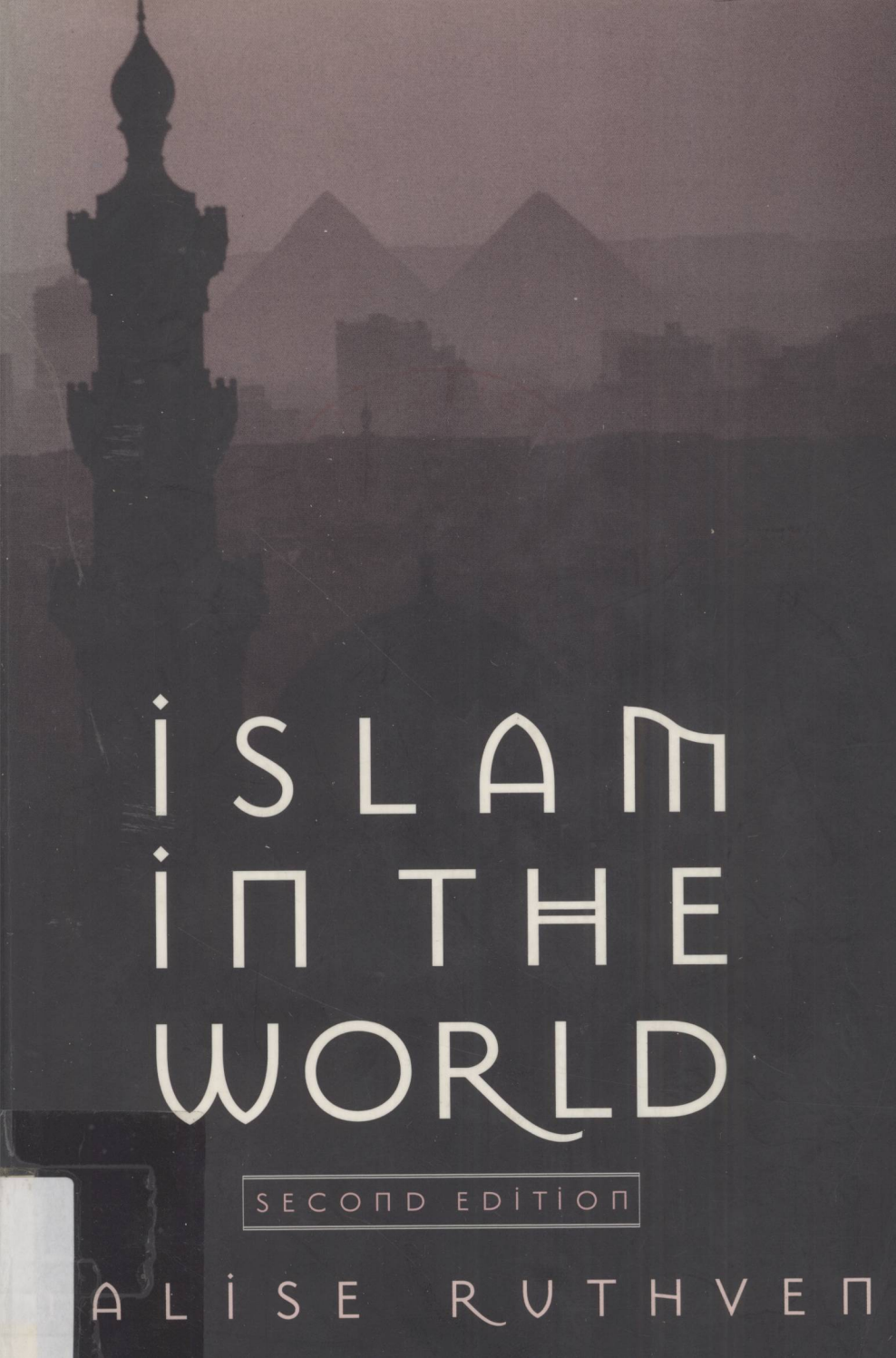

# ISLAM IN THE WORLD

SECOND EDITION

ALISE RUTHVEN

MALISE RUTHVEN

# *Islam in the World*

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## ISLAM IN THE WORLD

'I found it fascinating ... To have made a thorough examination of intricate and problematic issues and yet to remain completely mindful of the need for understanding of the average lay reader is no mean peformance. I hope, and in fact am confident, that it will satisfy a great need for those among Western English readers who want to understand Islam' Fazlur Rahman, University of Chicago

