

Part 4: Medieval Islamic Civilization to 1000

Islam developed in Arabia, which had never been part of either the Byzantine Empire or its major rival the Persian Empire. Pre-Islamic Arabian religion was diverse. The dominant religion was basically polytheistic, as the Arabs worshiped a series of tribal gods, usually represented by stones, and perhaps influenced by Christianity and Judaism, they also believed in a supreme king over all the gods, Allah. In many of the cities of Arabia, there were major shrines to Arab gods. One of the most important was the Kaaba, which was in Mecca, Muhammad's hometown. This structure was built around a black asteroid rock, and within the structure there were some 300 statues of various Arab gods. Since the Kaaba was a major pilgrimage site, it was a major source of income for the city of Mecca and its merchants. However, polytheism was not the only religion in Arabia. There was a plethora of Christian groups in the Arabian Peninsula, many of who were what the Byzantine and Latin Christians would have considered to be heretics, and there also numerous Jewish communities in the cities of western Arabia. Combined with the pagan background of Arabia, the Jewish and Christian influence had no so small impact on the religious ideas of Muhammad in the early seventh century.

The study of the origins of Islam is often a difficult field. One of the main reasons for this is how Muslims understand the nature of the *Qur'an*. While even the most literalist fundamentalist Protestant Christians usually recognize that the Christian Scriptures are compilation of books written by humans, though they obviously believe their Scriptures are divinely inspired, the majority of Muslims since the ninth century have believed that the *Qur'an* pre-existed its gradual revelation to Muhammad, and even going further by positing that the *Qur'an* is somehow co-eternal with God in almost the same way that Nicene Christians believe

Christ is co-eternal with God the Father. Since Muslims believe that the standard text of the *Qur'an* is identical to what exists in heaven, scholars have often been reluctant to trace pre-Islamic influences on the composition of the text. However, even within Islamic tradition, Muslims accept that it was not Muhammad himself who wrote down the *Qur'an*. Rather, Islamic tradition holds that one of Muhammad's companions compiled the earliest text of the *Qur'an* in the early 630s based on what Muhammad's companions had written down. But it was not until the reign of Caliph Uthman (644-656) that the current standard version was compiled, which required the addition of consonants to the text. Even then the earliest complete manuscript of this text dates to around 750, about one hundred years later. For this reason, some scholars have proposed that the final redaction of the *Qur'an* did not occur until much later than 650, though radiocarbon dating of fragments suggests that 650 may be somewhat accurate. Regardless, this does not rule out other scholarly arguments that have demonstrated parallels between passages in the *Qur'an* and both Jewish and Christian apocryphal texts.

The *Qur'an* is not the only source for early Islam. In addition, there are the *hadith*, which are collections of sayings of and stories about Muhammad. Though Islamic custom determines the authenticity of a *hadith* based on its chain of transmission from Muhammad, they were not compiled until after 750, and compilations include many sayings that are so blatantly forged in an attempt to condemn political and religious enemies. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the authenticity of many of the sayings. Finally, the earliest extant biography of Muhammad dates to 830, that is, about two centuries after the death of Muhammad. This biography written or rather edited by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) was largely based on another biography from around 767, which is no longer extant. Because of the problem of these sources and the lack of extensive alternative records for Muhammad, some scholars have suggested that perhaps Muhammad was

just a minor figure who was not entirely responsible for formulating the belief system of early Islam. Regardless of whether Muhammad was a minor or a major figure, the religion of Islam that developed in the early seventh century began to take its final form by the end of that century.

The story of Islam begins in the city of Mecca where Muhammad was born around the year 570, a few months after his father had died. His mother died when he was six, and his paternal grandfather raised him. His family was not part of the oligarchic merchants who dominated Mecca, but neither were they poor. He seems to have engaged in trade, and was probably illiterate. In 595, he began to work for the wealthy widow, Khadija, and then married her. They had two sons and four daughters. The sons died young and the one daughter, Fatima, eventually married Muhammad's cousin, Ali, who, as we will see, became an important figure in early Islam.

