bayt* or Ka'ba in Mecca, which is a nearly

wholesale adoption of pre-Islamic religious practice. The profound importance of pre-Islamic Arabian civilization for the development of warring in Islam requires its own independent examination.

Pre-Islamic Arabia

The history of pre-Islamic Arabia is garnered from reports from neighboring peoples, from occasional inscriptions found among ancient ruins, and from Muslim histories and related literature that were written centuries after the end of that era. The related literature referred to here includes oral Arabian poetry attributed to the pre-Islamic period but not committed to writing until a century or more into the Islamic period. ⁸ Although all historical documents have their own *tendenzen*, the typical view of Islamic literature, whether historical or otherwise, toward the pre-Islamic period merits a slight digression. The term for the pre-Islamic period in Islamic texts is *jāhiliyya*, which has come to hold the meaning of a state of ignorance. This period of ignorance is juxtaposed with the period of Islam, which is the era of moral and scientific enlightenment during which knowledge of God replaced the vanity of idolatry. ⁹ The term is revealing, for its very use illuminates the powerful Muslim historiographic bias regarding pre-Islamic Arabia. The ancient period is typified as being a time of ignorant idolatry, moral decadence, and near social anarchy. It was a period of hopeless human decay and darkness until the coming of light and hope with the advent of Islam. ¹⁰ This view presupposes, among other things, a radical break in values and worldview between the old pre-Islamic period and that even of early Islam, an assumption that is not supported by the results of this study. The bias against pre-Islamic times in Arabia expressed by the Islamic sources is quite clear and must certainly be taken into account, but its acknowledgment among Western scholars has too severely limited the amount of material that critical scholarship has been willing to accept for examination for the period.

A second and more difficult problem lies in the nature of early Islamic historical writing in general. Not only are those literary works that treat early Islam and the pre-Islamic era not contemporaneous with the age they treat, the earliest sources were compiled into their present form only 150 or 200 years after the end of the period in question. Although the available sources purport to contain material contemporaneous with the earliest period of Islam, Western scholarship has questioned their reliability since the middle of the nineteenth century. ¹¹ Some recent studies of the pre-Islamic period try to bridge the data gap by extrapolating information from anthropological investigations of traditional groups that appear to have similar social, ethno-linguistic, economic, cultural, and climatic backgrounds but that live in the modern world. ¹² The danger, however,

of relying heavily on analogues that are separated from the subject in question by a millennium and a half of history is clear, for we cannot control for the innumerable natural evolutionary changes in culture and ideas that can skew the analogy. ¹³

This study relies largely on Islamic texts for primary source material, notwithstanding the acknowledged difficulties of working with such information. Modern ethnographic studies of desert nomadic groups have also been consulted but not relied on for the extrapolation of data except in exceptional cases, which are acknowledged. This book, though neither a traditional study of historical events nor an ethnography, seeks to learn from historical and ethnographic data. As an examination of the concept of holy war in Islamic religious civilization, it attempts to understand cultural history. It therefore requires a critical examination of sources but not the same kind of examination as for a study of political history. It need not, for example, analyze why a primary source posits a particular motivation for, or outcome of, a particular event, because whether or not the events themselves even took place is often irrelevant. What is of importance for this study are the conceptual approaches and attitudes that the sources communicate. Do they distinguish between different qualities of fighting, different types of war, or the nature of justification for engaging in combat? How do they define the authority for the decision to engage in combat or for the obligation for doing so? What were the motivations for risking one's life on the battlefield? This information may sometimes be safely garnered even from texts that are unreliable for the purposes of recording political history, because such texts do not intend to manipulate the specific information being sought for this study. Sometimes materials that are suspect with regard to their historical accuracy may nevertheless provide accurate conceptual information even about the period they are suspected of misrepresenting. At the very least, they tend unselfconsciously to express beliefs and aspects of a worldview that represent their own period. ¹⁴

Southern and Northern Arabia

The geographic term for peninsula in Arabic is *shibh jazīra*, which means, literally, "resembling an island." This is an appropriate term for the Arabian Peninsula because it is surrounded by water on three sides and thus largely isolated from other lands and peoples. Its northern border, however, extends into the settled areas of the eastern Mediterranean region and Mesopotamia, and, as a consequence, cultural, economic, and social interaction always moved between the arid Arabian steppe and the Fertile Crescent. This movement, however, was restricted by the northern desert, which tended to keep large population movements, including invading armies, from moving southward. The Arabian Pen-

insula remained, therefore, largely free from the direct control of the great powers of early antiquity -- Egypt and Mesopotamia, and, later, Greece, Persia, Rome, and Byzantium. Communication across the boundary remained largely in the hands of Arab transporters who drove camel caravans back and forth between the southern tip of the peninsula and the southern Mediterranean in the west or the lower Tigris-Euphrates river valley in the east. Although the surrounding great powers were unable to conquer Arabia directly, they often succeeded through influence and proxies in preventing the formation of major rival commercial or political entities in Arabia. With the decline of these outside forces by the third quarter of the sixth century, however, the way was open for the growth of an indigenous Arabian power. ¹⁵

Because the armies of the empires never succeeded in controlling Arabia, oppressed peoples wishing to flee state-imposed restrictions in the Fertile Crescent sometimes slipped south of the frontier. Such peoples included unorthodox expressions of Judaism and Christianity, which were pressured, oppressed, or outlawed by the external imperial authorities or their own internal religious hierarchies. There were, therefore, well-known Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia, which fled the state-controlled orthodoxy of Byzantine Christianity and Persian Zoroastrianism. These groups, which entered the stark and bleak landscape of Arabia in order to practice their religious traditions, assimilated greatly to Arabian culture, adopted Arabic names, and spoke the local languages. ¹⁶ As noted previously, these groups seem to have had a profound influence on the development of early Islam, but because we do not know the details of their particular, most likely heterodox, religious expressions, it is difficult to know the quality of their influence. ¹⁷

