metaphorical rather than literal—as a representation, through fantasy, of the Spaniards' extraordinary good fortune in having stumbled upon this luxuriant new world of almost limitless potential. When the painting is seen from this perspective, virtually the only possibility the artist seems to exclude is the presence of any people other than the Spanish themselves. And in this sense, for all its exuberance, his painting conveys an image of history that is anything but connected, one in which Europeans are the only real protagonists, and the world exists only for them to explore—and, eventually, to conquer.

But look again—for this painting, much like history itself, holds many lessons to uncover, some obvious at first glance and others scribbled in the margins or hidden just beneath the surface. To begin with, look at the unfamiliar writing at the top of the page. It is obviously not Spanish. Nor is it Arabic, although it might seem so at first glance to the untrained eye. Instead, it is Ottoman Turkish—the language of the only sixteenth-century ruler who could legitimately vie with the king of Spain for the title of “World Emperor.” In other words, The History of the West Indies was a work produced not in any Western capital, but in the imperial workshops of Istanbul's Topkapı Palace, where it was prepared in 1584 for the reading pleasure of the Ottoman sultan, Murad III.

This unexpected provenance helps to explain the painting's distinctive visual style, itself the product of a long history of cultural influence that began not in the West, but, rather, far to the East. For during the sixteenth century, the artists of the Ottoman Empire had fallen under the spell of a particular style of miniature painting perfected in neighboring Persia (the Persians being the acknowledged artistic masters of the Islamic world in much the same way that the painters of Renaissance Italy were regarded as standard-bearers by their European contemporaries).

But in one of history's many twists, this Persian style of painting was, in turn, heavily influenced by the artistic traditions of China—a direct consequence of the Mongol conquests of an earlier age, when both China and Iran were incorporated into the transcontinental empire established by Genghis Khan. By the sixteenth century, this empire had faded into distant memory. But in our painting, its cultural legacy can still be seen in the sweeping zigzag of the landscape, and the angular energy of the rocks and trees—both features highly evocative of Chinese visual styles.

Such details helped to ensure that our painting would appeal to Sultan Murad, a famously generous patron of the arts with the tastes of a connoisseur. But why, from the comfort of his palace in Istanbul, would the sultan have been interested in a book about Spanish America in the first place? The answer is to be found not in the painting itself, but in the sweeping political events of that moment in world history.

Specifically, in 1578—just a few years before The History of the West Indies was composed—the dashing but reckless King Sebastian of Portugal had fallen in battle while on a crusade in Morocco. Because Sebastian was a young man and left no children, his death paved the way for King Philip II of Spain, his closest living relative, to inherit both Portugal and its many new colonies in India. And since Philip, already the most powerful sovereign in Europe, was Sultan Murad's most feared Western rival, his accession to the Portuguese crown was a matter of the utmost concern in Istanbul—raising the specter of Spanish attacks not only from the Mediterranean, but from the Indian Ocean as well. This brings us once more to The History of the West Indies, whose author introduces his work in a most unexpected way: with a proposal to build a Suez canal, which would enable the Ottomans...
The classical Islamic religious tradition and civilization emerged in the Arabian Peninsula and the surrounding regions, eventually extending from the Atlantic Ocean in the west, across the northern half of Africa, to Central Asia and on to South and Southeast Asia. Their numbers totaling about 1.57 billion, Muslims today make up the second-largest religious community in the world. Only Christianity has a greater number of adherents, about 2.3 billion. From Egypt to Indonesia, Muslims today share certain fundamental principles and practices, but express their religious beliefs in a wide variety of ways.

Islam is an Arabic word meaning “surrender, submission,” specifically to the one universal god known as Allah in Arabic. One who submits to Allah and commits to the teachings and practices of Islam is called a Muslim, a “submitter.” Learning and obeying the monotheistic message of the Qur’an and following the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings are central to Islamic belief and practice. The Prophet’s followers seek to make a good profession of their faith by following Muhammad’s teachings and personal example. In doing so, they draw upon a body of sayings and practices, known collectively as the Hadith, through which the Prophet and his companions provided guidance on spiritual, ethical, social, legal, and leadership issues.

