The Ottomans were Turkish-speaking nomads who had expanded into Asia Minor and the Balkan Peninsula by the 1300s. They were successful in capturing Constantinople in 1453. The city was renamed Istanbul and became the capital of the Ottoman empire.

The Ottoman empire enjoyed a golden age under Suleiman, who ruled from 1520 to 1566. He expanded the empire into Asia, Africa, and Europe. Although he was defeated at Vienna in 1529, the empire remained the largest and most powerful in Europe and the Middle East for centuries. Suleiman had absolute power, but a council helped him govern. He based the justice system on the Sharia, as well as royal edicts.

The top two social classes in Ottoman society—military men and intellectuals, such as scientists and lawyers—were nearly all Muslims. Below them were men involved in trade and production, and then farmers. All people belonged to religious communities, which provided for education and legal matters. The Jewish community, which had been expelled from Spain, possessed international banking connections that benefited the Ottomans.

Ottomans converted some young Christian boys to Islam and trained them for government service. Some were chosen for the janizaries, an elite force of the Ottoman army. The brightest became government officials.

Ottoman culture included great poets, painters, and architects. However, after Suleiman’s death, the empire declined. By the 1700s, it had lost control of areas in Europe and Africa.

By the early 1500s, the Safavids united an empire in Persia (modern Iran). They were Shiite Muslims who fought with Sunni Ottomans to the west and the Mughals in India to the east. Their greatest king, or shah, was Shah Abbas who ruled from 1588 to 1629. He created a strong military and developed military alliances with Europeans. Abbas lowered taxes and encouraged industry. He tolerated other religions and built a capital at Isfahan, which became a center for silk trading.

After Abbas’ death, the empire suffered from religious disputes until its end in 1722. In the late 1700s, a new dynasty, the Qajars, won control of Iran, made Tehran the capital, and ruled until 1925.

Review Questions
1. What social classes existed in the Ottoman empire?

2. What religious difference existed between the Ottoman and Safavid empires?