According to the early Islamic sources, Muhammad seems to have disliked the pagan religions of Mecca, but neither was he convinced by Christianity or Judaism. Around 610, when he was forty-years old, he began to fast and pray in a cave near Mecca, when he claimed that he received a vision from Allah (Arabic for God) through the angel Gabriel, commanding him to recite the revelation. Muslims believe that this was the first of many revelations that make up the Islamic holy book, the *Qur'an*, which means recitation. When Muhammad began to preach this new message, it had three major elements. First, there was a single-all-powerful God, who was the creator of the universe. Second, heavenly awards awaited those who carried out God's commandments, while punishment awaited those who did not. Third, worship of God was necessary and so was acknowledging the power of God and the weakness of humankind, Though some within Muhammad's immediate family, especially his wife, were interested in his message, the general reaction within Mecca was negative. The Meccans feared that his anti-idol

monotheism would destroy the Kaaba and the very status that had allowed Mecca to prosper so much. So, the merchant class began to persecute Muhammad and his early followers. As a result he began to emphasize the terrible doom that awaited all those who opposed Allah. This naturally did not do anything for his popularity.

In 621, twelve men from Medina came to Mecca seeking Muhammad's arbitration in their city in order to reestablish order in their city after years of clan warfare. Apparently, news of Muhammad's message had reached Medina via the caravans, since it was about 200 miles north of Mecca on the caravan route. Muhammad agreed to accompany the men back to the city on July 16, 622 to become not only the arbitrator but the leader of the city. No longer welcomed in Mecca, Muhammad's followers also accompanied him on his emigration to Medina. This move is known as the *Hijira* and marks the beginning of Islamic history and marks year 1, or 1 AH, of the Islamic calendar. It was at Medina that the new religion received its name, because during a public sermon, Muhammad descended from a pulpit and prostrated himself three times (to God) with his back to the audience; thus the new religion came to be known as Islam (to surrender or to make peace) and its adherents Muslims (those who submit). There was some opposition to Muhammad, especially among the Jewish clans. In 624, after the Jewish families refused to recognize his prophethood, he turned his back from Jerusalem to which he had prayed and turned to Mecca. Yet, he also later claimed to have ascended to the seventh circle of heaven from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem where later the Dome of the Rock was built. In 627, after Mecca failed to conquer Medina when besieging it, Muhammad ordered the execution of all 700 men of the last remaining Jewish clan and then sold their wives and children into slavery. Though the Jews had not aided the Meccan attack, Muhammad found their defense of Medina lackluster.

Mecca's attack on Medina was not unprovoked. Soon after his arrival, Muhammad began to raid caravans from Mecca in order to acquire food and supplies. Mecca's attack on Medina, however, turned Medina's raids into *jihads*, or holy struggles against the infidel. After a few more years of struggle, in 629, Mecca made a truce with Muhammad, agreeing to convert to Islam, allowing him to return triumphantly to his home city. He then proceeded to destroy the idols within the structure of the Kaaba. However, he did not destroy the Kaaba itself. Instead, he integrated it into Islamic practice. He explained the black rock was the remnant of an altar that Adam had built after his expulsion from paradise. Rebuilt by Noah after the flood, Abraham and his son Ishmael later rebuilt it again. Ishmael himself was the ancestor of Muhammad's clan and the Arabs who had abandoned the worship of and belief in the one true God for polytheism. Now that the Kaaba had been purified, Muhammad sanctioned the kissing of the black stone in the Kaaba, and it soon became the main holy site in Islam. For the remainder of his life, Muhammad formed alliances with other Arab tribes throughout Arabia, expanding the reach of Islam within the peninsula.

Muhammad's death in 632 inaugurated a period of both expansion and instability within Islam. Muhammad left no provision for succession, so his father-in-law (Abu Bakr) became the first caliph or successor to Muhammad (632-4). As caliph, he did not claim the status of a prophet. Instead, caliphs were generals, religious and political administrators, and judges. After his death, the companions of the prophet selected Umar (634-644) who was succeeded by Uthman (644-656), a son-in-law of Muhammad.

The Muslims under these early caliphs and their successors began to expand outside of the Arabian Peninsula. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, did not lead this expansion, since he focused on putting down a rebellion among the Arab tribes who quickly apostatized upon Muhammad's

death. It was his successor Umar who first led the *jihad* against both the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire. Because the two classical empires had only recently ended a long and devastating war with each other, they were in no condition to resist the enthusiastic forces of Muslim Arabs. As a result, between 633 and 651, Muslim forces managed to conquer the Persian Empire completely; in addition, they also made headway into the Byzantine Empire, conquering all of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt by 661. By the end of the seventh century, the later Umayyad dynasty also conquered the rest of Byzantine North Africa, and in the early eighth century, Spain. In this newly established empire, the Arab Muslims generally preferred not to interfere with local customs and governmental structures. In general, as long as cities submitted without resistance, they were unharmed. The Arabs were a minority in their new empire and could not afford to provoke resentment, at least for the time being.

