

# THE CIVILIZATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ISLAM

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## ABSTRACT

The article explores the study of Islam as a civilization and considers the lived experiences of Muslims from a sociological perspective. The history of Islam is intertwined with world history and consists of many genuine encounters and exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims. The civilizational approach to the study of Islam indicates that Muslims and Muslim societies were ready to learn from other religious groups. This article will examine the situation in Baghdad and Cordoba during the 10th-century and show how different socio-economic, political, and religious systems were enriched by means of exchanges between diverse religious groups. Instead of becoming involved in debates about doctrine, which can be divisive, the study of Islam from a civilizational perspective can promote understanding and encourage cooperation among different religions.

**Keywords:** Civilizational approach, clash of civilizations, culture, essentialist approach, diversity, exchange of knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

Since 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, many Muslims have been subjected to discrimination, mental torture, and physical assault worldwide. While some people have lost their lives or kin, others have lost the hope of living in a society where there is harmony between religions. Globalization has enabled people to live in proximity, but it has also contributed to fragmentation and discrimination among individuals and groups. Biased narratives and misinformation through the selective lens of the media have often fueled animosity against ethnicity, religion, and culture. Extremist, fanatic and radical are a few words that describe the long history of hate against Muslims and what came to be known as Islamophobia, a term coined in the 1990s to express hostility against Islam and fear of Muslims (Esposito & Ibrahim, 2011). It became an academic term with the publication of the Runnymede Trust report 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All' (Trust, 1997). Since the Second Gulf War, the London and Paris bombing and the Danish 'Cartoon' controversy, we now have well-

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documented evidence of increasing Islamophobic attitudes and behavior worldwide. The unfounded fear and hate against Islam have gone to the extent that many believe Islamophobia directly threatens world peace and multiculturalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ihsanoglu, 2010).

This article suggests that Islamophobia is possibly the result of an essentialist view of Islam, according to which Islam as a monolithic religion and implies that all Muslims should understand, interpret and practice Islam in the same way. Those who promote an essentialist view of Islam claim that Islam's fundamental and unchanging characteristics can be derived from classical Islamic texts and traditions, including the Qur'an and the Hadith. In the book *Muslim Society*, Ernest Gellner, a prominent anthropologist and philosopher of religion, argues that Islam represents a distinct and coherent cultural system with beliefs and practices that define Muslim identity (Gellner, 1983).

Lewis is a contemporary historian who also argues that Islam is characterized by a set of universal and timeless principles that define Islam (Lewis, 1994). In Lewis' view, it is necessary to understand the essential features of Islam in order to appreciate its unique contributions to world history. In contrast, however, many critics argue that the essentialist viewpoint ignores the evolution of Islam and the diversity of cultural, social, and political factors that have shaped the beliefs and practices of Islam throughout history. The essentialist approach disregards the history and social aspects of the Islamic faith as well as the lived experiences of Muslims, the complexities of human interpretations and the need for change and evolution in religion.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF THE ESSENTIALIST VIEWPOINT

While the essentialist approach to Islam has provided an in-depth understanding of the foundational sources, including the Qur'an and Hadith, and an appreciation for Islam's core values and principles, the approach also has some limitations. First, the essentialist approach studies Islam as it existed in the sixth and seventh centuries, ignoring the evolution of the society in which Muslims lived and practiced Islam. When Geertz published his famous essay "Religion as a Cultural System," he proposed the study of religion as the interpretation of meaning systems (Geertz, 1973). He further explained that religions, unlike science, live closer to the ground and are directly affected by society and culture. If religions arise out of dynamic cultures and find expression through those cultures, we can conclude that religions cannot be understood as fixed in time and space. As people's understanding of themselves, of others, and of the world evolves, the way they understand and practice religion also changes.

The interaction of religion, culture and society responds to the assumption that religions do not live in a vacuum and cannot resist external influences and change. When we rely solely on classical texts and traditions such as the Qur'an and Hadith from the sixth and seventh centuries to understand Islam, we overlook the process of meaning-making that Muslims undertook to understand Islam in different cultures and societies throughout history. By understanding religion as a dynamic system of beliefs, interpretations, and practices, we can avoid understanding Islam as a monolithic religion and emphasize the importance of a contextual approach to the correct understanding of classical Islamic texts and traditions.

