

RELIGION AND...

Islam's Fourteenth Centennial

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November 9, 1980, marked the first day of the year 1401 in the Muslim lunar calendar, the fourteenth centennial of the founding of Islam. Today Islam is embraced by almost a fifth of the world's people and is its fastest growing religion. Although the majority of the 700-800 million Muslims live in countries stretching from Morocco to Indonesia, and from sub-Saharan Africa to northern China, Muslims are found in almost every country of the world.

Most Americans know very little about Islam, although Islam and its culture have profoundly influenced Western life. For this reason a group of Americans in education, government, business, religion, and the arts started meeting informally in Washington in 1978 to discuss how the 1400th anniversary of the founding of Islam might serve as an appropriate occasion for programs designed to increase American understanding of the peoples and cultures of Islam.

The members of the group formed a National Committee in 1979 and asked the Honorable Lucius D. Battle, former assistant secretary of state for cultural affairs and ambassador to Egypt, to serve as chairman; and the Honorable William R. Crawford, former principal deputy assistant secretary of state and ambassador to Yemen and Cyprus, to serve as executive director. They then invited a group of distinguished Americans representing a broad spectrum of American life to serve as members of the National Committee. An Academic Advisory committee and a panel of diplomatic advisors (representing the geographic breadth of the Muslim world) were chosen to complement the National Committee and to provide the expertise necessary to insure the highest level of professionalism in all areas of the committee's endeavors.

Over a four-year period the committee will sponsor educational and cultural programs directly; encourage and publicize independent and community-sponsored events; and serve as a clearinghouse, primarily through a newsletter, for information on Islam-related events throughout the U.S.

The centerpiece of the committee's activities is a major traveling art and cultural exhibition, "The Heritage of Islam." Slated to be presented in eight American cities during its two-year tour, it will open in Houston in March, 1982, at the inauguration of a new wing of the Museum of Natural Science. The exhibition will include areas devoted to: a timeline and orientation; religious architecture and ornamentation; the source and bond of Islamic life; science and technology; the living arts and the song of Islam (music and poetry). Two films, one on the varied lands and peoples of the Islamic world and one on architecture and design of the Islamic world, will accompany the exhibition and may subsequently be circulated independently.

The art and science objects exhibited will be loaned primarily by American museums, libraries, and private collectors. The breadth of Islamic collections in Ameri-

ca is not generally known, and many of the objects in this exhibition, including Korans, rugs, textiles, pottery, glass, and metalwork are being publicly displayed for the first time. The "Heritage of Islam" will be augmented not only by select loans from European institutions, but also by important objects borrowed from the national museums of the Muslim world.

Art, artifacts, and scientific instruments, accompanied by models and photoprinted materials, will be arranged to illuminate the religious and social developments that have shaped the history of Islamic civilization and also profoundly influenced societies beyond Islam's borders. All themes in the exhibition will have a contemporary as well as historical dimension.

To enrich the educational and artistic value of this major cultural exhibition, the National Committee is forming local committees in the cities the exhibition will visit. These committees will then design and coordinate programs and events based on local resources.

A second major project of the committee will be a unique "Symbols of Faith" exhibition, co-sponsored with *National Geographic*. Scheduled to run from Christmas to Easter 1981-82, it will emphasize the common historic, artistic, and cultural roots of the world's major monotheistic religions as illustrated in the symbolism and design elements of representative religious objects of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

A major goal of the committee is to develop and distribute resources on the Muslim world. This is a challenging as well as continuous process. Already available are a kit of printed materials on Islam; an audio-visual kit containing the printed materials supplemented by a filmstrip and audio-tape; an annotated catalogue describing over 250 films on the Islamic world; a series of six 16 mm. thirty-minute films, "The Traditional World of Islam"; and a book published by the Smithsonian Institution on the Kalila Wa Dimna tales.

Since its inception the committee has convened the members of the National Committee at the Hirshhorn Museum; jointly sponsored a conference, "The World of Islam from Morocco to Indonesia," at SAIS; developed, with others, a briefing packet on Islam for broad distribution; established a newsletter to publicize events nationally; commissioned a calligrapher to present to our principal donors, and made contributions to the CBS television series "Sunrise Semester" for forty-five half-hour programs on the 1,400 years of Islam, to the New School of Social Research for a course on Islam, and to the American Council of Learned Societies for publication of a catalogue of films on Islam.

Funding for all committee programs comes from essentially American sources: corporations, foundations, and individuals. Islam Centennial Fourteen policy precludes acceptance of contributions from any foreign governments. Furthermore, the programs of Islam Centennial Fourteen do not promote specific religious or political viewpoints of any kind but derive from a conviction that the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish cultures share important universal values.

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