The Arabian Peninsula hosted two general categories of indigenous populations: nomadic Arabs or Bedouin, and settled Arab agriculturists, with the former predominant in most habitable areas outside the southernmost region. The southern end of the peninsula, corresponding roughly to today's Yemen and known by the Romans as *Arabia Felix*, or "happy Arabia," was the most watered area and the only location, outside the occasional oasis, where agriculture could be practiced on an ongoing and year-round basis. The success of agriculture in South Arabia freed some of its population to pursue specialty skills necessary to build large and complex social structures necessary for the growth of large civilizations. Its major export crop was frankincense, which, because of the great demand for this commodity in the ancient Mediterranean world, provided the means to import goods and knowledge that helped establish a highly organized and developed society. South Arabia during this high period, beginning at least five centuries before the Common Era, was organized under the four major kingdoms of Sabā', Minaea, Ḥaḍramawt, and Qatabān, as well as some other minor states, but the social, religious, political, and cultural systems of South Arabia

were so similar that they may be considered basically uniform. ¹⁸ The populations of South Arabia were largely settled in villages and towns practicing irrigation agriculture, but nomadic groups lived in areas not fit for productive farming. Notwithstanding the unique climatic and socioeconomic situation of South Arabia, there was common traffic and communication between it and the remainder of the peninsula, partly as a result of the caravan trade but, also, simply because of their proximity and the great success of South Arabian civilization. Rulers of South Arabia occasionally marched against other areas, as is preserved in the famous qur'ānic *sūra*, Al-Fīl (105, "The Elephant"), which refers to the attempt of an invader from the south to capture Mecca by attacking it with elephants. ¹⁹ Southern kingdoms established colonies in North Arabia, and ancient inscriptions describe the campaigns of southern kingdoms against nomadic tribes on the frontiers as well. ²⁰ South Arabian peoples occasionally migrated northward, and although the two areas were linguistically separate (and remain so to an extent even to this day), they easily communicated and most certainly influenced one another.

Although South Arabia preserved no pre-Islamic literary tradition aside from the material sifted through the lenses of later Muslim writers, a number of ancient inscriptions in south Arabian languages have been discovered. These include a series of votive inscriptions dating up to the mid-fourth century C.E., which were dedications to statuettes in thanks for military and other successes. Most were found in a single area and dedicated to one national deity, Ilmuqah (*Imqh*), in its cultic center of Awā near the famous ancient Marib and known today as Maḥram Bilqīs. These votive offerings were mounted on stone plinths containing a record of the dedication, and they provide information about the modes of warfare current in the Sabaean kingdom. ²¹ Similar votive offerings were made at the pre-Islamic shrine known as the Ka'ba in Mecca, although no inscriptions remain. ²² Despite the fact that these records of ancient campaigns were dedicated to tribal deities in thanks for success on the field of battle, the wars referred to in relation to the votive offerings do not fall into the category of "holy war." Motivations for warring derived from the inscriptions were almost exclusively the acquisition of plunder and the attainment of military glory. Warriors occasionally also received official awards at the conclusion of a campaign. In one case, rescue of a ruler's sister married to another ruler was cited as the reason for battle. There seems to be little obvious interest in territorial expansion and possession, but control of trade routes was important. ²³ The casualties listed are almost always restricted to the number of combatants killed or taken prisoner, along with an accounting of the booty taken (usually in heads of camels, donkeys, and sheep and goats). Only one of thirty-eight such inscriptions noted the loss of noncombatants. ²⁴ In one text, enemy casualties are listed as 2,000 men, but most of the battles were fought with only scores of troops on each side, ex-

tending upward to a few hundred. Reprisal operations were not uncommon, according to these records, but the victors are rarely cited as massacring captive troops. Battles were often waged by these settled South Arabian groups against nomads living on the peripheries of the settled areas.

Because of its unique climatic, economic, and sociopolitical conditions, South Arabia is usually considered to be a separate and distinct civilization significantly removed from the dominant nomadic Arabs to its north, but this was often not exactly the case. Among the southern regions, some were more and others were less centralized and organized around farming and commercialization. Some remained seminomadic, and all of them experienced periods of transition between village agrarianism and nomadism or vice versa, depending on the climatic, political, and economic conditions of the period. ²⁵ During a crisis, nomadization increased, to such an extent at times that large populations migrated out of the south and into areas that are known to have been almost exclusively nomadic, ²⁶ particularly when the important Mediterranean market for frankincense declined in late antiquity. The concomitant decrease in income resulted in the south's inability to keep up its irrigation system of dams and canals, which in turn accelerated its decline. Later and lesser southern kingdoms such as the Ḥimyar and the Kinda also declined by the sixth century, and with their decline came increased nomadization and northward migration of South Arabian peoples. ²⁷ The decline did not spell an end to urban centers, however, even in the depressed period just before the rise of Islam, for towns were needed for trading and continued to grow up around cultic centers and oases. ²⁸ But certainly by the century before the beginning of Muḥammad's mission, even predominantly agrarian South Arabia had taken on a considerably more nomadic character.

The Christian kingdom of Ethiopia (Abyssinia), opposite South Arabia and across the narrow Bab al-Mandab straits separating the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden, must also be mentioned. The mutual influence and interaction between South Arabia and Ethiopia are exemplified by the claim of each area as the ancient home of the Queen of Sheba, who according to the biblical report (1 Kings 10:1-10 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-9), went to Jerusalem with a great caravan of camels bearing spices, gold, and precious stones to test King Solomon's famous wisdom with difficult questions. Abyssinian rulers occasionally invaded South Arabia, and Abraha (a variant of Abraham), the leader of the aforementioned South Arabian expedition against Mecca recorded in the Qur'ān, was an officer originally sent by the Ethiopian negus to assist South Arabian Christians against the aggression of the last (and Jewish) king of the Ḥimyar dynasty, Dhū Nuwās. ²⁹

In North Arabia, and particularly in areas encroaching onto the Fertile Crescent, were organized Arab polities that reached very sophisticated levels of organization and culture. The prime example is the Nabataean kingdom (ca. 200 B.C.E.-200 C.E.) in today's southern Jordan, Israel, and northern Saudi Arabia.