Besides, the essentialist viewpoint generalizes that all Muslims practice Islam in a similar way and disregards the deeply rooted diversity in the Muslim *Ummah*. By including all Muslims under a single religious and cultural ideology or identity, it becomes possible for people who believe in Islamophobia to attribute the actions of one extremist group to Islam itself rather than to acknowledge the variety of views and interpretations within the religion. However, a deeper and more informed understanding of the Muslim world can enlighten individuals about the diversity of beliefs that truly reflect the ever-increasing diversity in the Muslim *Ummah*. An honest investigation will show that Muslims live in different countries, embrace diverse cultures, belong to various sects, adapt to different levels of secularization, and have varied religious practices, including unique ways of worshipping. On the other hand, those who understand Islam according to an essentialist viewpoint tend to label all Muslims as of one kind and attribute the ideology and actions of one Muslim group to all Muslims.

Further, by understanding Islam only from the scriptural point of view, one could disregard the lived experiences of Muslims that also represent Islam's peaceful and pluralist spirit. Moreover, one could fail to see the multiplicity of religious thoughts, ideas, and understanding of Islam which have been influential in different societies and cultures in the past. Islam has a history intertwined with world history during which many world faiths lived and prospered side by side. Thus, a purely scriptural focus on Islam can isolate Muslims' lived experience throughout history.

Lastly, an essentialist approach has enabled Western society to view other societies and religions as primitive and backward and in need of Western assistance for their development. A popular argument, which was used to justify Western colonialism and imperialism in the Middle East and North Africa, was that Muslims were barbaric and needed enlightenment through Western values and institutions (Chatterjee, 1986). This portrayal of non-Western society is problematic because it simplifies and

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homogenizes complex and diverse groups and reinforces Western cultural and political hegemony.

This thinking also informed Orientalist scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries, perpetuating the idea that Muslim societies are static, unchanging and, therefore, inferior to the West (Said E. , 1979). The essentialist approach has had a significant impact on society even today. Throughout the history of the West's interventions in Muslim-majority countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the objective has been to civilize and democratize Muslim societies in the name of democracy (Mamdani, 2005). Besides contributing to the rise of Islamophobia in the West, this approach has also contributed to portraying Muslims as a monolithic and dangerous group in the West (Kundnani, 2014). For all the reasons mentioned above, the essentialist approach to the study of Islam cannot be accepted as valid or helpful.

While essentialist viewpoints have provided an understanding of Islam by means of the classical texts and traditions that emerged in the sixth and seventh centuries, a dynamic and broader understanding of Islam can be recognized through the lived experiences of Muslims. In this paper, I propose a civilizational study that considers the plurality of Muslim cultures, identities and beliefs and that explores how Islam was understood, interpreted, and practiced in different periods of history.

The civilizational approach underpins a strong belief that Muslims are not homogenous and cannot be unified under a single cultural ideology or land. Instead, Muslims have embraced diverse beliefs and practices. Instead of attributing the actions of one Muslim group to all Muslims, the civilizational approach undermines the assumption of homogeneity by raising questions such as: 'Which group within Islam?' and 'Whose interpretation of Islam?' Understanding Islam from a civilizational approach allows us to contextualize different aspects of religion and appreciate the diversity of Islamic traditions that have evolved over time.

## CLASH OF CIVILIZATION VS. CLASH OF IGNORANCE

While considering the civilizational approach, it is necessary to refer to the theory of the 'clash of civilizations' presented by Samuel Huntington for whom culture is the fundamental source of conflict in our world today. According to Huntington, there are several distinct civilizations in the world, each with a unique cultural and religious tradition, and these civilizations will increasingly conflict with one another. Huntington wrote:



It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics (Huntington, 2020).

In his view, as globalization continues to erode national borders and traditional sources of identity, people will increasingly turn to cultural and religious identities for meaning and security. In such a world, it is more likely that a clash between Islam and the West or between other civilizations will occur.

It could be argued that the ‘clash of civilizations’ theory overlooks the importance of other factors, such as economics and politics, in determining international relations. It also simplifies the complex and varied factors that drive conflicts between nations and peoples. Edward Said argues that acts of conflict are not perpetrated by civilizations but by extremist individuals who may have been driven by political ideologies rather than by cultural or religious ideologies. Said further refutes Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ hypothesis by explaining that people in the globalized world are too highly interconnected to exist as separate civilizations (Said E. , 2014).