'An exceptionally insightful and thought-provoking introduction to Islam, explaining its basic religious beliefs, practices and institutions as well as discussing its impact on Muslim life today' John L. Esposito, editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*

'The best and most sophisticated introduction to Islam as a religion and as a culture that is available in succinct form at the moment. Sympathetic, knowledgeable, and critical. Very well balanced' Nur Yalman, Harvard University

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malise Ruthven was born in Dublin. On his father's side he is descended from a family of Scottish soldiers, on his mother's from a line of Irish Protestant clerics and scholars. After leaving school Malise Ruthven spent a year doing relief work in Jordan, where he began learning Arabic and spent several weeks travelling among the Huweitat beduin. He read English literature at Cambridge before returning to the Middle East to study Arabic. After several years as a staff writer and editor with the BBC's External Services in London he became a freelance journalist and writer with a special interest in religion and politics. Prior to its closure in 1999 he was a lecturer at the Centre for the Study of Religions at the University of Aberdeen. He has also taught at the department of religion at Dartmouth Collge, USA and at the University of California, San Diego. His other books include *Torture, The Grand Conspiracy* (1978), *Traveller Through Time: A Photographic Journey with Freya Stark* (1985), *The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America* (1989), *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Wrath of Islam* (1990) and *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (1997). When not travelling or teaching abroad he lives in London with his wife, the photographer Ianthe Ruthven.

# *List of Illustrations*

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders. The publishers will be glad to make good in future editions any errors or omissions brought to their attention. (Photographic acknowledgements are given in brackets.)

1. *Yūsuf Fleeing from Zulaykhā*, illumination from the manuscript of Būstān of Sa'dī, completed by the calligrapher Sultan Muhammad Nur, Bukhara, Uzbek dynasty, *c.*1535. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Louis V Bell Fund and Astor Foundation Gift, 1974. [1974.294.4] All rights reserved)

2. Double page from a Quran written in Makka or Madina, eighth century or later (© The British Library, London [Or.2165 ff.67v–68])

3. Opening chapter of the Quran and opening passage of *Surat al-Baqara*, in Nashki script, presumably Egypt, *c.*1510 (Private Collection/ ET Archive)

4. *Interior of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Cairo*, lithograph from 'Egypt and Nubia', vol. 3, by David Roberts (The Stapleton Collection/ Bridgeman Art Library, London)

5. *The First Ships Sailing through the Suez Canal*, watercolour, 1869, by Edouard Riou (Compagnie Financière de Suez et de l'Union Parisienne)

6. *A Princely Youth and a Dervish beneath a Tree*, drawing from an album made on behalf of the Sultan of the Poor, Rahemā, by Reza-ye 'Abbāsī, Iran, Isfahan, Safavid period, second quarter of seventeenth century. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1911 [11,84.13]. All rights reserved)

7. Dervishes dancing during Ramadan, Cairo, Egypt (© Abbas/ Magnum Photos)

# *Preface to the Second Edition*

Since this book first appeared in 1984, there has been a swelling tide of English books about Islam, many of very high quality. As a student of religion who has also lectured on the subject at universities in Britain and the United States, I have become increasingly aware of my book's shortcomings in trying to address a vastly complex and variegated subject in a relatively short amount of space. The academic in me knows that almost any statement one makes about a topic is open to challenge. At the same time the journalist knows that the reader wants a story with clearly demarcated themes.

When first I wrote this book I tried to find the balance between scholarly fastidiousness and journalistic accessibility. My project was doubtless over-ambitious. The subject area it attempts to cover embraces the beliefs, cultural practices, legal traditions and politics of approximately one thousand million people, about a fifth of humanity. Nevertheless the warm response that greeted the first edition indicated that I had found a small but significant niche. *Islam in the World* partially filled the need for a general book that was introductory in the sense that it did not require a prior knowledge of the subject, without being elementary or simplistic. Lamentably, in a Western world that is home to millions of Muslims, to be without even a basic knowledge of Islam is not yet deemed to imply a lack of sophistication.