The great civilization of Nabataea, centered in its rose-colored capital city hewn out of solid rock among the cliffs of Petra in today's Jordan, had so greatly assimilated to its Aramaic and Greco-Roman surroundings that it hardly qualifies as an indigenous Arabian kingdom. Its language of discourse was Aramaic, and its aesthetic, Greco-Roman. Only the personal names preserved reveal its Arabian origin. ³⁰ The Nabataeans, however, offer a prime example of the course of migration and acculturation of Arabian peoples who moved northward from the Arabian steppe and into the more settled areas of the Fertile Crescent, a process continuing from the earliest times. ³¹

Two other Arabian kingdoms in the north served as buffer states between the Byzantine and Persian Empires and the sporadic incursions of Bedouin migrants and raiders. These are the Ghassanids in the west and the Lakhmids in the east, both of which retained their Arabic language and culture although they took on forms of Christianity as their religion. They existed into the beginning of the seventh century but were weakened considerably by the time Muḥammad began preaching in Mecca in the early 600s. ³²

Both northern and southern Arabia were experiencing a period of decline during the time leading up to the birth of Muḥammad . The eastern Mediterranean region in general was in decline during this period, and the constant wars between Byzantium and Persia weakened the entire region. On the other hand, the central Arabian town of Mecca appears to have remained influential, primarily because of its position as the major cultic center of the west central Arabian region known as the *Ḥijāz*. Contrary to earlier assumptions among European scholars, Mecca may not have controlled a vast and influential network of trading contacts but, rather, a more modest trade in mostly local commodities. ³³ The growth of sea trade, in which Arabia did not compete, drained resources away from the traditional Arab caravaning and trade of earlier centuries, and the collapse of powerful indigenous polities in southern and northern Arabia encouraged free reign among Bedouin tribes. This collapse, in turn, led to greater internecine feuding and wars, which resulted in a heightened insecurity throughout the peninsula. Nomadic tribes became increasingly dominant over sedentary communities, and Bedouin cultural influence rose. This trend away from organized polities and toward increased nomadism or at least nomadic influence has been termed the "bedouinization of Arabia." ³⁴

This term is somewhat misleading because the majority population of the peninsula did not make the transition from agrarianism or settled village or urban life to nomadism. On the contrary, the archaeological and literary evidence suggests that the majority population was in fact never nomadic, including the period leading up to the genesis of Islam. What did seem to change in this period, however, was a shift in power and influence away from sedentary communities and toward dominant nomadic tribes.

In the midst of the political dislocation and general decline of settled populations, the centrally located town of Mecca is depicted in the sources as maintaining itself as a powerful center exhibiting such urban traits as significant socioeconomic distinctions between clans and "classes." It is still unclear what specific factors may have contributed to a strong and influential Mecca at this time beyond its importance as a religious cult center and the commerce that this importance would naturally attract -- but the Arabic sources are quite consistent in their depictions. Such are the common features of Arabia toward the end of the sixth century. They make up the backdrop to the emergence of Islam. ³⁵

Central Arabia

Notwithstanding the importance of and influence exerted by the history, cultures, and religions of southern and northern Arabia on early Islam, the new Islamic order emerged out of the uniquely west central Arabian milieu of the Ḥijāz, and it is this environment that most strongly influenced the new order. It must be stressed, however, that the Ḥijāz does not equal Bedouin nomad. The majority population was probably settled among the agricultural oases scattered throughout the area, while the fewer but more ubiquitous nomads were spread throughout the steppe and deserts adjoining the occasional oases. The definitions of nomad and settled agriculturist were not static however, because there was movement between the two populations and even a sizable population of "seminomads" who practiced settled agriculture at certain times of the year and a localized form of nomadism at other times. ³⁶ Indeed, most settled populations traced their origin from Bedouin nomadism, and, despite the difficult life of the desert pastoralist, the Bedouin image -- and therefore its cultural importance and influence -- remained the highest in status. The status of Bedouin culture and custom was enhanced by the fact that, for the most part, they held the reins of power in the region, and it is the dominant tribes of Bedouin who exercised the greatest influence. The strong tribes dominated not only weaker nomadic formations but also the less-mobile seminomads and the sedentary populations because of their fighting skills and mobility, which allowed them to attack and then retreat into the desert where they could not be pursued. ³⁷

Muḥammad was born and raised in the west central Arabian town of Mecca, and it was the environment of Mecca that had the greatest influence on the worldview of early Islam. Mecca was founded as a religious shrine, most likely because of its sacred spring, the *zamzam*, which gurgled up in an unlikely and inhospitable place. ³⁸ Mecca and its sacred spring became a cultic center, which, by the sixth century, attracted pilgrims from throughout Arabia. Commercial-

ism grew up alongside pilgrimage, and trading fairs were established in conjunction with the major periods of population influx. Mecca thus became a center for the visits of people with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, thereby serving as a central focus for the intermingling of cultures, traditions, and ideas. It became "the most complex and heterogeneous place in Arabia," in which a variety of social, economic, and religious systems came together, causing ferment, tension, and opportunity.³⁹

Muḥammad was of the Hāshim clan , a part of the large and dominant tribe of the region known as Quraysh. According to tradition, the Quraysh tribe left off from its previously nomadic lifestyle and took over the rule of Mecca some five generations before Muhammad.⁴⁰ Qurayshite cultural roots were therefore those of the Bedouin, and although as a settled urban tribe some Bedouin social and cultural values surely evolved and changed, these traditional Bedouin cultural realia must be examined in order that we can gain an appreciation of the dominant cultural norms of seventh-century Arabia and the part that they played in the development of an early Islamic worldview.

Bedouin Nomadism

It is appropriate as well as logical that the name "Bedouin" is derived from the Arabic word for desert, *al-bādiya*, for the Bedouin nomads of Arabia have been successful in living in extremely adverse desert conditions for millennia. The key to their success in such a hostile environment was the domestication of the camel, which may have been achieved in south central Asia as early as the last quarter of the third millennium B.C.E. Ancient rock drawings suggest that camel domestication entered Arabia after the sixteenth century B.C.E. The Bible (Judges 6-8) records the migration of what appear to be camel-herding bedouin in its reference to Midianites, Amalekites, and "children of the east" (*b^eney qedem*) crossing the Jordan River from the north Arabian desert in the early eleventh century B.C.E. "They would come up with their livestock and their tents, swarming as thick as locusts; they and their camels were innumerable. Thus they would invade the land and ravage it. Israel was reduced to utter misery by the Midianites, and the Israelites cried out to the Lord."⁴¹

The domestication of the camel along with cultivation of the date palm provided the transportation and nourishment for deep penetration into and regions. Under certain conditions, a camel can travel for weeks without drinking,⁴² and the date, which supplies high caloric energy for sustenance, is easily preserved and does not spoil in the desert heat. The date pits and stems may also be fed to camels, and in an emergency the camels themselves may be slaughtered and their stored water drunk. The extreme mobility available to camel nomads made them formidable raiders of settled areas, for they could attack settled peoples unawares

and then retreat into the desert where they could not be followed. Camels, however, were only one of a variety of animals tended by Bedouin: these included also donkeys for local transportation, sheep and goats for food, and, occasionally, horses for raiding.