The notions of paths and ways resonate with Islam’s most important principle: following the correct pathway to well-being and spiritual fulfillment both in this life and in the hereafter. In their daily prayers, Muslims repeatedly implore God to “guide them upon the straight path”—the straight path being the one that leads an individual through the temptations and trials of earthly life, ending in contentment in the eternal presence of God. Yet the Qur’an and the broader Islamic tradition also leave open the possibility of conceiving multiple paths and ways.

That Islam is literally a pathway of faith may be discerned in the important concept of the Sharia. This word is based on the Arabic term meaning “the way to the waterhole.” Simply put, the Sharia is Islam’s canon law. It systematizes the Qur’anic message and the lessons from the life of the Prophet. The Sharia is applicable to both personal and communal faith and works. Over the centuries, it has been explicated and interpreted in exchanges among specialists in jurisprudence, ethics, philosophy, theology, and history, each aligned with distinct legal schools that arose early in Islamic history. In various countries in the modern world, Islamic political movements have also attempted to implement Sharia based on a wide range of understandings of the tradition.

The basic source of the Sharia is the “Noble Qur’an,” as Muslims often refer to their sacred scripture. Second only to the Qur’an as a source of law is the sunnah, the body of tradition about the Prophet’s life and teachings. Islam, like Judaism, is a religion based on divine law. And like Judaism, it has developed many pathways for understanding and applying its own legal sources through a variety of forms of jurisprudence, ranging from strict interpretations to more moderate and even liberal viewpoints.

The Qur’an charts out a pathway to success and prosperity for every Muslim through the practice of the Five Pillars of Islam. The first pillar is the declaration, “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.” This testimony, known in Arabic as shahada, is the closest thing to a creed in Islam. It is sufficient simply to utter it once in one’s life, freely and as a believer, to become a Muslim. Then all the other elements of belief and the prescribed duties become immediately incumbent on the one who has testified by means of the shahada.

The second pillar is the ritual prayer service known as salat. Muslims are required to perform the salats five times daily: early morning, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. In addition, the Friday congregational service, which features a sermon, and the salats of funeral and the two eclipses (sun or moon) are also required.

The third pillar is almsgiving, zakat. The importance placed on ritual prayer and almsgiving in the Qur’an and other sources is a clear indication of the importance of the vertical relationship between humankind and God through prayer and obedience, and the horizontal relationship among Muslims through the giving of one’s wealth. Next in importance to worship is concern for others, both individually and as a community of Muslims.
Sunni Muslims believe that leadership within the Muslim community should always be a descendant of the Prophet, with the corollary that the head of the Muslim community (the caliph) is the successor of the Prophet. The Sunni movement coalesced in the 800s, about 150 years after Muhammad’s death. Sunnis believe that authority over the Umma (the Muslim community) is transmitted down to the Prophet most intimately and were given the task of developing the Muslim ritual practices. The pilgrimage to Mecca during the holy pilgrimage month of Dhul al-Hijja (literally, “the month with the hajj”) is held annually. It is required once in each Muslim’s lifetime, but only if he or she is legally an adult, as well as both physically and financially capable.

While knowing the pathway to Muslim faith enunciated in the Five Pillars is fundamental for all Muslims, serious historical differences have divided the Muslim community (Ummah) into two branches: the Sunni majority and the no less important Shiite minority. This division occurred over a disagreement about how leadership would be handed down once Muhammad no longer led the Umma. The Shia contend that he designated his son-in-law, Ali, as his successor, with the corollary that the head of the Muslim community should always be a descendant of the Prophet. The Sunni movement coalesced in the 800s, about 150 years after Muhammad’s death. Sunnis believe that authority over the Umma descends from the Prophet not through his natural heirs, but through his companions, who knew the Prophet most intimately and were given the task of compiling the Qur’an. The authority of the companions, Sunnis believe, is transmitted down to the present through decisions and opinions of the learned and respected scholars who have succeeded them. Shia today is interpreted by mullahs (religious officials) in conformity with these traditions, a practice that often results in a rather literal interpretation of the Qur’an. Today, about 85 percent of Muslims are Sunnis; the largest concentration of Shia lives in Iran and Iraq.