In preparing this new edition I have updated sections dealing with current events, and added a section on developments up to 1999. I have also made significant changes to Chapter 4 in the light of recent scholarly research. At the same time I have not attempted to revise everything in the light of the hopefully more refined and detailed knowledge I have acquired in the intervening years. What probably makes this book different from others, whether written by scholars, critics or apologists, is its genesis as an 'outsider's' or non-specialist's encounter with a world that is elemental yet rich in its diversity,

strange in its 'otherness' yet familiar in the way in which it draws on so many themes and symbols common to the Abrahamic Tradition. To blunt the sharp edges of the original vision with hypersensitive scholarly nuance would seriously damage its thrust.

In producing this edition I have been guided by the scholarly advice of Professor Gudrun Krämer who subjected the revised manuscript to a critical reading as exhaustive and detailed as that to which my previous expert reader, the late Albert Hourani, subjected the original version. I am extremely grateful to her for the meticulousness with which she performed this task and for her comments, both positive and critical. While some of these comments – particularly on Chapter 4 – sent me back to my books, I did not always agree with them. But in at least one instance they stimulated me to refresh my arguments with materials that would not otherwise have featured in the book. Given that I did not always act on her suggestions, she cannot in any way be held responsible for remaining errors of detail or fact or for my interpretative idiosyncrasies.

I would also like to register my thanks for the support I received from my friend and colleague Professor James Trower at the University of Aberdeen; to James Piscatori who made useful suggestions for improvements in the first edition and to Louise Hosking who assisted with the original research. Others who read parts of the original manuscript, who helped develop my ideas in the course of interviews or discussion or otherwise contributed to the original version of the book include the late Muhammad Asad, Zaki Badawi, James Buchan, Mick Csàky, Omar al-Farouq, 'Abdul Wahid Hamid, Russell Harris, Derek Hopwood, Sayyid Sadiq al-Mahdi, the late Peter Mansfield, Edward Mortimer, Fathi Osman, Terry Povey, Elizabeth Rodenbeck, John Rodenbeck, David Rosser-Owen, Muhammad Salahuddin and Michael Yorke. I wish to thank them all, but would emphasize that none is responsible in any way for matters of fact or interpretation. Finally I would like to thank Caroline Pretty of Penguin for her patience in waiting for these revisions and Pen Campbell for his meticulous copy-editing of the text.

Source material for the maps was drawn from Francis Robinson's *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (Phaidon Press, Oxford, 1982).

London
August 1999

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# 1 *Introductory: Pilgrimage to Makka*

*And proclaim unto all people the [duty of] pilgrimage: they will come unto thee on foot and on every [kind of] fast mount, coming from every far-away point [on earth] so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice] over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them.* *Quran 22:27–8*

## *The duty of pilgrimage*

Every year during the season of pilgrimage or 'Hajj', about two million people converge on the holy places of Makka, Mina, Muzdalifa and 'Arafat to participate in rites whose origins have been lost in the mists of antiquity. About one million of them come from overseas – 50 per cent from the Arab world, 35 per cent from Asia, 10 per cent from sub-Saharan Africa and 5 per cent from Europe and the Americas. The rest are from Saudi Arabia, most of them foreign workers.

Pilgrimage is one of the five *rukns* or 'pillars' of Islam, a religious obligation which every Muslim must observe at least once in a lifetime if he or she is able. According to most religious scholars, substitutes may be sent by those who for reasons other than poverty cannot make the journey. The very poor are exempted altogether. In the past the hazards of travelling restricted observance to a very small number. The trip to the holy sites took many months and sometimes lasted years: it was not unknown for a man to spend the better part of a lifetime on it, setting out as a youth from one of the distant fringes of the Muslim world and arriving back half a century later, having worked his passage as an itinerant craftsman or labourer. Returning pilgrims have long borne the honoured title Hajji, and were accorded the reverence normally given to religious dignitaries. The coming of cheap air travel, however, which has produced a fifty-fold increase in Hajj

attendance since the 1950s, has inevitably devalued the prestige of this title.