The theory overstates the differences between cultures and civilizations while underplaying their similarities and shared values. For many scholars, it is a clash of ignorance rather than a clash of civilizations that has triggered the knowledge and empathy gap among world religions (Said & Eid, 2012). Therefore, it is more important for people to learn about each other’s faith and culture in order to co-exist in the global world rather than to attempt to divide the world into ‘us versus them’. In other words, by adopting a civilizational approach to Islam, a more all-inclusive understanding of this religion will make it possible to respond to the gap in knowledge and the clash of ignorance.

The civilizational approach provides us with a glimpse into Muslim history that will show how Islam encouraged peaceful and pluralistic interaction among different religious groups in the past. This kind of approach will enable us to understand how different Muslim dynasties flourished by showing hospitality and accepting religious differences. The civilizational study of Islam will dispel the unfounded hate against Muslims by recognizing that not all Muslims are fanatic and that the actions of a single Muslim group do not misrepresent the entire Muslim community.

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### THE CIVILIZATIONAL APPROACH

The civilizational approach views Islam from both cultural and historical perspectives. According to Kroeber & Kluckhohn, culture refers to material and non-material aspects of social life, including shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). In this perspective, a civilization appears as a wider and more advanced level of cultural identity. In early Muslim societies, we find Muslim thinkers who pondered over questions like 'How do civilizations rise?' and 'How do they prosper?' One such thinker was Ibn-e-Khaldun, who lived in Tunis during the fourteenth century. Khaldun reflected on human societies and civilizations for many years before completing his work called *al-Muqaddima*, an introduction to the history of the Berbers, which he later expanded into a book on world history. This book was possibly one of the first efforts by anyone to analyze how civilizations arose, grew and declined. Khaldun wrote:

When tribes settle down in a country together, take up their abode in a certain place, and become members of a society united by a single group feeling and the warmth of mutual contact, they form what is called a civilization (*hadarah*), and their society is called a city (*madinah*) (Khaldun, 1974, p. 39).

Khaldun was of the view that a civilization formed whenever people came together to settle in one place, usually in a city, and their combined efforts created a common supply of goods from which everyone could benefit. Because of his systematic study of society, Khaldun has been recognized as the first sociologist in history and is remembered for his framework for the study of civilization.

The civilizational approach to the study of Islam is an approach that seeks to understand the religion in its broader historical, cultural, and social context, including its interaction with other civilizations. This approach focuses on the diversity of Muslim societies and the complexity of local, regional, and global factors that have influenced Islamic beliefs and practices. Among the leading scholars who have studied Islam according to the civilizational approach is Marshall G. S. Hodgson. According to Hodgson, Islam can be studied as a "world civilization" which has had a profound impact on human history (Hodgson, 1974). From the origins of Muslim civilization in the Arabian Peninsula to its spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa and beyond, the writer traces the development of Muslim civilization throughout history. Hodgson's approach to the study of Islam can be described as an historical or a civilizational approach, which has inspired other scholars to explore the diversity and complexity of Muslim societies.

The civilizational study of Islam informs us that Islam has evolved in different periods and in different locations. This approach to Islam considers the lived experience and memory of Muslims and investigates how they interpret and practice Islam in various ways today and in the past. It recalls how Muslims exercised authority in the past and how they developed highly sophisticated social, economic and political systems that continue to function in modern society.

It explains how Muslim history has always been intertwined with world history and has consisted of diverse encounters, stories and discoveries of Muslims and their relations with non-Muslims. For instance, the flowering of the arts, literature and architecture during the Abbasid rule (750-1258 CE) provides ample evidence of the growth of a new Muslim civilization across a vast expanse of land because of Muslim co-existence with other groups and cultures. The multicultural encounters of Arabs, Persians, Berbers, Visigoths, and Slavs in eleventh century Al-Andalus, known as *Convivencia*, a Spanish word meaning 'co-existence', is another clear example of how diverse groups lived together peacefully. Muslim history is full of interesting anecdotes of encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. Various Muslim civilizations appeared and declined in history but many have left a lasting legacy of exchanges in the field of arts, science and trade that have become the precursors of other world civilizations.

