CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the origin and early development of Islamic civilization under the direction of Muhammad. The basic ideals and ideas of the Islamic worldview derived from a single prophetic revelatory event: Muhammad's proclamation of the Qu'ran. The Arab community developed a sense of unity as Muslims, or "submitters" to God. The new civilization was sustained by older diverse cultures that were militarily invaded and yet accepted the new vision of Islamic society.

The origins of Islam centered in the city of Mecca. In this thriving commercial location, center of the busy caravan trade, older tribal values were breaking down. The popular notion that Islam was a "religion of the desert" is largely untrue.

The faith centered around its prophet, Muhammad (ca. 570-632). He was raised an orphan and married a wealthy widow. In the midst of a successful business career, he grew increasingly troubled by the idolatry, worldliness and lack of social conscience around him. Muhammad felt himself called by the one true God to "rise and warn" his fellow Arabs about their disregard for morality and worship. Revelation came to him through God's messenger angel Gabriel, and took the form of a recitation (Qu'ran) of God's word. The chapter then discusses the Islamic doctrine and the emigration (Hegira) of Muhammad in 622 from Mecca to Medina. The basic Muslim vows took shape in Medina: allegiance to the umma (Islamic community), honesty in public and personal affairs, modesty in personal affairs, abstinence from alcohol and pork, the five daily rites of worship facing the Ka'ba, fasting for one month each year and eventually a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once a lifetime.

After Muhammad's death in 632, a political struggle ensued between various factions, since the Prophet never named a successor. Abu Bakr established himself as Caliph (632-634) and held a nominal religious conformity over Arabia. The chapter goes on to detail Arab conquest and administration in the seventh century, as well as the establishment of a new Islamic order. For a detailed analysis, see "KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS."

The great strength of the Qu'ranic message was its universalism, and the umma or Islamic community grew quickly. There were, however, different interpretations or versions of the umma. The most radical idealists were the Kharijites or "Seceders," who believed that Muslim policy must be based on strict Qu'ranic principles and espoused a total egalitarianism; still, they held a rigid moral view and anyone who committed a major sin was no longer a Muslim. A
second position was defined largely in leadership terms. Shi’ite Muslims accepted the leadership of Muhammad's son-in-law Ali (which was denied by the Kharijites). They stressed the divinely inspired knowledge of Muhammad and his heirs. As these two contentious groups vied for power, another more moderate group called Sunnis claimed a centrist position and became very influential among pragmatists. They have tended to put communal solidarity above purist adherence to theological positions, and have been inclusive rather than exclusive in their converts and in their maintenance of the faith. The period from about 700-850 is known as the High Caliphate, a time of political power and cultural vibrancy that saw the legendary rule of Harun al-Rashid (786-809). The vizier was the main advisor to this Abbasid state and Mamluk slave troops (mostly from Turkey) formed the core of personal political power. The ideal of full conversion of the Islamic Empire lagged behind the centralization of political power and was never fully realized.

The decline of the empire began in the ninth century with local control being exercised in Spain and parts of North Africa as early as 800. Beginning in 821, Abbasid governors set up independent dynasties in Iran. A Shi’ite family, the Buyids, took over Abbasid rule in 945 and continued as figureheads of Muslim unity until the Mongol invasions of 1258.

The "classical" culture of the Abbasid period was preserved in the tales of The Thousand and One Nights. Sophisticated tastes and a thirst for knowledge, any knowledge, were a hallmark of Abbasid rule. Contact with the T'ang empire of China was important in developing the high cultures of the period. Translations of Greek and Sanskrit works were common and familiarized Islamic civilization with the ideas of Galen, Ptolemy, Euclid, Aristotle, Plato and the neo-Platonists. Grammar formed the basis of Muslim learning and Arabic writers specialized in historical and biographical literature. The hadith, or reports containing the words or deeds of Muhammad and his companions became the chief source of Muslim legal and religious norms. The avoidance of pictures, icons and overt symbols of public art was an important aspect of the "classical age."

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **The Message of the Qu'ran:** As revealed by God through his Prophet Muhammad, the Qu'ran warns people against idolatrous worship of false gods, immorality and injustice to the weak and less fortunate, the poor, orphans, widows, and women in general. A judgment day at the end of time will see everyone face either punishment in hellfire or
external joy in paradise according to how one has lived. The way to paradise is through obedient worship and submission (Islam) to God's will thus becoming Muslim (submissive). There is but one God (Allah) and Muhammad is his prophet. Yet he was only the last in a long line of prophets chosen to reveal God's message. Others included Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. But Muhammad was chosen to give one final reiteration of God's message.

2. The Course and Success of Islamic Conquest: In the course of the seventh century, Arab Islamic armies burst out of the peninsula and conquered the Byzantine and Sassanid territories by 640, Egypt by 642 and Iran by 643. Succeeding decades saw conquests of the Berbers, Morocco and much of Spain. Islamic armies were finally checked by the Frank, Charles Martel, at Tours in 732. A combination of factors resulted in this success: 1) Islamic vision of society united Arabs and attracted others as well; 2) religious zeal, especially as time went on, maintained commitment, although too much has been made of Muslim desire for martyrdom in the jihad; 3) leadership of the first caliphs and field generals; 4) liberal ruling policies that were a relief from Byzantine or Persian oppression. These included no military obligations, maintenance of local legal systems, the adjustment of unequal taxation, and relatively little bloodshed or destruction of property.

3. The New Islamic Order: The Islamic community required a period of political and religious organization after the death of Muhammad. His first successors were chosen on the basis of their superior personal qualities and leadership within their tribes. Their titles were caliph ("successor") or imam ("leader") which underscored their political and religious authority. This dual authority was difficult to maintain and the caliphate became a titular office representing political and military unity. Religious leadership devolved upon scholars known as ulama ("persons of right knowledge") whose opinions on legal issues and theological doctrine established a general basis of religious order and a workable legal-moral system.

4. Islamic Civilization in World Perspective: The rise of Islam as a world religious tradition and international civilization is one of the great events of world history. As different as they were, only China compared favorably with or surpassed the Islamic world in terms of political and military power, cultural unity and creativity. Still, the Islamic empire was
culturally heterogeneous and more widely dispersed. The Islamic empire was agrarian-based, but the overall conditions for food production (owing to a general lack of water) were not as favorable as those in China or western Europe. The Islamic achievement was different primarily in that it was consciously an effort to build something new rather than to recapture previous traditions of religion, society or government.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Moslem World: Beginning and Growth.* Cornet Div. of Esquire Inc. 11 min.


*Islam.* Ontario Educational Communications Authority. 28 min.