The hazardous journey exacted a high cost in human misery. Ibn Jubair, who made the pilgrimage early in the thirteenth century CE, noted the skeletons of those who had died of thirst in the desert. Later, well-organized 'caravan cities' were established, leaving Cairo or Damascus under the command of a specially chosen Amir, a practice originally instituted by the 'Abbasid caliphs. The officials charged with the pilgrims' safety included judges empowered to punish violations of the Shari'a law and to advise pilgrims on their religious duties, medical officials, including doctors, surgeons and oculists, and a public trustee to deal with all the legal problems arising out of a pilgrim's death. Practically speaking, the most important officials were probably the lawyers who scrutinized the contracts made between the Amir and the beduin from whom he hired his camels, and the numerous functionaries in charge of food, water and fodder. Despite these precautions, however, the pilgrims often suffered appalling casualties. Those who survived the extremes of heat and cold, hunger and thirst or attacks by beduin marauders often succumbed to the plague. An Austrian sold into slavery early in the seventeenth century, who accompanied his master from Cairo, recorded that by the time the Egyptian caravan had reached half-way across Sinai, 1,500 men and 900 camels were already dead. In 1824 about one fifth of the 20,000-strong Syrian caravan died from heat or thirst; two years later 12,000 are said to have died from the searing blasts of the hot *khamsin* wind. When the Hajj, which like all Muslim festivals follows the lunar calendar, fell in winter, cold was also a serious hazard. In 1846 500 pilgrims, 1,200 horses and 900 camels died on the return journey from Madina to Damascus.

Cholera also took a fierce toll of pilgrims, especially after steamship navigation had led to a huge increase in numbers from places like India where the disease is endemic. Between 1831 and 1912 some 27 epidemics are thought to have started in Makka, whose insalubrious valley has been described as a 'breathless pit enclosed by a wall of rock'. The dangers of disease were eventually reduced by the adoption of drastic quarantine procedures and fumigation – measures which considerably added to the ordeal of the Hajj. According to a Moroccan who made the journey in 1897, sea-borne pilgrims were made to wait for up to three weeks in the Gulf of Suez with the bare minimum of food and water, for which they were grossly overcharged, before

the authorities would let the ships enter the Canal. They were then disembarked and had to wait out the rest of the quarantine period in conditions scarcely better than those of a prison camp. As recently as 1927 Muhammad Asad, a Jewish convert to Islam, described the appalling overcrowding of pilgrim ships as greedy ship-owners sought to make the most of the short but profitable season:

> There were only pilgrims on board, so many that the ship could hardly contain them. The shipping company . . . had literally filled it to the brim without caring for the comfort of the passengers. On the decks, in the cabins, in all passageways, on every staircase, in the dining rooms of the first and second class, in the holds which had been emptied for the purpose and equipped with temporary ladders, in every available space and corner human beings were painfully herded together . . . In great humility, with only the goal of the voyage before their eyes, they bore all that unnecessary hardship.[1]

Although the number of pilgrims has always fluctuated with the vagaries of war and other international factors, the age of the charter jet has seen a dramatic increase in numbers. Half a century ago about 30,000 people made the pilgrimage each year – a proportion of roughly one Muslim in 10,000, given an estimated population of 330 million. With the present Muslim population estimated at more than 1,000 million (about one fifth of the human race), the proportion of Hajj attenders has risen to almost two in 1,000 – a symptom not only of improved transport opportunities, but of a general increase in Islamic observance.

In response to this increasing demand, and to reinforce the legitimacy of the Saudi ruling family as guardians of Islam's holy places, the Saudi government invested some $5 billion in developing the new King Abdul Aziz International Airport near Jedda, which occupies an area of some 100 square kilometres (35 square miles) – larger than the international airports of New York, Chicago and Paris. The airport's most spectacular feature is the new Hajj terminal, two vast tented halls making up the world's largest fabric structure enclosing its largest covered space. The tent clusters forming the ceiling, which are suspended from cables and steel pylons high above floor level, resemble the great tented city of 'Arafat where the pilgrims forgather at the high-point of the Hajj ceremonies. The fabric itself, a spin-off from space research, is made from an insulated fibre which reflects back most of the sun's heat and retains

enough of its light to make artificial illumination unnecessary during daytime. With a full jumbo jet landing every five minutes, the terminal can 'process' about 5,000 pilgrims each hour, or just under one million during the season. As impressive an example of contemporary design as can be found anywhere in the world, it is an apt symbol of the Saudi rulers' ambition to boost their legitimacy as guardians of the Islamic holy places with the latest technology.