In addition to the Shiite and Sunni communities is the widely followed mystical pathway known as Sufism. Adherents to Sufism have their own spiritual disciplines known as Tariqa. An Arabic term, Tariqa occurs in the Qur’an and may mean “spiritual pathway.” In a symbolic sense, the Shari’a is the main pathway, the highway for faith and activities for all Muslims; whereas Tariqa is a general term for a wide range of additional pathways Muslims may elect to follow in pursuit of personal and communal spiritual fulfillment.

Above all, Muslims strive to believe in and worship Allah, and live as one cooperative global community as they follow their pathways of faith. In their daily salat prayer services, when all Muslims worship in the direction of the holy city of Mecca, they are unified in a global circle of the faithful. Indonesians and Chinese face westward, worshippers in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan face southward, Yemenis and Kenyans face north, while Canadians and Americans face eastward. Throughout Islamic history, the exact geographic coordinates for Mecca have been carefully calculated for every location where formal prayers are performed. Every mosque has been built to include a focal point precisely oriented toward Mecca called a qibla, which is marked by a niche in the wall called a mihrab. Having placed themselves in rows facing toward the mihrab, the faithful are led in prayer by an Imam, who stands alone before the congregation, also facing the mihrab.

The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam

By Francis E. Peters

The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam is a historical and conceptual survey of the Abrahamic traditions, whose author, Francis E. Peters, is one of today’s leading scholars in the comparative knowledge and understanding of the Abrahamic religions. The book has been widely admired and read since its initial publication in 1970, and its insights and arguments continue to shape how scholars and students think about these rich and complex traditions. The book began as a collection of essays delivered over two years at the Institute of Religion and Politics in New York City. It was first published in 1973.

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Given the geographic and cultural range of Islam, it is impossible to cover all of its varieties and nuances in a summary essay or in a single book. This essay and the five books it addresses do not claim to be a definitive or comprehensive treatment of the Islamic faith. Rather, they are offered as an introduction, meant to spark conversations, comprehension, thought, and further exploration. What follows is a brief overview of the five books, arranged in a specific order to guide your reading from one title to the next.

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Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction

By Jonathan A. C. Brown

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last prophet God has sent into the world, bearing the divine message of the Qur’an. Previous monotheistic prophets in the Abrahamic traditions are duly respected, but Muhammad’s prophetic vocation is seen also to have brought corrections to what are regarded as earlier misunderstandings of prophetic teachings. Thus, Islam is considered by its adherents to provide for perfection of monotheistic principles, beliefs, and behavior.

The man Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born around 570 CE. By the age of 6, he had been orphaned and was taken by his uncle on caravans throughout the region. As Muhammad became an adult he was widely respected and called al-amin or “the trustworthy.” By the age of 25, he married a wealthy widow, Khadija, and began managing Khadija’s caravans. It was not until around 610, when he had become a thoughtful, middle-aged man, that Muhammad the prophet came into being. This man had taken up the habit of retiring for personal meditation and spiritual cultivation to a cave near Mecca, aside Mount Hira. He would pack enough provisions for a day’s retreat, after which he would return home for more, so that he might pass additional days and nights on the mountaintop. He would often dream, and it was during a dream that the first revelations came to him, “like the morning dawn,” as the early Muslim historian Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri reported. A mysterious presence came to him and announced, “O Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God.”

The presence, the archangel Gabriel, appeared again and again, and finally commanded Muhammad to recite. Muhammad spoke verses that came to him as revelations. The word Qur’an refers to the individual passages as well as to the entire collected body of revelations Muhammad was to receive over a period of twenty-two years until his death in 632.

The Prophet Muhammad became one of the most influential and respected religious personalities in history. It is always interesting to try to understand how he was able to inspire Muslims in so many ways without ever having claimed to be divine in any sense. The Prophet’s humanness has enabled his admirers and followers to believe and behave in practical, down-to-earth ways while serving Allah in ways indicated by Muhammad in his teachings and general behavior.