As with any population spread over a large area and separated by the natural boundaries of water, mountains, and desert, it is impossible to speak of a single "Arabian culture" or even of a single Bedouin culture. There were and are, rather, a virtually infinite number of permutations of cultural norms. It is nevertheless possible to speak of the "ideal-typical" traits of a society, and it is this theoretical norm, which of course must vary considerably over time and place, that must be established here as a baseline against which changes brought about by Islam may be examined. Because of the political importance of Bedouin tribes in the Hijāzi highlands of the sixth century -- the assumption among the settled populations themselves that they derived from Bedouin ancestors and what appears to have been in many respects their strong cultural influence if not dominance in some areas even of settled life -- it is to Bedouin cultural values and concepts that we shall now turn.

Bedouin society was and remains a patriarchal system, and the sources providing data about camel-nomadism in ancient times stress male roles and the cultural traits that relate to those roles.⁴³ It is clear that female roles and cultural traits associated with those roles play a critical role in Bedouin life as they do in all human cultures, but the data on these topics in ancient Bedouin cultures is difficult to extract. The following discussion therefore centers on traits of great importance to the male role as leader and warrior in ancient nomadic Arabian cultures.

Fate

Pre-Islamic Arabian poetry contains a great amount of material treating the vicissitudes of fate. The vocabulary of the poetry is varied and sophisticated, with a number of different terms treating various nuances of what English renders generally as fate or destiny. *Manīya* or other forms of the root *m.n.w.* (*manā*, *munā*, the plural *manāyā*, etc.) convey this sense. As Helmer Ringgren notes in his monumental *Studies in Arabian Fatalism*, "[The root *m.n.w.*] is generally used to denote the allotting or apportioning carried out by Destiny, but as a rule we feel that the thing allotted is something dark and gloomy."⁴⁴ Other terms associated with fate include the verb *ḥamma* as in *uḥimmat* or *ḥummat manīya*, meaning "fate or death (*manīya*) is determined,"⁴⁵ *qadar* and *qadā'*, both of which are associated with the sense of decree and which later become the primary terms in Islam for divine decree;⁴⁶ and *dahr* (*miqdār*) and *zamān*, which are associated with the meaning of time as destiny and which often appear personified: "Time

overcame 'Ād by force, and Himyar, troops after troops. . . ." "Time has killed him. . . ." "Time destroyed them (*'afnāhum al-dahr*). . . ." "Time is a thief who snatches away friends and relatives. . . ." ⁴⁷

To the pre-Islamic Arabian poet, fate cannot be avoided or escaped. It will find you wherever you may be, whether you fortify yourself in castles or even take refuge in the sun:

The young man runs, but his fated death (*ḥimām al-mawt*) reaches him.
Every day brings the fixed term nearer to him.
I know that my day will once reach me
And I shall not care for my world any more.

or

Time (*dahr*) is change, Time's fool is man,
Wealth or want, great store or small,
All is one since Death's (*manūn*) are all. ⁴⁸

What is inevitably fated in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is the necessity of death, which is preordained. Destiny is, in fact, death, and a death that does not seem to include the possibility of an afterlife. ⁴⁹ One will meet one's demise in a particular way at a particular place, so it is no use trying to avoid it by attempting to change the course of one's own history. Other events are not specifically mentioned as being destined to occur, however, so that decision making in general seems not to have been obstructed by the whims of fate. On the other hand, the overwhelming sense of fated death must have affected one's general view of history, both personal and general. Patient endurance (*ṣabr*) is the best attitude to be taken in the face of destiny. Destiny is capricious and impersonal, so that events occur without a sense of meaningful grounding. Whether one will die in an upcoming raid, in defense of one's honor while fighting, or through a mortal accident, one should be patient and courageous in facing the inevitable.

O my friends, a respected death
Is better than an illusory refuge;
Anxiety does not ward off the decree (*qadar*)
But endurance is a cause of victory.
Death (*manīya*) is better than vileness,
And having death before oneself is better than having it behind.
Thus, courage! There is no escape from death. ⁵⁰

It is still not clear how much pre-Islamic Arabian poetry reflects the actual worldview of daily life with regard to such beliefs as fate. Some of the great

European scholars of this poetry were hesitant, given the strictly formulaic use of common motifs and clichés in this oral medium, to consider it an accurate reflection of a common worldview.⁵¹ At question is to what extent the poetic view of fate weakened or superseded traditional Arabian religious beliefs.⁵² Ignaz Goldziher holds that the importance of the idea of fate lessened the influence of the old religious traditions, as do Watt and Ringgren.⁵³ The fact that religious motifs are rarely found in the poetic compilations, however, does not necessarily mean that they were not an important part of pre-Islamic Arabian culture. What seems clear is that several trajectories of belief were pulling pre-Islamic Arabian culture in different directions. Fatalism, the belief in the gods as controllers of human destiny; the Jewish and Christian religious belief systems held by newcomers and their resident Arabian converts; the indigenous pre-Islamic monotheistic expressions grouped together under the term *ḥanīfiyya*;⁵⁴ and what Watt terms "tribal humanism" associated with the important pre-Islamic traits of honor, generosity, and tribal solidarity all pulled at the minds and hearts of the populations of the region. These contrasting and competing systems added to the sense of dislocation that was affecting Arabia in the period immediately before the rise of Islam.

Honor

The harsh conditions and paucity of resources in the Arabian desert engendered a sociocultural system among Bedouin that promoted certain survival traits. These include hospitality and generosity, strength and bravery, good judgment, and an intense loyalty to one's kin and clan. Such characteristics tend to be subsumed under the Arabic term *murū'a* (or *muruwwa*), which is often defined today by the general term "manliness" but which is given a number of variant definitions in medieval Arabic lexicons. It seems to have had a broad range of meanings in ancient days but tended to define the qualities of a man's wealth and management of property, which therefore included such traits as generosity, judgment, and the abilities needed to acquire wealth in that society. The honor of a tribesman could be realized through hospitality, which often meant protection of a weaker individual (perhaps a refugee cut off from his own kinship group for some major offense) or an entire kinship group requesting aid. Weaker groups, for example, such as the Jewish clans of Yathrib/ Medina,⁵⁵ attached themselves to the larger and more powerful Arab tribes (or clans) of the town. So, too, in the nomadic situation, strong tribes or tribal leaders would gather a number of dependents (*jār*, plural *jirān*) whom they protected and who were in turn obligated to their superiors, and the most powerful tribes had a number of weaker tribal groups attached to them in various levels of clientship.⁵⁶ The most noble tribes (*sharīf*, plural *shurafā'*) were those that were strong enough to be inde-

pendent of other tribes and could offer protection to many weaker groups. The following poem by the chief of the powerful Tamīm tribe exhibits the hierarchy of status and influence:

We are the noble ones, and no other clan is our equal;
From our number kings [are raised], and among us temples erected.
How many clans we have overpowered during [our] raiding!
It is [only] a surfeit of might [such as ours] that finds imitators. . . . ⁵⁷

Honor included loyalty and devotion to members of one's kinship group but not to one's superiors, for the ancient nomadic system was one of equals. Loyalty and devotion were directed, rather, to one's comrades. This loyalty tended to be concentrated within the kinship group but also extended beyond it in certain cases. Ancient poetry extols those heroes who were willing to sacrifice all that was dear in order to honor a commitment or a relationship, even to the descendant of a dead comrade. ⁵⁸

The related term *'ird* narrows the qualities of tribal men toward honor in battle. Although the term still denotes honor and dignity in modern Arabic, its origin lies in the honor of warriorship. Failure in fighting or the loss of independence was a humiliation, while success in combat was accorded great honor and status. Humiliation was considered the opposite of power because it demonstrates weakness, which brought dishonor. *'Ird* was a powerful driving force for pre-Islamic nomadic behavior and, as noted previously, is seen by some to have largely upstaged religion as a motivator of attitudes and behavior. ⁵⁹ Sacred contests of honor known as *mufākhara* or *munāfara* tested the mental as well as physical mettle of tribesmen -- the men's *'Ird*. Its near-sacred nature suggests that it was a primary motivator of tribal and intertribal behavior.

Pre-Islamic poets, who were an extremely important institution in Bedouin society, perpetuated the ideals of heroism and manliness in verse. These ideals included the responsibility to reinforce the special worth and qualities of one's own tribe and to devalue those of competing tribes, and it has been suggested by one prominent scholar that poets of the pre-Islamic period probably had more power in their society than the press of modern times has in ours. ⁶⁰ Because of the great importance placed on honor, such issues as tribal jealousies, insults, and competition all served to encourage fighting between tribes. Even multigenerational wars were attributed to insults given in verse, and poetry occasionally ended bloody conflicts as well. In the latter case, impartial judges were appointed to determine which side was more successful in a contest of boasting against each other (*mufākhara/ munāfara*). The outcome had nothing to do with impartial justice but, rather, with the poetic accomplishment of the winning side. ⁶¹

Equality

Established by economic necessity for survival in the difficult natural environment and strengthened by the importance of honor, the concept of fraternity among equals was of great importance among the Bedouin. The pastoral economy of the steppe provided very little surplus, and all worked as herdsmen. There was little specialization of skills. Partly because of the need to avoid the retention of material goods that could not be carried easily from place to place, there was little stratification of wealth. ⁶²The oral arts of singing, reciting poetry, storytelling, and recounting genealogies could distinguish individuals, as could excellence in raiding skills, but these talents were completely portable and were qualities judged among equals. There was more accumulation of wealth and stratification among sedentary populations living around oases, for agriculture was coupled with trade and simple artisanship. The subsistence-level economy of both nomads and agriculturists, however, ensured a nearly undifferentiated society, the importance of which has been eternalized in pre-Islamic poetry.

Tribal Solidarity

Because central Arabia was governed neither internally nor externally by any overarching political organization or state, there was no concept of law in the politico-juridical sense of the term. There was no authority to legislate or enforce universal rules beyond the limits of the kinship group, and even within the kinship group no formal system of law developed beyond that of cultural expectations of behavior. Power relationships were therefore a question of the relative strength of one kinship group in relation to another. The notion of universal justice or an abstract set of legal principles by which an individual was to be judged was not a part of the system. It was probably because of this decided lack of an overarching legal system that tribal solidarity assumed such an important role in daily life. The individual found protection not under the law but, rather, through the family and its extended kinship relations, which could be called on to rally to one's defense. In the absence of law, the strength of the tribe and the threat of retaliation served as the only means of protection. ⁶³

The basic unit of kinship relation was the family household. A number of households together made up the *ḥayy*, and this or a somewhat larger group constituted the clan, or *qawm*. It is in the clan where solidarity is of the utmost importance, for this is the largest unit for which there can be regular ongoing social interaction in the steppe environment. Each clan led by a chieftain, or *shaykh*, had its own name based on an eponymous ancestor. Several related clans together made up the largest kinship unit, the *qabīla*, or "tribe." ⁶⁴

Tribal organization seems to have been the organizing principle of all of Arabia, whether nomadic or settled, in the period leading up to the rise of Islam. Individuals identified themselves in terms of real or supposed association with kinship groups, beginning with the nuclear family and encompassing the larger extended family and clan groupings to the tribe. Nomads, seminomads, settled agriculturists, and urban dwellers all identified themselves according to this system, whether in southern, northern, or central Arabia. The individual felt his primary loyalty to the closest relations and felt less fidelity as the relationship extended out to broader determinants of identification. As a result, different clans or sublineages even within a single tribal grouping might have rivalries or even wars between them, as will be seen. The complicated system of relations between kinship groups promoted a feeling of tribalism, which forced the individual always to be aware of how close one's kinship relation is to the "other" and to determine the quality of interaction and mutual responsibility based on it. Fred Donner summarizes this feeling of tribalism: "Whatever his way of life, the Arabian was first and foremost a tribesman -- identified with his tribe, loyal to it, and secured as much as possible against abuse [from outside his kinship group] by it. This was as true of the fully settled populations of South Arabia or the oasis towns scattered through the peninsula, as it was of the nomadic peoples of Arabia." ⁶⁵

Because of the adverse natural conditions in most of the peninsula and its subsequently limited resources, the means of sustenance among the Bedouin tended to be insufficient to provide for the natural rate of human increase. Because of the competition for scarce resources, there was a constant tendency for the strong to seize the resources of the weak. ⁶⁶ Kinship solidarity helped to avoid such divisiveness within closely related groups by subordinating individual interests to those of the kinship group, or *hayy*, and to protect its members from the constant threat of predatory raids from outsiders: I am [of the tribe of] Ghaziyya: if she be in error, then I will err; And if Ghaziyya be guided right, I go right with her!" ⁶⁷ In fact, when a clan or kinship group went into any kind of military action, no individual was deserted, and none had the right to refrain from participation. Otherwise, the clan had to sever the blood relationship with the members concerned. ⁶⁸

