

A Brief History of Islam (The Spread of Islam)

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Abstract

Islam is a religion for all people from whatever race or background they might be. That is why Islamic civilization is based on a unity which stands completely against any racial or ethnic discrimination. Such major racial and ethnic groups as the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Africans, Indians, Chinese and Malays in addition to numerous smaller units embraced Islam and contributed to the building of Islamic civilization. Moreover, Islam was not opposed to learning from the earlier civilizations and incorporating their science, learning, and culture into its own world view, as long as they did not oppose the principles of Islam. Each ethnic and racial group which embraced Islam made its contribution to the one Islamic civilization to which everyone belonged. The sense of brotherhood and sisterhood was so much emphasized that it overcame all local attachments to a particular tribe, race, or language--all of which became subservient to the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam.

Key Words: Islamic History, Islamic Civilization, Islam, The Spread of Islam.

1. Introduction

From the oasis cities of Makkah and Madinah in the Arabian desert, the message of Islam went forth with electrifying speed. Within half a century of the Prophet's death, Islam had spread to three continents. Islam is not, as some imagine in the West, a religion of the sword nor did it spread primarily by means of war. It was only within Arabia, where a crude form of idolatry was rampant, that Islam was propagated by warring against those tribes which did not accept the message of God--whereas Christians and Jews were not forced to convert. Outside of Arabia also the vast lands conquered by the Arab armies in a short period became Muslim not by force of the sword but by the appeal of the new religion. It was faith in One God and emphasis upon His Mercy that brought vast numbers of people into the fold of Islam. The new religion did not coerce people to convert. Many continued to remain Jews and Christians and to this day important communities of the followers of these faiths are found in Muslim lands[4].

Moreover, the spread of Islam was not limited to its miraculous early expansion outside of Arabia. During later centuries the Turks embraced Islam peacefully as did a large number of the people of the Indian subcontinent and the Malay-speaking world. In Africa also, Islam has spread during the past two centuries even under the mighty power of European colonial rulers. Today Islam continues to grow not only in Africa but also in Europe and America where Muslims now comprise a notable minority. Islam was destined to become a world religion and to create a civilization which stretched from one end of the globe to the other.

Already during the early Muslim caliphates, first the Arabs, then the Persians and later the Turks set about to create classical Islamic civilization. Later, in the 13th century, both Africa and India became great centers of Islamic civilization and soon thereafter Muslim kingdoms were established in the Malay-Indonesian world while Chinese Muslims flourished throughout China. The global civilization thus created by Islam permitted people of diverse ethnic backgrounds to work together in cultivating various arts and sciences. Although the civilization was profoundly Islamic, even non-Muslim "people of the book" participated in the intellectual activity whose fruits belonged to everyone.

The scientific climate was reminiscent of the present situation in America where scientists and men and women of learning from all over the world are active in the advancement of knowledge which belongs to everyone. The global civilization created by Islam also succeeded in activating the mind and thought of the people who entered its fold. As a result of Islam, the nomadic Arabs became torch-bearers of science and learning [6].

The Persians who had created a great civilization before the rise of Islam nevertheless produced much more science and learning in the Islamic period than before.

The same can be said of the Turks and other peoples who embraced Islam. The religion of Islam was itself responsible not only for the creation of a world civilization in which people of many different ethnic backgrounds participated, but it played a central role in developing intellectual and cultural life on a scale not seen before. For some eight hundred years Arabic remained the major intellectual and scientific language of the world. During the centuries following the rise of Islam, Muslim dynasties ruling in various parts of the Islamic world bore witness to the flowering of Islamic culture and thought. In fact this tradition of intellectual activity was eclipsed only at the beginning of modern times as a result of the weakening of faith among Muslims combined with external domination [1]. And today this activity has begun anew in many parts of the Islamic world now that the Muslims have regained their political independence.

