



## *Introduction*

*A*LTHOUGH MORE THAN a year has passed since the attacks of September 11, 2001, most Americans still have such a sketchy knowledge of Islam that we probably need to keep ourselves focused on President George W. Bush's repeated reminders that terrorists, not Muslims or Arabs, are the enemy. That reasoned message, however, is often drowned out by noisy ones from some Muslim clerics, who call America the "Great Satan," and some political theorists, who interpret the war cries of militant Islamists as the start of a "clash of civilizations."<sup>1</sup> Provocative messages always gain a disproportionate amount of public attention, but they must be carefully considered and put in context.

It will surprise many Americans that Islam is the world's, and America's, fastest growing religion. It continues to grow at a rate faster than that of the world's population. If current trends continue, according to some estimates, it will have more adherents by the year 2023 than any other faith.

Most Americans tend to think of Islam as exclusively a religion of Arabs. But Muslims are as diverse as humanity itself, representing one in five people in the world. Only 15 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims are Arabs, while nearly one in three Muslims lives on the Indian subcontinent. The largest Muslim nation is Indonesia, with 160 million Muslims among its 200 million people. Muslims represent the majority population in more than fifty nations, and they also constitute important minorities in many other countries. Muslims comprise at least 10 percent of the Russian Federation's population, 3 percent of China's population, and 3 to 4 percent of Europe's population. Islam is the second largest religion in France and the third largest in both Germany and Great Britain. Although estimates vary widely, Muslims represent 1 or 2 percent of the U.S. population, and some say there are more Muslims than Jews or Episcopalians in America. Religious, cultural, and population centers for Muslims, then, are no longer limited to such places as Mecca, Cairo, Baghdad, Teheran, Islamabad, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Fez, and Damascus—they also include Paris, Berlin, London, and now New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup>

Many Americans do not know that there are Christian Arabs as well as Muslim Arabs. Indeed, some of the oldest Christian churches—including the Coptic, Orthodox, Jacobite, and Maronite churches—rose, functioned, and still do, in Arab countries.

Given America's role as a magnet for immigrants, it is not surprising that the United States is one of the best reflections of Muslim diversity. "It is of the greatest interest and significance that the Muslim *umma*, or community, of North America is as nearly a microcosm of the global *umma* as has ever occurred since Islam

became a major religion,” writes Lawrence H. Mamiya.<sup>3</sup> American Muslims bring a rich ethnic heritage from South Asian countries (such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan), Southeast Asian countries (such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines), all Arab nations, Iran, and Turkey. American Muslims also add their African, Caribbean, and European heritage to the nation’s mix.<sup>4</sup>

With the United States currently the world’s sole military and economic superpower, I believe that we, as a society, have a responsibility—for our own sake as well as for others’—to know the complex nature of the world, its incredibly rich variety of races, nations, tribes, languages, economies, cultures, and religions. Today, of course, Islam has become one of the major topics of discussion and controversy in the United States and elsewhere. Yet there is a disconnect between our passions about Islam and our knowledge of it.

It has become essential for us to understand Islam as a religion, its unity, diversity, and culture—and to appreciate the legacy of Islamic civilizations, their roles in the development of modern civilizations, the roles of Muslim nations and the challenges they face, and their future place in the world. This is much easier said than done, especially because in America today there is unfortunately no deep national commitment to history and heritage—not to our own, and certainly not to that of the world at large.