Jonathan A. C. Brown’s introduction to Muhammad is, as its title claims, short, but it is richly detailed and engaging. It begins with the Sura, the “Muslim sacred narrative of Muhammad’s life,” the story of his life as viewed by devout Muslims throughout the ages. The second section explores the sources of this biography and some of the historical and critical responses to it among both Muslims and non-Muslims. The final section of Brown’s study focuses on Muhammad’s importance to Muslims as the model of what a human being should strive to be in all dimensions of life. Seeing how “central Muhammad has been to Muslims’ identification with their religion,” as “an object of fervent love amongst the believers,” may help readers to understand the passions that arise in reaction to portrayals of the Prophet.

The Story of the Qur’an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life

By Ingrid Mattson

The Qur’an is believed by Muslims to be Allah’s message to humankind on how to achieve jihad—success, contentment, and well-being—in this world and the next. The coming of Allah’s word into the world through a human prophet parallels in some degree the Christian concept of the Incarnation, but instead of the word becoming flesh, it became a holy scriptural text. Academics sometimes employ the term inlibration as a parallel term to incarnation as a means of understanding Allah’s word as being cast into the world as a “book.” But the Arabic term Qur’an, which means “recitation,” clearly transcends the notion of Allah’s word as a “book” in the mere physical sense of ink on pages.

Ingrid Mattson’s The Story of the Qur’an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life is an excellent starting point for understanding and appreciating the Qur’an’s presence and influence in Muslims’ individual and communal devotion and living. As a woman, a native of Canada, and a convert to Islam, Mattson has a distinctive perspective on the subject. A professor of Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, she is adept at connecting the past with the present and at addressing Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Among other things, Mattson draws attention to the aesthetic enjoyment of the Qur’anic Arabic text experienced by hearing it recited or by seeing it rendered in beautifully inscribed calligraphy, not only as text in books but also as a prominent decorative element in mosques and on other works of art and architecture.

Quoting one of the first revelations in the Qur’an, “Recite, for your Lord is most generous”
The Art of Hajj

By Venetia Porter

The pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj) was practiced long before Muhammad’s time by polytheistic Arabs, who were attracted in large numbers to ancient holy sites, such as Medina. A visit to Medina, 210 miles north of Mecca, is not required as part of the hajj, but most hajjis do visit the site of Muhammad’s mosque tomb in Medina, either before or after the hajj itself. Such journeys are not defined as pilgrimages; only the hajj qualifies for that status. Instead, such a journey is called a ziyārah, the Arabic word for “visit.” Ziyāras are common among Muslims around the world. They often include major public gatherings and activities, including parades with banners, floats, and music, particularly when they are focused on a saint’s birthday celebration. Both Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims make ziyāras, often traveling considerable distances. Ziyāras are a form of popular religion among Muslims, often embodying and expressing regional customs and practices that are sometimes regarded as deviations from Islamic orthodoxy.

Rumi: Poet and Mystic

(1207-1273: Selections from His Writings Translated from the Persian with Introduction and Notes)

By Reynold A. Nicholson

Another major pathway of faith for Muslims is reflected in the diverse range of mystical traditions known collectively as Sufism. The terms Sufism and Sufi are traced to the word for coarse woolen frocks, similar to Christian monks’ habits, worn by early Muslim ascetics. Sufism does not require that one embrace asceticism, although some of its practitioners continue to prefer that kind of devotional piety.

Sufis have had their own, quite independent ways of thinking about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad and how Muslims may regard him as they seek enlightenment. The Sufis see their beloved Prophet as thoroughly saturated by the Qur’anic message, and they believe that in reading it Muhammad’s soul is made manifest. They especially delight in recalling Muhammad’s mysterious “night journey” up through the seven heavens to the presence of God. In this initiatory experience Muhammad was given the special power and wisdom that Sufis consider to be the charter of their own continued existence, because they trace their lineage back to Muhammad and through the “night journey” to God himself.