The larger the extended kinship group from which support was garnered, the more secure and powerful the group. The meager environment, however, could not support groups beyond a relatively small critical mass except during certain times of the year. Large groups, therefore, broke into smaller units that, given the natural tendency if they were successful, eventually grew to such an extent that they, too, had to divide. ⁶⁹ The problem with this trend toward increase is that limited desert resources simply could not support the numbers. Too large a population resulted in starvation or epidemic, so the large kinship groups split

and eventually separated to such an extent that kinship relationship was eventually unrecognized. Kinship groups vied with one another for limited resources by raiding the assets of unrelated (or not closely related) groups. When circumstances were particularly difficult, they even practiced infanticide within their own group.⁷⁰ As a result, stamina, patience, and a fierce toughness were necessary and valued traits.

Although a complex web of obligations and expectations lay within the kinship group, each extended tribal unit considered itself independent of every other and, therefore, considered no inherent obligation to those outside the extended kinship group.⁷¹ Raiding the resources of "unrelated" tribes, therefore, was not only acceptable but also commendable, and raiding has even been termed the "national sport" of the ancient Arabs.⁷²

Raiding and Revenge

Raiding (*al-ghazw*)⁷³ was practiced only against outside groups who were not in close kinship or allied relationship and was an important means of gaining or redistributing resources in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁷⁴ Nomadic groups raided each other or sedentary populations or, probably more commonly, extracted what might be called "taxes" or protection money called *khuwwa*, meaning "brotherhood" payments, from weaker tribes. Because the practice of raiding was essentially economic (re) distribution, bloodshed was avoided as much as possible,⁷⁵ and the raiders themselves always knew that they, in turn, would also be the victims of counterattacks or independent campaigns.⁷⁶ For this reason, a kind of protocol developed, sometimes referred to in Western sources as pre-Islamic chivalry, in which accepted "rules of engagement" were generally honored. The *modus operandi* was for warriors to appear suddenly and overwhelm the enemy at a moment of inattention in order to acquire their moveable wealth -- usually flocks or herds. Raiding was possible especially during certain periods of the year when pasturage supported only small groups.⁷⁷ The *sayyid*, or tribal leader, received a fourth part of any spoils taken in raids, but his responsibilities to the tribe were also greater. His duties included ransoming prisoners and seeing that restitution was made for infringements of the accepted "rules of engagement" in intertribal raids and other conflicts. The remainder of the spoils was divided among the male members of the kinship group. As a rule, the closer the kinship relationship between neighboring tribes, the more benign the fighting during a raid. When raids were conducted from a farther distance, however, there was a greater likelihood of more serious violence, and when hostilities deepened, raiding changed its character altogether.⁷⁸ Adult males were killed, and women and children were captured and held for ransom or sold as slaves.

Such serious clashes extending over greater geographical and genealogical distances were much rarer and much more dangerous. They tended to be "associated with severe environmental dislocations such as abnormal drought or major political changes that forced one pastoral group to migrate into territories normally claimed by another, and they were sometimes tantamount to battles for the very survival of the groups in conflict, since the resources under dispute could support only one of the groups." ⁷⁹

When blood was spilled, the *lex talionis* came into play in the form of tribal retaliation (*qiṣāṣ* or *qawad*), for the basis of tribal unity consisted of the principle that all must act together in war. On the other hand, no one was allowed to protect his own kinsman for the murder of another *within* the kinship group. ⁸⁰ Because tribal members felt no inherent responsibility toward those outside the kinship group, the system of mutual revenge (*tha'r*) served to a certain extent as a preventive to wanton killing across tribal boundaries. Not only was it a matter of individual honor and responsibility for a close relative of the victim to take revenge on the killer, tribal honor was also at stake if the extended kinship group could not protect or avenge its members or those attached to it, and this ideally meant a life for a life. If the killer could not be found, a close relative could be killed as a substitute, although the custom of paying a bloodwit (*diyya*) also evolved as a less-honorable substitution. ⁸¹

The payment or receipt of the bloodwit paralleled the distribution of booty among the male members of the kinship group. Inheritance was also shared among the male members of the same group. This practice points again to the importance of tribal solidarity in pre-Islamic nomadic Arabia, since pasturage and other resources were tribal property of which the individual had only usufruct. Blood feud, bloodwit, booty, and even inheritance revolved around male interdependence and sense of responsibility in clan warfare. ⁸²

A major problem with the combined rules of the talio and revenge has been that tribal members tend naturally to value the lives of their own kin greater than those of more distant or unrelated groups. The great warrior and idolatrous opponent of Muḥammad, 'Āmir b. al-Ṭufayl, is credited with the words, "We slew of them a hundred in requital for an old man. . . ." ⁸³ The pattern of reprisals for blood vengeance, therefore, sometimes escalated to the extent that a fullblown war between tribes might ensue for generations, ⁸⁴ and even official settlements between extended tribes did not always satisfy the personal need for individuals to avenge the death of close relatives. One example is the feud between the Kināna and the Quraysh in the vicinity of Mecca, where the tribal leaders agreed that the two tribes had achieved a balance of the *lex talionis*. This agreement did not satisfy the brother of the most recently killed, however, who took advantage of an opportunity to avenge his brother, thus rekindling the tribal feud indefinitely. ⁸⁵ These tribal feuds were complicated by the competing values of

kinship solidarity and loyalty to comrades, thereby exacerbating the tensions and raising emotions. ⁸⁶ In the more centralized state system of South Arabia, an attempt was made to mitigate the problems inherent in blood vengeance by transferring the responsibility for revenge from blood relatives and assigning it to the ruler. Then, only the perpetrator suffered under this system, thereby protecting innocent relatives and reducing the tendency for intertribal escalation. ⁸⁷ This practice was, of course, only possible in an environment in which a sovereign political organization had the administrative system and power to transcend the individual ties of kinship in adjudicating disputes, which was certainly not the case in central Arabia, where no centralizing authority existed before the genesis of Islam. ⁸⁸