2. History of Islam

Upon the death of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, the friend of the Prophet and the first adult male to embrace Islam, became caliph. Abu Bakr ruled for two years to be succeeded by 'Umar who was caliph for a decade and during whose rule Islam spread extensively east and west conquering the Persian empire, Syria and Egypt. It was 'Umar who marched on foot at the end of the Muslim army into Jerusalem and ordered the protection of Christian sites. 'Umar also established the first public treasury and a sophisticated financial administration. He established many of the basic practices of Islamic government. Umar was succeeded by 'Uthman who ruled for some twelve years during which time the Islamic expansion continued. He is also known as the caliph who had the definitive text of the Noble Quran copied and sent to the four corners of the Islamic world [3]. He was in turn succeeded by 'Ali who is known to this day for his eloquent sermons and letters, and also for his bravery. With his death the rule of the "rightly guided" caliphs, who hold a special place of respect in the hearts of Muslims, came to an end. The Umayyad caliphate established in 661 was to last for about a century. During this time Damascus became the capital of an Islamic world which stretched from the western borders of China to southern France. Not only did the Islamic conquests continue during this period through North Africa to Spain and France in the West and to Sind, Central Asia and Transoxiana in the East, but the basic social and legal institutions of the newly founded Islamic world were established.

The Abbasids, who succeeded the Umayyads, shifted the capital to Baghdad which soon developed into an incomparable center of learning and culture as well as the administrative and political heart of a vast world. They ruled for over 500 years but gradually their power waned and they remained only symbolic rulers bestowing legitimacy upon various sultans and princes who wielded actual military power[11]. The Abbasid caliphate was finally abolished when Hulagu, the Mongol ruler, captured Baghdad in 1258, destroying much of the city including its incomparable libraries. While the Abbasids ruled in Baghdad, a number of powerful dynasties such as the Fatimids, Ayyubids and Mamluks held power in Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The most important event in this area as far as the relation between Islam and the Western world was concerned was the series of Crusades declared by the Pope and espoused by various European kings. The purpose, although political, was outwardly to recapture the Holy Land and especially Jerusalem for Christianity. Although there was at the beginning some success and local European rule was set up in parts of Syria and Palestine, Muslims finally prevailed and in 1187 Saladin, the great Muslim leader, recaptured Jerusalem and defeated the Crusaders.

3. North Africa and Spain

When the Abbasids captured Damascus, one of the Umayyad princes escaped and made the long journey from there to Spain to found Umayyad rule there, thus beginning the golden age of Islam in Spain. Cordoba was established as the capital and soon became Europe's greatest city not only in population but from the point of view of its cultural and intellectual life. The Umayyads ruled over two centuries until they weakened and were replaced by local rulers. Meanwhile in North Africa, various local dynasties held sway until two powerful Berber dynasties succeeded in uniting much of North Africa and also Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries. After them this area was ruled once again by local dynasties such as the Sharifids of Morocco who still rule in that country[9]. As for Spain itself, Muslim power continued to wane until the last Muslim dynasty was defeated in Granada in 1492 thus bringing nearly eight hundred years of Muslim rule in Spain to an end.

4. After the Mangol Invasion

The Mongols devastated the eastern lands of Islam and ruled from the Sinai Desert to India for a century. But they soon converted to Islam and became known as the Il-Khanids. They were in turn succeeded by Timur and his descendents who made Samarqand their capital and ruled from 1369 to 1500. The sudden rise of Timur delayed the formation and expansion of the Ottoman empire but soon the Ottomans became the dominant power in the Islamic world.

5. Ottoman Empire

From humble origins the Turks rose to dominate over the whole of Anatolia and even parts of Europe. In 1453 Mehmet the Conqueror captured Constantinople and put an end to the Byzantine empire. The Ottomans conquered much of eastern Europe and nearly the whole of the Arab world, only Morocco and Mauritania in the West and Yemen, Hadramaut and parts of the Arabian peninsula remaining beyond their control. They reached their zenith of power with Suleyman the Magnificent whose armies reached Hungary and Austria. From the 17th century onward with the rise of Western European powers and later Russia, the power of the Ottomans began to wane. But they nevertheless remained a force to be reckoned with until the First World War when they were defeated by the Western nations. Soon thereafter Kamal Ataturk gained power in Turkey and abolished the six centuries of rule of the Ottomans in 1924[10]. While the Ottomans were concerned mostly with the western front of their empire, to the east in Persia a new dynasty called the Safavids came to power in 1502.