Sufism speaks of a pathway called Tariqa that differs considerably from the Sharia. Like Shari’a, Tariqa means “way,” but in the context of Sufism, Tariqa can also mean “method,” “system,” “procedure,” or “creed.” The Shari’a is generally concerned with the external way of all Muslims, in that it deals with people’s actions, whereas Tariqa more often focuses on an inner way, beyond adherence to the Shari’a. It can be quite individualistic, although many charismatic mystical Muslims over the centuries have attracted numerous followers. Sufic movements range from those that are very “sober” in their commitment to adhere strictly to Islamic teachings, to those that advocate surrender to “intoxicating” union with God, and varieties in between.

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-73) was a leading Sufi master who wrote an enormous corpus of poetry in the Persian language. Born in Afghanistan, as a young man Rumi fled with his family to Turkey, and there at the age of thirty-seven, when he was well established as a teacher, he met a wandering dervish who inspired his poetic vocation. He was not a retiring writer who observed the world from a distance. He was fully engaged in the life of his order.

Rumi preached and wrote thousands of poems, often in a trance. These poems describe Rumi’s longing for and experience of the divine. His work is ecstatic: in every encounter he sought the godhead—for him friendship was spelled with a capital F—and his revelations about the nature of the human condition are as pointed as they are timeless. He believed that in the great mystery of existence we are all united, a revelation that has made him one of the most popular poets in the world.

Rumi’s poetry continues to be widely read throughout the world, in both the original Persian...
and translations, and adds to Sufism's surprisingly strong ecumenical appeal. The English translations by the University of Cambridge professor Reynold A. Nicholson (1868–1945) are greatly admired by specialists as well as the general reading public.

Nicholson's introduction to his translation provides a basic knowledge of Rumi and his times in the period when Sufism was increasingly moving in pantheistic, monistic directions—that is, toward a belief in the unity of reality and the presence of God in all things.

At the core of Rumi’s thought was his conviction that God is both hidden and revealed. In other words, God is beyond his creation and, at the same time—paradoxically—inmanent in the world of appearances. Rumi believed that God reveals himself mainly through the Qur'an. But Rumi went beyond the scriptural text of the Qur'an to weave folklore and traditional tales, as well as neo-Platonic, biblical, and Christian ideas, into his poetry. His work poured forth from him more often in ecstatic exuberance than in reflective composition. He is reported to have been a joyful person who wanted always to share his sense of life.

Frederick Mathewson Denny is professor emeritus of Islamic Studies and History of Religions at the University of Colorado at Boulder. An alumnus of the College of William and Mary and Andover Newton Theological School, he also holds MA and PhD degrees from the University of Chicago and has held teaching appointments at Colby-Sawyer College, Yale University, and the University of Virginia. He has conducted field research on Qur'anic recitation, Muslim popular ritual, and contemporary Muslim societies in Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and North America. His publications include a widely used college-level textbook, *An Introduction to Islam* (4th edition Pearson Prentice Hall, 2010). He is founding editor of the scholarly book series *Studies in Comparative Religion*. He was lead editor for the second edition of *Atlas of the World’s Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Denny served for eleven years on the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion.

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As the first step on our journey through Connected Histories, let us start with a painting. More precisely, it is an illustration, found within the pages of a famous sixteenth-century illuminated manuscript known as The History of the West Indies. As its title implies, this was a book about the ongoing Spanish exploration of the New World—an understandably popular subject for writers of the time—and the theme of our painting is one typical of such works: a group of Spanish conquistadors surveying an exotic landscape somewhere in the Americas.

Uncertain of their surroundings but eager to know more, two of these adventurers hold torches in their hands, shedding light on the unfamiliar terrain and its strange flora and fauna. A third, bolder than his companions, marvels at a parrot perched comfortably on his arm, as another flies serenely overhead. Meanwhile, in the foreground, our eyes are drawn to a school of outlandish creatures gathering at the shoreline. With bull horns and cow udders, cloven hooves and mermaid tails, they are at once fish and beast, male and female.

How do we interpret this painting, and the otherworldly animals that serve as its centerpiece? Does the artist truly expect us to accept this scene as real? Perhaps. But another way to understand it is...