However, neither Saudi money nor the know-how they can afford to buy with it has yet been able to solve the problem of moving such large numbers of human beings within the time-limits specified in the Hajj rituals. With its complicated ceremonies lasting almost a week, in conditions that are often far from comfortable, the Hajj still has the aspect of an ordeal undertaken in the spirit of faith. It has yet to become, like so many Christian festivals or pilgrimages, a mere adjunct to tourism. Indeed, in contrast with that of many European cults, the commercial importance of the Hajj has declined with the advent of air transport and stricter passport controls. Though Makkan rentiers and hoteliers still depend on the Hajj for their livelihood and are often accused of charging exorbitant prices for private accommodation, the Saudi government spends more on servicing the Hajj than it receives back in revenues.

## *The Hajj and Saudi Arabia*

In the history of Islamic ruling dynasties the Saudis are comparative parvenus, descendants of an eighteenth-century desert *shaikh* who formed a military alliance with the Hanbali reformer, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Like other reformers throughout Islamic history, 'Abd al-Wahhab sought a return to the 'purity' of the original Islam of the Prophet and his companions. Employing the military power of the Saudis and their tribal allies, he created a state which, following the precedent established by the Prophet of Islam, aimed to reunite the whole Arabian Peninsula. Although this aim was frustrated by the Ottoman governor Muhammad 'Ali, who occupied the Hejaz, opening the way to the replacement of the Saudis by the pro-Turkish Rashids, Saudi fortunes revived under the remarkable leadership of 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al Sa'ud (better known to the world as Ibn Saud). Starting out from Kuwait in 1902 with a band of about 40

followers, he regained the stronghold of Riyadh from the Rashids and proceeded, by war and diplomacy, to recover all the former Saudi dominions and much else besides. By 1913 he controlled the Gulf coast from Kuwait to Qatar, having eliminated the Turks from Hasa, now the Eastern Province, where, in the 1930s, the world's largest oil deposits were discovered. In 1924 his eldest son, Faisal, added Asir on the Yemeni border to the Saudi dominions. By 1926 Ibn Saud had realized his final ambition, the conquest of the Hejaz. The way had unwittingly been smoothed for him by the British, who had helped the local ruler, the Sharif Husain, to remove the Turks.

In creating his dynastic state Ibn Saud had followed the time-honoured pattern, exemplified by his own ancestors, of combining military force with religious enthusiasm. The storm-troopers on whom he relied for his victories, known simply as the Ikhwan ('Brothers'), were former beduin from the Mutair, 'Utaiba and other tribes who had been settled into *hijras* or military cantonments, where, when not actually fighting, the Ikhwan observed a spartan and puritanical regime closely modelled, as they supposed, on the first Islamic community established by the Prophet in Madina. The Ikhwan were extremely rigid and literalistic in their behaviour: they cut their *thaubes* (or gowns) short above the ankles, trimmed their moustaches to a shadow while letting their beards grow freely, and eschewed the black *aghal* or rope-ring which secures the Arab head-dress, all because it was said in certain *hadiths* (traditions) that the Holy Prophet was thus attired or trimmed. Above all, they were utterly fearless in battle, and brutal as well, having defined themselves as the only true Muslims in a world of backsliding heretics. 'I have seen them hurl themselves on their enemies,' wrote an Arab witness, 'utterly fearless of death, not caring how many fall, advancing rank upon rank with only one desire – the defeat and annihilation of the enemy. They normally give no quarter, sparing neither boys nor old men, veritable messengers of death from whose grasp no one escapes.'[2]

Though acknowledging 'Abd al-'Aziz as their leader, the Ikhwan refused to recognize any territorial limits to their power. The Saudi leader's northern and eastern frontiers were controlled by the British, whose officials were invariably impressed by his charm and intelligence. Eventually his international undertakings (not to mention his personal inclinations) obliged him to deal with his over-zealous followers. This was particularly the case after his conquest of the Hejaz.