The most that we know of the pre-Islamic period from the Arabic sources is about its battles and wars, and the records of these are found in a literature known as *Ayyām al-'Arab*, meaning, literally, "Days of the Arabs" but more accurately translated as "Battle-Days of the Arabs." ⁸⁹ Since individual battles tended to be decided in one day, the name of the battle was called "the Day of X." Although the number of "days" recorded in the literature is quite large, it is clear that there were far more battles and raids than are mentioned in the sources because only the interesting ones were recorded or discussed in the ancient literature preserved in the Islamic collections. ⁹⁰ The reasons for these battles range from blood revenge to competition over pasturage and include cases in which stronger tribes forced weaker units to pay them a tax. The converse situation occurred as well, when tribes battled to free themselves from obligations to a previously stronger tribe. ⁹¹

Traditional Arab as well as modern Western sources all emphasize that fighting among pre-Islamic Arabs was a natural, some even suggest joyous, part of Bedouin life. ⁹² From an economic and evolutionary perspective, the modus operandi of such fighting seems to have evolved as a means of ensuring survival of the fittest and of distributing scarce resources to those who survived best -- at the same time as it contributed to maintaining a limited population in a harsh land. The consistent losers who could not recoup their losses were destined to sell themselves into slavery or clientship to a more powerful tribe that could protect them or else to migrate altogether out of the area in which the system operated, if that was possible. ⁹³

Religious Factors

A great deal of controversy still lingers over the religious life of pre-Islamic Arabs. ⁹⁴ Because the Islamic sources sketch out a picture of pre-Islamic Arabia as being hopelessly sunk in the mire of superstitious idolatry, modern scholars have had to read them with great care, and their readings have resulted in a va-

riety of interpretations of pre-Islamic religious realia. It still remains unclear, for example, to what extent indigenous Arabian monotheism (*ḥanīfiyya*) existed before Muḥammad, ⁹⁵ what kind of polytheistic ritual existed aside from pilgrimages and dedications (including sacrifice), how the people related to their sacred stones and how much influence the religious systems exerted over daily life, the extent of Jewish and Christian influence on indigenous Arabian religious practice, or even what kind of Judaism or Christianity was practiced by the communities living in Arabia. ⁹⁶ It is clear, despite the uncertain state of our current knowledge, that religio-cultural values and institutions exerted an important influence over the life of the inhabitants of pre-Islamic central Arabia. The extent and nature of that influence, however, cannot yet be determined with any kind of certitude.

Luckily, the factors associated with warring in pre-Islamic central Arabia all appear to be linked directly to the economic and social commodities of pasturage, material wealth, and prestige. ⁹⁷ No available writings or inscriptions relating to the period describe fighting that we might consider was religiously or ideologically motivated. As might be expected, the pre-Islamic deities may have been consulted before the tribal members embarked on a campaign of war or blood revenge, but this type of action hardly constitutes a form of "holy war." A man seeking revenge, for example, may have consulted divination arrows associated with pre-Islamic idols. According to Ibn al-Kalbī, when the god was consulted through divination, it sometimes appeared to forbid exacting revenge against a victim's killer, which invariably infuriated the would-be avenger. ⁹⁸

Despite the lack of any clear reference to holy war in central Arabia, religious wars appear to have been fought between Jews and Christians in southern Arabia during the first half of the sixth century. The most famous of these was a series of battles associated with the last king of Ḥimyar, Zur'a b. Tibbān As'ad, ⁹⁹ known most commonly as Dhū Nuwās, who subsequent to his conversion to Judaism is said to have persecuted and killed Christians living in the Christian enclave of Najrān. ¹⁰⁰ The conflict was important enough to have entered the oral lore of the Ḥijāz and came to be associated with *sūra* 85:4-7 in the Qur'ān, the verses known as the "people of the trench" (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*). Early Muslim exegetes associate this reference to the burning of Najrāni Christians, although the qur'ānic passage is likely to be an eschatological reference. ¹⁰¹ In any case, according to the later sources, the Najrāni Christians pleaded to the Abyssinian Christian negus for help. ¹⁰² He, in turn, took counsel with his religious ally, the Byzantine emperor. ¹⁰³ The negus, with Byzantine assistance, then sent troops across the straits into southern Arabia and engaged Dhū Nuwās in battle. Although the first attack was apparently destroyed by the Ḥimyarite army, the second put an end to the kingdom of Ḥimyar and placed the entire region under the control of the Abyssinians. ¹⁰⁴ The problem with the entire episode from the standpoint of

war is that we can learn very little of the real and purported motivations behind the actions from the incomplete and often contradictory sources. What is most clear is that the affair reflects the influence of the great powers of Byzantium and Persia at that time over the internal affairs of the south Arabian kingdoms. Part of the superpower interest was the control or taxation of trade, both from India and from southern Arabia. ¹⁰⁵ The Jewish Himyarites were allied to the Persians, while the Christians of the region were associated with Abyssinia, and despite the major monophysite-duophysite controversy that divided most Semitic Christians from Byzantine orthodoxy, the Arabian Christians inclined toward Byzantium. ¹⁰⁶ Abyssinia carried out the policies of its Byzantine suzerain while gaining control of the valuable lands of southern Arabia. It seems, therefore, that although the motivations for warring were perhaps partly religious, religious denomination more likely served as a means of differentiating and dividing the local populations between the influences of the contemporary superpowers of Byzantium and Persia.

Sacred Time and Sacred Space

One of the great economic and therefore survival problems inherent in the pre-Islamic system of tribal exclusivism and intertribal raiding was the resultant difficulty of engaging in trade between separate tribes, exchanging information, and having open social (and genetic) intercourse. This problem was mitigated by the institution of four pre-Islamic sacred months (*al-'ashhur al-ḥaram*), ¹⁰⁷ which served as periods during which fighting between enemy tribes was forbidden. This period of nonbelligerency allowed Arabs of various and unrelated kinship groups to settle claims and debts, arbitrate disputes, and intermingle in other ways as they visited religious shrines and attended the market fairs, where they traded ideas as well as goods. ¹⁰⁸ It was during the sacred months that pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to the sacred sites took place as well, an activity that brought together both nomadic and sedentary populations under the rubric of religious ritual. According to the sources, the Arabs strictly observed the prohibition against both initiating conflicts and exacting revenge during these sacred months. ¹⁰⁹