#### THE CIVILIZATONAL STUDY OF ISLAM

One way of understanding Islam is by means of a civilizational approach is to investigate the kind of Muslim rule of the land that allowed Muslim civilizations to flourish. Muslim rule of the land refers to the development and administration of Muslim cities and societies where different religious groups lived together. Moreover, the term *Khalifa* refers to the variety of ways in which authority was exercised in early Islam. Although the concept of Muslim cities originated in Mecca and in the establishment of the early Caliphate in Medina, cities also developed during the formation of Muslim dynastic empires in Baghdad and Cordoba. Using cities as a space for dynamic creativity, in this article my investigation will highlight the flowering of Muslim civilizations from various perspectives. A case study of Baghdad under Abbasid rule and Cordoba under Umayyad rule can illustrate the peaceful exchanges that occurred between Muslims and non-Muslims through the lens of Muslims' own lived experiences.

In contrast to these periods of peace and diversity in Muslim history, however, there were also some dark periods in which minorities were persecuted and internal conflict prevailed. The Ottoman Empire (1299-1923 CE), which ruled parts of Europe, Africa

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and Asia, was infamous for discriminating against Christian and Jewish minorities. The millet system, which divided communities based on religion, also restricted non-Muslims' rights and freedoms in the Ottoman Empire (Shaw & Shaw, 1977). Similarly, the Mughal Empire (1526-1857 CE) is often associated with cultural and artistic achievements but is also criticized for religious persecution, particularly against Hindus and Sikhs (Revolution, 2021). These examples show that Muslim history, like other world civilizations and faith histories, has been marked by periods of religious persecution and internal conflicts. However, the context and background of these historical events require further investigation.

## UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM RULE

Soon after the death of the Holy Prophet (pbuh), authority in Islam was administered through an office called *Khalifa*. Since the Prophet (pbuh) had not designated a clear successor, *Ansars* (the people of Medina) and *Muhajirun* (the people of Mecca) began to disagree over the legitimacy of exercising authority under the designation: *Khalifat-e-Rasool Allah* (the representative of the Prophet). While *Ansars* wanted to choose a *Khalifa* from among their own people, *Muhajiruns* opposed them by claiming that they had more legitimate rights to authority because they were the first converts and supporters of the Prophet (pbuh) in Mecca. As the debate over power intensified in the *Saqifa* (the assembly hall), the assembly elected Hazrat Abu Bakr on the basis that he was a *Muhajirun*, the first convert, a senior companion, and came from the family of the Prophet (pbuh). This marked the beginning of a new era of authority in Islam. The *Khalifa* became responsible for looking after all the religious and worldly affairs of the Muslims. The first four *Khalifas* are called *al-Khulafa al-Rashidun* (rightly guided *Khalifas*), a designation in the Sunni branch of Islam. Although the power of the early *Khalifas* was exercised with different styles and in various ways, Islamic authority was strengthened during the reign of the first four *Khalifas* (632-661 CE). While the rule of Hazrat Abu Bakr focused on protecting the values of the Prophet (pbuh) and defending Muslims in the *Ridda* Wars (Wars of Apostasy), the leadership of Hazrat Umar focused on strengthening Muslim authority by means of suitable administration and the development of the city.

During Hazrat Umar's reign, Muslims expanded to distant regions such as Mesopotamia, Sindh, Jerusalem and Persia by defeating the forces of powerful empires such as the Sasanian and the Byzantine, among others. Many non-Arabs now converted to Islam and contributed to the development of Islam by retaining their various unique cultures. As a result, Muslim society began to experience a period of transformation that reflected increasing multiculturalism. Many Muslims and non-

Muslims settled in the famous Muslim cities of the time, such as Medina, Damascus and Kufa.

Although the initial period of the four rightly guided *Khalifas* facilitated many improvements, this period also witnessed frequent political upheavals, divisions, and rivalries among Muslims. During the *Khilafat* of Hazrat Ali, Muslims experienced intense conflict in the Battle of Camel and Siffin, the first-ever civil war in Muslim history. Mu'awiya Ibn Abu Sufyan, who had been appointed as governor of Syria, now seized complete control and challenged Hazrat Ali's *Khilafat*. As a self-appointed *Khalifa*, Mu'awiya presented himself as the leader of the whole Muslim community (*Ummah*). At the same time, he ruled according to tribal norms and customs by giving priority to those of pure Arabic descent and by selecting leaders from his own tribe to positions of authority.