The Safavids established a powerful state of their own which flourished for over two centuries and became known for the flowering of the arts. Their capital, Isfahan, became one of the most beautiful cities with its blue tiled mosques and exquisite houses. The Afghan invasion of 1736 put an end to Safavid rule and prepared the independence of Afghanistan which occurred formally in the 19th century. Persia itself fell into turmoil until Nader Shah, the last Oriental conqueror, reunited the country and even conquered India. But the rule of the dynasty established by him was short-lived. The Zand dynasty soon took over to be overthrown by the Qajars in 1779 who made Tehran their capital and ruled until 1921 when they were in turn replaced by the Pahlavis. Farther east in the Malay world, Islam began to spread in the 12th century in northern Sumatra and soon Muslim kingdoms were established in Java, Sumatra and mainland Malaysia[7]. Despite the colonization of the Malay world, Islam spread in that area covering present day Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, and is still continuing in islands farther east.

As far as Africa is concerned, Islam entered into East Africa at the very beginning of the Islamic period but remained confined to the coast for some time, only the Sudan and Somaliland becoming gradually both Arabized and Islamized. West Africa felt the presence of Islam through North African traders who travelled with their camel caravans south of the Sahara. By the 14th century there were already Muslim sultanates in such areas as Mali, and Timbuctu in West Africa and Harar in East Africa had become seats of Islamic learning. Gradually Islam penetrated both inland and southward. There also appeared major charismatic figures who inspired intense resistance against European domination. The process of the Islamization of Africa did not cease during the colonial period and continues even today with the result that most Africans are now Muslims carrying on a tradition which has had practically as long a history in certain areas of sub-Saharan Africa as Islam itself.

6. Islam in the United States

It is almost impossible to generalize about American Muslims: converts, immigrants, factory workers, doctors; all are making their own contribution to America's future. This complex community is unified by a common faith, underpinned by a countrywide network of a thousand mosques. Muslims were early arrivals in North America. By the eighteenth century there were many thousands of them, working as slaves on plantations. These early communities cut off from their heritage and families, inevitably lost their Islamic identity as time went by. Today many Afro-American Muslims play an important role in the Islamic community. The nineteenth century, however, saw the beginnings of an influx of Arab Muslims, most of whom settled in the major industrial centers where they worshipped in hired rooms.

The early twentieth century witnessed the arrival of several hundred thousand Muslims from Eastern Europe: the first Albanian mosque was opened in Maine in 1915 others soon followed, and a group of Polish Muslims opened a mosque in Brooklyn in 1928[8]. In 1947 the Washington Islamic Center was founded during the term of President Truman, and several nationwide organizations were set up in the fifties.

The same period saw the establishment of other communities whose lives were in many ways modelled after Islam. More recently, numerous members of these groups have entered the fold of Muslim orthodoxy. Today there are about five million Muslims in America.

7. Aftermath of the Colonial Period

At the height of European colonial expansion in the 19th century, most of the Islamic world was under colonial rule with the exception of a few regions such as the heart of the Ottoman empire, Persia, Afghanistan, Yemen and certain parts of Arabia. But even these areas were under foreign influence or, in the case of the Ottomans, under constant threat. After the First World War with the breakup of the Ottoman empire, a number of Arab states such as Iraq became independent, others like Jordan were created as a new entity and yet others like Palestine, Syria and Lebanon were either mandated or turned into French colonies. As for Arabia, it was at this time that Saudi Arabia became finally consolidated. As for other parts of the Islamic world, Egypt which had been ruled by the descendents of Muhammad Ali since the 19th century became more independent as a result of the fall of the Ottomans, Turkey was turned into a secular republic by Ataturk, and the Pahlavi dynasty began a new chapter in Persia where its name reverted to its eastern traditional form of Iran. But most of the rest of the Islamic world remained under colonial rule.

It was only after the Second World War and the dismemberment of the British, French, Dutch and Spanish empires that the rest of the Islamic world gained its independence. In the Arab world, Syria and Lebanon became independent at the end of the war as did Libya and the shaykdoms around the Gulf and the Arabian Sea by the 1960's. The North African countries of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria had to fight a difficult and, in the case of Algeria, long and protracted war to gain their freedom which did not come until a decade later for Tunisia and Morocco and two decades later for Algeria [5]. Only Palestine did not become independent but was partitioned in 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel. In India Muslims participated in the freedom movement against British rule along with Hindus and when independence finally came in 1947, they were able to create their own homeland, Pakistan, which came into being for the sake of Islam and became the most populated Muslim state although many Muslims remained in India. In 1971, however, the two parts of the state broke up, East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh.