In addition to the limitations on fighting during sacred time, there were sacred places in which fighting was always forbidden. These were the sacred enclosures associated with local religious cults (*ḥaram*, plural *aḥrām*). Such sacred sites existed in a number of locations besides the most famous pre-Islamic shrines situated in and around Mecca, which continue to function in Islamized form to this day as the *manāsik*, or "sacred sites of pilgrimage." Al-Ṭ'if boasted a sacred site also within the region of the Hijāz, and the territory of al-Yamāma to the east had its own sacred enclosure, probably in the town of al-Ḥajr, in which fighting was strictly forbidden. ¹¹⁰ To respect the sanctity of the sacred areas, particu-

lar ritual customs had to be adhered to which varied from location to location, but certain common social and political regulations seem to have been observed in all the sacred enclosures. Killing, for example, was always forbidden in the *ahrām*, ¹¹¹ which were known as neutral areas where feuding tribes sent representatives to engage in negotiations. Such sacred enclosures with their special status and restrictions have continued to function in southern Arabia well into the twentieth century. ¹¹²

Warring in Pre-Islamic Arabia

All the evidence suggests that in pre-Islamic Arabia, armed aggression between nomadic tribes and between nomads and settled populations was a normal part of life. War as an activity, however, less defined the relationship between unrelated or distantly related kinship groups than did war as a condition. That is, however often groups within the larger tribal unit engaged in battle, it can be said that a "state of war" existed generally between tribal groupings, even when no actual fighting took place, which was a normal definition of relationship in pre-Islamic Arabia. ¹¹³ Battle between unrelated or distantly related kinship groups was a culturally acceptable means for distributing and redistributing the limited commodities of material wealth (in the form of herds and flocks), access to pasturage, and personal and tribal prestige. With regard to the social system as a whole, warring served to keep the population at a survivable level, while in the social Darwinian sense it provided a means for the fittest and most adaptable groups to excel. This warring was nonideological. Intertribal raids served a similar purpose to the hunt in early hunting societies, in that successful endeavors provided sustenance for the tribe while also offering the opportunity for male members to demonstrate skills and excel and rise within the social hierarchy. There is no evidence to suggest that religious restrictions or prescriptions had any significant effect on this aspect of traditional pre-Islamic Arabian life, although it has been noted above that a form of aggression with some similarities to holy war may have been engaged in, at least in one case, by Jewish and Christian tribes of southern Arabia. In central Arabia, however, raiding and intertribal aggression remained nonideological and was not associated in any way with the range of warring defined as "holy war." Martyrdom has little meaning in such a social system, for no transcendent meaning was applied to the act of war, nor was reward in an afterlife a part of the indigenous Arabian worldview. The economic and social (status, prestige) benefits of warring were reason enough for the powerful to engage in the act of war, while the weak had no alternative but to protect themselves through preemptive aggression, alliances, or defense or lose their independent status altogether. Neither religion nor what we today would

call "moral consciousness" within this social system had any impact on warring in general, although within certain spheres of kinship relationship, restrictions against excessive violence were at least theoretically in place. This entire system changed significantly, but not easily, with the coming of Islam.

Significance of Jāhiliyya

The root *j.h.l.*, which, as we have noted, conveys a general sense of ignorance in Islamic tradition, occurs in the Qur'ān twenty-four times, and the word *jāhiliyya* four times. ¹¹⁴ Goldziher noted that the definition of "ignorance" as opposed to knowledge (*'ilm*) is actually a secondary and less-important meaning for the root *j.h.l.* in pre-Islamic and early Islamic usage. ¹¹⁵ The much more prevalent usage in the pre-Islamic period itself was a meaning that may be juxtaposed with its Arabic antithesis, *h.l.m.*, conveying the meaning of gentility and civilization. "A *ḥalīm* is what we would call a civilized man. The opposition to all this is the *jāhil*, a wild, violent and impetuous character who follows the inspiration of unbridled passion and is cruel by following his animal instincts; in one word, a barbarian." ¹¹⁶ But this definition is strongly colored by nineteenth-century Western bias by reducing the nature of *j.h.l.* to barbarism. In fact, far from being barbaric, the quality of being *jāhil* was an essential and positive component of pre-Islamic Arabian manhood. Pre-Islamic Arabian culture recognized the importance of both the qualities of *ḥilm* and *jahl* in its society. True *murū'a*, or "manliness," required knowing when *ḥilm* and when *jahl* were indicated. "I am ferocious (*jahūl*) where mildness (*taḥallum*) would make the hero despicable, meek (*ḥalīm*) when ferocity (*jahl*) would be unfitting to a noble." ¹¹⁷

In Islamic texts, however, the sense of *jāhiliyya* in reference to the pre-Islamic period tends to emphasize only the cruelty, barbarism, and anarchy that Islam wished to associate with Arabia before the coming of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. Islamic civilization, according to this view, would radically alter Arabian culture. As the Muslim refugee to Abyssinia, Ja'far b. Abī Tlib, is said to have told the ruler:

O King, we were an uncivilized people (*kunnā qauman 'ahla jāhiliyyatan*), worshipping idols, eating dead [not properly butchered] meat, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle whose lineage, truth, trustworthiness, and clemency we know. He summoned us to acknowledge God's unity and to worship him and to renounce the stones and images which we and our fathers formerly worshipped. He commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes

and bloodshed. He forbade us to commit abominations and to speak lies, and to devour the property of orphans, to vilify chaste women. ¹¹⁸

This classic Islamic attitude toward pre-Islamic days has its own clear agenda. It is profoundly influenced by Islam's claim to have revolutionized the morality and religious behavior of Arabia with the coming of God's revelation and the submission of the region to the religious civilization of Islam. Such Islamic historiography views pre-Islamic Arabian culture as inherently immoral, barbaric, and anarchic. As far as can be discerned, however, its innocent depictions of certain aspects of the social and economic systems of the pre-Islamic period are not significantly distorted by its general devaluation of the ancient days. These systems clearly served as a rational and functional means of survival for nomads living outside of a unified legal framework in the harsh environment of the desert.

It is clear, however, despite our acknowledging the subjective nature of the Islamic worldview, that the coming of Islam does indeed mark a major transition in social, religious, and economic mores from an older time. This transition is noted in Islam as part of the great religious movement, which radically and forever changed Arabian culture for the better, elevating certain values and reducing others. ¹¹⁹ In fact, however, the actual transition may not have been as complete or as sudden as suggested by Islamic historiography, for the coming of Islam simply marked a watershed in a long process of cultural, social, and religious change. Part of this process included a marked reevaluation of violence and warring.