Some people admired Mu'awiya's political skills, especially his handling of tribal conflicts. He was praised for virtues known as '*hilm*', an Arabic word meaning patience and self-control, qualities which were appreciated by Arab tribal leaders. He was also known for his eloquent Arabic. During the rule of Mu'awiya, the authority of the *Khalifa* grew in stature to become the Caliphate, which was like a 'kingdom' in which a Caliph ruled with the absolute power of a king. Moreover, the position of the Caliph became a family dynasty in which future Caliphs would be chosen from within the family of Umayyads without any process of shared consensus, public consultation or democracy as had been the custom in the appointment of the earlier *Khalifas*. Since the Umayyads emerged as absolute rulers, who sometimes even acted as dictators, many Muslims began to criticize the development of authority in Islam. For these Muslims, the authority of *Khalifa* should take the form of earlier models of representation or deputy, which had been commonly accepted after the death of the Prophet (pbuh). They felt that such a *Khalifa* would uphold the values of justice, fairness, and equality.

From the early period of Muslim history, diverse opinions had already existed about what it meant to be a believer or a Muslim ruler or how Islam should be practiced. The diverse ways in which Muslim rulers practiced Islam had a direct impact on the plurality of ideas, beliefs, and practices in Islam. The level of religious freedom, secularization, and openness encouraged by the Caliph decided how Muslims were to live and practice their faith in a particular society. In the course of history, a wide range of Muslim authority was exercised both in political and religious domains. While the Caliphs were directly responsible for the political and social life of Muslims, religious leaders such as *Ulamas* (Muslim scholars) and *Imams* (spiritual and religious leaders) preached Islam in their own unique ways, thereby providing

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different ideologies and approaches to Islam for Muslim believers. Such diverse models of authority led to different ways of ruling and organizing the Muslim community. To understand the broad range of religious ideas and practices adopted by Muslims, I will now examine the social, political, and religious dimensions of some Muslim societies by focusing on specific capital cities where Muslim dynasties ruled.

### UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM LAND

The desire for a Muslim land, as understood during the life of the Prophet (pbuh) and later during the Caliphate, grew out of the need to have a place where Muslims could practice their religion and exercise civil responsibilities based on the values of justice, fairness, diversity, and equality as presented in the Qur'an. The Prophet himself had decided to rule in Medina as a *Hakam* (a mediator and a leader of the tribes) through the Charter of Medina (Islam, 2018). Later, the Muslim *Khalifas* and Caliphates developed the idea of a Muslim land by constructing capital cities that could function as places for political, social, economic and cultural activities. The first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads, established themselves as a powerful dynasty based in the capital city of Damascus. The Umayyad dynasty made use of the remains of the previous civilizations which had existed in Damascus. This dynasty was characterized by new and creative contributions to Muslim civilization and culture by adopting the political, administrative, and economic systems, which had already been used by the Byzantine and Sasanian civilizations (Lapidus, 2014).

Moreover, the Umayyad Caliphs built mosques and palaces, promoted the expansion of trade and started cultural traditions that allowed these Umayyad Caliphs to mix with the ordinary people. Even though their adoption of the techniques of earlier civilization by the Umayyads may have been a strategy to strengthen and to legitimize their rule, many Muslims found themselves attracted to the arts, learning and architecture, which contributed to the further development of Islamic culture. Muslims began to understand themselves as people made up of several languages and traditions who had adopted various forms of literature, arts, and architecture. Islam was now becoming more than just a religion because Islam was not only concerned with the recognition and worship of God but also intended to provide an understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim, socially and culturally. Following the Umayyad leadership model, the caliphs of later dynasties established capitals of their own in the cities of Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Like Damascus, these cities became the political and cultural centers of the Muslim world. I will now explore the broad understanding of Islam that existed in the cities of Baghdad and Cordoba.