During the campaign some 300 people had been massacred in the city of Taif, and Muslims throughout the world were alarmed at what the 'Najdi fanatics' might do in the holy places. Their fears were far from groundless: during the previous conquest of the Hejaz in 1802 the Wahhabis had smashed up the Prophet's tomb in Madina and destroyed the remains of most of the saints who had been buried near the holy places. When the pilgrim caravans arrived from Egypt and Syria they were turned away as idolaters. After his family's re-occupation of the sacred territories, 'Abd al-'Aziz did his best to reassure the inhabitants that he was no bloody iconoclast. He had to intervene personally to prevent the Ikhwan from slaughtering the official delegation of Egyptians bearing the *kiswa*, the black silk covering of the Ka'ba, renewed every year at the Hajj season. About forty pilgrims were killed in the incident, after which the Saudis decided to supply the *kiswa* (traditionally a gift from Egypt) themselves. When the Ikhwan attacked the British-held Iraqi territory and two of their leaders revolted, 'Abd al-'Aziz disbanded them. Most of their units became absorbed into the Saudi National Guard. For the moment, the genie was back in the bottle – Islam reverted to its more familiar function, a prop to the social order, not a force to threaten it. 'Abd al-'Aziz, who already held the titles of King of Najd and its Dependencies and King of the Hejaz, gave himself a new one – King of Saudi Arabia (the only state in the world whose citizens are labelled with their ruler's surname). In the eyes of the religious militants, it was a classic case of the ideological 'sell-out': instead of being allowed to restore the Islamic government of their dreams, the Ikhwan, like so many of their predecessors from the time of the early caliphs, had been used to further the ambitions of a worldly dynast.

In a sense the problem, a classic one, had existed from the beginnings of Islam. The Prophet, like Ibn Saud, was a realist who recognized that an accommodation would have to be made with the Quraish, rulers of Makka and once his bitterest enemies, because they were the only power in Arabia strong enough to maintain the tribal alliances upon which the infant Islamic state depended. Before the conquest of Makka, the Prophet and Abu Sufyan, his former enemy, came to an arrangement which guaranteed that Islam would have a brilliant future in this world, but at a price. The generous terms Muhammad granted his former enemies would enable them to rise to the leadership of the new Islamic community, thereby laying down the basis for the

Umayyad caliphate which presided over the first great era of expansion. The first schisms of the community, which have lasted to the present, were caused by a mixture of ideological and personal factors. However, the fact that the 'losers', the party (*shi'a*) of 'Ali and his heirs, the Imams of the Prophet's house, retained their hold over the affections and imaginations of many pious and radical elements, was largely due to the sense of betrayal that accompanies any attempt to translate an ideal into reality. Christians had shelved, not solved, this problem by proclaiming that since Christ's Kingdom was 'not of this world', obedience to secular authority, however corrupt or wicked, could be mitigated or atoned for by an essentially private piety or morality. For Muslims there was no such easy way out: the Prophet had been his own Caesar, a temporal ruler as well as the bearer of a divine message. The Quran had urged the faithful to 'obey God and His Prophet'. The sense of betrayal must always, sooner or later, rouse a significant portion of the faithful to action, in order to restore the purity of an Islam deemed to have been corrupted. If *imitatio Christi* meant renouncing worldly ambition and seeking salvation by deeds of private virtue, *imitatio Muhammadi* meant sooner or later taking up arms against those forces which seemed to threaten Islam from within or without.

## *The Hajj and politics*

The Hajj, the most central event in the Islamic calendar, cannot be described as a purely religious festival. With so many Muslims gathered together from different parts of the world, it contains a political message and the potential for political action. The political ideals of Islam – universal justice and equality, regardless of tribe, nation or race – are implicit in the rituals themselves. They are performed in the the state of *ihram*, ritual purity, in which all men (and most women) wear the white *kaffan* or seamless shroud which they will keep for their burials, a uniform which removes all outward signs of distinction between them. The potentialities for action are in the opportunities presented by Makka as the universal Muslim city, where Muslims from distant parts of the world have the right to congregate at all times, not only in the Hajj season. Many of the revolutionary and revivalist movements which swept through Africa and Asia, creating, albeit temporarily, new 'Islamic' states, originated there in encounters