Farther east still, the Indonesians finally gained their independence from the Dutch and the Malays theirs from Britain. At first Singapore was part of Malaysia but it separated in 1963 to become an independent state. Small colonies still persisted in the area and continued to seek their independence, the kingdom of Brunei becoming independent as recently as 1984. In Africa also major countries with large or majority Muslim populations such as Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania began to gain their independence in the 1950's and 1960's with the result that by the end of the decade of the 60's most parts of the Islamic world were formed into independent national states. There were, however, exceptions. The Muslim states in the Soviet Union failed to gain their autonomy or independence. The same holds true for Sinkiang (called Eastern Turkestan by Muslim geographers) while in Eritrea and the southern Philippines Muslim independence movements still continue.

8. Education and Science in the Islamic World

In seeking to live successfully in the modern world, in independence and according to Islamic principles, Muslim countries have been emphasizing a great deal the significance of the role of education and the importance of mastering Western science and technology. Already in the 19th century, certain Muslim countries such as Egypt, Ottoman Turkey and Persia established institutions of higher learning where the modern sciences and especially medicine were taught. During this century educational institutions at all levels have proliferated throughout the Islamic world. Nearly every science ranging from mathematics to biology as well as various fields of modern technology are taught in these institutions and some notable scientists have been produced by the Islamic world, men and women who have often combined education in these institutions with training in the West[2].

In various parts of the Islamic world there is, however, a sense that educational institutions must be expanded and also have their standards improved to the level of the best institutions in the world in various fields of learning especially science and technology. At the same time there is an awareness that the educational system must be based totally on Islamic principles and the influence of alien cultural and ethical values and norms, to the extent that they are negative, be diminished.

To remedy this problem a number of international Islamic educational conferences have been held, the first one in Makkah in 1977, and the foremost thinkers of the Islamic world have been brought together to study and ponder over the question of the relation between Islam and modern science. This is an ongoing process which is at the center of attention in many parts of the Islamic world and which indicates the significance of educational questions in the Islamic world today..

9. Influence of Islamic Science and Learning upon the West

The oldest university in the world which is still functioning is the eleven hundred-year-old Islamic university of Fez, Morocco, known as the Qarawiyyin. This old tradition of Islamic learning influenced the West greatly through Spain. In this land where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived for the most part peacefully for many centuries, translations began to be made in the 11th century mostly in Toledo of Islamic works into Latin often through the intermediary of Jewish scholars most of whom knew Arabic and often wrote in Arabic. As a result of these translations, Islamic thought and through it much of Greek thought became known to the West and Western schools of learning began to flourish. Even the Islamic educational system was emulated in Europe and to this day the term chair in a university reflects the Arabic kursi (literally seat) upon which a teacher would sit to teach his students in the madrasah (school of higher learning)[11]. As European civilization grew and reached the high Middle Ages, there was hardly a field of learning or form of art, whether it was literature or architecture, where there was not some influence of Islam present. Islamic learning became in this way part and parcel of Western civilization even if with the advent of the Renaissance, the West not only turned against its own medieval past but also sought to forget the long relation it had had with the Islamic world, one which was based on intellectual respect despite religious opposition.

Conclusion

The Islamic world remains today a vast land stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with an important presence in Europe and America, animated by the teachings of Islam and seeking to assert its own identity. Despite the presence of nationalism and various secular ideologies in their midst, Muslims wish to live in the modern world but without simply imitating blindly the ways followed by the West. The Islamic world wishes to live at peace with the West as well as the East but at the same time not to be dominated by them. It wishes to devote its resources and energies to building a better life for its people on the basis of the teachings of Islam and not to squander its resources in either internal or external conflicts. It seeks finally to create better understanding with the West and to be better understood by the West. The destinies of the Islamic world and the West cannot be totally separated and therefore it is only in understanding each other better that they can serve their own people more successfully and also contribute to a better life for the whole of humanity.

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