## PLURALISM IN BAGHDAD

Many men and women from different social backgrounds and religions came to live in the Abbasid dynasty's capital city, Baghdad. Although many people settled there, the city also had a floating population of merchants, scholars and students. The largest ethnic groups in Baghdad were Arabs, Persians and later, Turks. They followed a variety of religions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Manichaeism (a religion based on the teachings of a Babylonian prophet named Mani). The Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians could usually practice their religions freely. They could build churches, synagogues and temples. These non-Muslims paid a special tax called the *jizya* for living and working in Muslim lands. In return, they were given the guarantee of protection from any assault or injustice. Many non-Muslims also worked in the government and held other high positions. In the early Abbasid era, the caliphs employed several Jewish and Zoroastrian astrologers and relied on Christian doctors. Many translators working at the Caliph's court were also Christians who knew Greek and Syriac.

An historical event of this period illustrates the nature of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims and the way they collaborated and benefitted from each other. Georgios Ibn Gabriel belonged to a family of Nestorian Christians from Gundeshapur in Iran. When the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (ruled 754-778 CE) was ill, he summoned Georgios Ibn Gabriel to Baghdad and kept him there as his personal physician. Georgios Ibn Gabriel never converted to Islam and the Caliph al-Mansur respected his religious beliefs throughout his life. His descendants also served as Abbasid physicians (Menocal, 2004).

Since the first revelation of the Qur'an insisted upon the need for learning (Surah Al Alaq), Muslims began to respond to this revealed message by using their reason in order to acquire knowledge. Gradually, the need for learning became part of the everyday life of Muslims and the Muslim Caliphates began to build more and more libraries, *kutubs*, and *madrassas*. As the desire for learning became stronger, Muslims learnt about papermaking from Chinese prisoners of war during the Abbasid rule. According to historical accounts, Baghdad had a whole street where books, paper, inks, and pens were made and sold (Gacek, 2006).

The availability of knowledge in Muslim Caliphates became a turning point in the history of Islam. Moreover, the foundation of *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) by the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mamun, played an enormous role in promoting knowledge in Baghdad. The contribution of Muslims to learning was due to the message of the Qur'an as well as to the inspiration of Greek philosophers. According to one

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traditional story, a Greek philosopher by the name of Aristotle inspired the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mamun in a dream to translate Greek sciences and literature into Arabic. Al-Mamun's interest in ancient philosophers grew strong after this dream. Thus, the search for knowledge, evident particularly in Greek civilization, was taken up and continued by Muslims.

Just as in today's New York, Tokyo and London, Baghdad became a center for learning and trade. Great ideas and objects travelled from here to other parts of the world, spreading the legacy of Islam. Many modern applications and innovations can be credited to Muslim thinkers during this period. For example, a widely acknowledged Muslim scientist and philosopher of this time was Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna in the West. He invented many modern-day practical medicine and treatments. Ibn Sina composed nearly 200 books on philosophy and medicine. In his book, Canon of Medicine, written in the eleventh century, he advocated the use of a certain medicine for specific surgery (Urquhart, 2006). His Canon of Medicine has been translated into Latin, Hebrew and even Chinese. Letters of Ibn Sina that have survived show that he corresponded with al-Biruni, a fellow scientist and traveler. Their letters show healthy and sometimes heated arguments regarding scientific and philosophical matters. Based on the experiences of Georgios ibn Gabriel and Ibn Sina in Baghdad, we can build a better understanding of the Muslim world and Islam. These experiences relate how Muslims lived peacefully, side by side with believers from other faiths. The Qur'an's frequent references to the intellect (Surah Ar-Rum) and to the need for knowledge encouraged these Muslims to strengthen co-existence and learning.

With its capital in Baghdad, the Abbasid Caliphate lasted for five centuries. It would be inaccurate to portray this entire 500-year period as one of constant amity between Muslims and non-Muslims. For instance, Christians experienced persecution under Caliph al-Mutawakkil (ruled 847-861 CE), who ordered the destruction of churches and the forced conversion of some Christians to Islam (Kennedy, 2001). The Abbasid Caliphate also took discriminatory actions against non-Muslims, such as raising taxes and denying them access to certain jobs and positions of authority (Tillier, 2018). We need to recognize the variety of experiences within the Abbasid period, which included instances of religious intolerance and discrimination as well as instances of inter-religious harmony. I will now turn to another Muslim society, Cordoba, to expand our understanding of Muslims and Islam.

## MUSLIM PLURALISM IN CORDOBA

Following the flowering of cultures in Abbasid's capital Baghdad, another Muslim dynasty arose in Al-Andalus, today's Spain and Portugal. Al-Andalus was the name given to the territories ruled by the second or Spanish Umayyad dynasty (756-1031) and other Berber dynasties (1040-1492) in the Iberian Peninsula. During just over two centuries (8<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), Al-Andalus developed into a prosperous region in medieval Europe and became a celebrated center of diverse cultures. Its cities, such as Cordoba and Granada, were famous for their vibrant culture, architecture and scholarship. Muslims of different ethnicities, alongside Jews and Christians, contributed to these artistic and intellectual achievements. In this way, Al-Andalus had a significant influence on European as well as Muslim civilization. For centuries, it has been admired as a model of cultural diversity where different groups lived and worked together in the pre-modern period.

A culture of co-existence promoted stability and a sense of unity in Al-Andalus. It also promoted peaceful and pluralistic exchanges among people. For instance, the cultural diversity of Al-Andalus made it essential for its inhabitants to acquire new languages like Arabic. Many words were taken from Romance, the Al-Andalusian dialect of Latin and became part of the Arabic dialect that was used throughout the region. The pronunciation of Arabic in Al-Andalus was likewise influenced by the way that Romance was spoken. Anyone who hoped to work in the Umayyad administration had to learn to read and write Arabic and this opened a new world of literature and learning for the people of Al-Andalus. A Christian historian of the time, Paul Alvarus, wrote that Christians often read Arab poetry and romance literature. While some were also familiar with Latin, many wanted to learn Arabic in order to express themselves well (Friedman, 2005). The first coins minted in Al-Andalus show how local languages and traditions blended with Muslim culture. These coins had Islamic phrases written on them in Latin. Later, coins were designed with words in both Arabic and Latin until a purely Arabic coinage was introduced.

One engineering marvel of this period was a prototype of a tailless glider made of silk and feathers over a wooden frame constructed by Abbas ibn Firnas (810–887 CE), a descendant of Berber settlers. He served the Umayyad Emirs al-Hakam I and Abd al-Rahman II in Al-Andalus. Centuries before the Wright brothers gifted a flying plane to the world, a Muslim scientist and inventor, Abbas Ibn Firnas, created a prototype of a plane that could fly in the sky (Hassani, 2010). He climbed into the glider machine and jumped off a tower in the royal gardens but could glide for only a short distance before making a disastrous landing.

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The Wright brothers' development of a plane which had been conceived of by a Muslim inventor is an example of how Western civilization was influenced by contributions from Muslim civilization. According to many historians, the roots of the Renaissance were possibly also to be found in Muslim cities like Toledo in Andalusia, which again illustrates how Muslims were living peacefully and pluralistically with other religions and cultures. Just as in the Abbasid period, however, there were also times during the Umayyad period in Al-Andalus when religious groups came into conflict. In spite of these tensions, the Abbasid period was largely marked by the co-existence of different religious groups - a reality known as *Convivencia*.

## CONCLUSION

We can conclude that, in the course of history, Islam has exercised various models of authority and has produced great poets, physicians and scientists who lived according to various interpretations of Islam. The strength of the civilizational approach to Islam allows us to understand how various dynamic cultures have always been part of Islam in the past. I have discussed how Islam interacted with these diverse cultures in history. Whenever possible, Islam reshaped and reformed these cultures. But it cannot be denied that Islam was also influenced and changed by these cultures. To view Islam from an essentialist perspective would be to disregard the inter-cultural experience of Muslims throughout the ages.

In short, Islam cannot be seen as a reality that was determined and fixed in Arabia in the sixth and seventh centuries because Islam developed in history as a dynamic and evolving religio-cultural phenomenon. The civilizational approach to the study of Islam will not allow us to discover the one and only true and authentic Islam. On the contrary, the civilizational approach will enable us to acknowledge that Islam is a religion of many forms and expressions - a religion that encompasses a multitude of beliefs and practices and which has been shaped by a variety of cultures and geographical areas of the world. ■

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