Because early Muslims recognized the divine origins of Christian and Jewish revelation, they granted them *dhimmi* or protected status. They in no way considered these two religions equal to Islam, since they believed both religions had corrupted the original revelations to the prophets Moses and Jesus. In particular, they believed that the Christians had erred by believing that Jesus was the son of God and true God himself and for believing in the Trinity. As it is often said in the Qur'an, God can have neither a partner nor a child. The *dhimmi* status made Christians and Jews second-class citizens, requiring them to pay a tribute tax for living in Islamic lands, restricting their public displays of worship, requiring them to wear distinct clothing, and forbidding them from building new religious structures. Despite this, Christians and Jews often retained positions in government, since they had previous governmental experience.

In the century following Muhammad's death, Muslims also began to announce what are known as the five pillars of Islam. Because Islam is an intentionally simple religion compared to

the complex creeds of Christianity, the first pillar of Islam and the profession of faith required for converting to Islam is: “There is no god but God alone, and Muhammad is his prophet.” Second, Muslims are required pray at five set times a day in the direction of Mecca. Third, they are required to pay legal alms, or *zakat*, for the poor. Fourth, all Muslim men are required to make the *hajj*, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, once in their lifetime in order make a circumambulation of the Kaaba seven times counter-clockwise. Finally, all Muslims are required to fast between sunrise and sunset every day during the lunar month of Ramadan, which was the same month in which Muhammad first received revelations from the angel Gabriel in 610 and later returned to Mecca in 629.

Despite the successful conquest of so much territory, nearly a quarter of a century after Muhammad’s death, the Islamic world was plunged into a civil war. The reign of the third caliph, Uthman was ended when a group of Arab Muslims from Egypt revolted against Uthman and assassinated him, supposedly with the blessing of his brother-in-law Ali, the husband of Muhammad’s favorite daughter Fatima. At the time of Muhammad’s death, many had supported the pious Ali’s claim as Muhammad’s successor, but Muhammad’s companions had denied him that distinction. As a result of his supposed support for Uthman’s murder and his subsequent claim on the caliphate, the Islamic world was plunged into civil war. A member of Uthman’s Umayyad clan, Mu’awiya became the leader of the Muslims who opposed Ali. Though Ali won the war, Mu’awiya refused to recognize his caliphate. When Ali showed a willingness to accept arbitration about the succession dispute, some of his followers assassinated Ali for what they saw as a betrayal in 661. As a consequence, Mu’awiya had himself proclaimed caliph soon afterwards, establishing the Umayyad dynasty. Though Ali was dead, the party of Ali did not give up on making his sons and then grandsons caliphs, or imams as they called them. This is

the origins of Shia Muslims who insist that the successor of Muhammad, or the caliph, should be a descendent of Muhammad through Ali's marriage with Fatima, the prophet's daughter.

Though the Shia developed varying traditions and practices that differed from the predominate Sunni Islam, which developed in the eighth century, the main issue was over who exactly was the leader of the Islamic community.

Shia Islam was not the only challenge to the new Umayyad dynasty. Though technically, all Muslims in early Islam were equal, the Umayyads required non-Arab Muslims (or the *mawali*) who converted to Islam to continue to pay the tribute tax required from the *dhimmi*. The Arabs also segregated Arab and non-Arab worship by building separate mosques for their use. As you can imagine, this caused resentment against the Umayyad dynasty, especially as more and more Persians in Iran and Iraq abandoned their Zoroastrian faith for Islam. Combined with Shia resistance, *mawali* resentment would lead to the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty when a revolt of *mawali* and Shia broke out in Persia (modern-day Iran) in 750. The eventual leader of this rebellion was the Arabic family, the Abbasids, who traced their lineage from Abbas, an uncle of the prophet. Though they had very questionable Shia credentials, they claimed that before one of Ali's childless heirs died, he had adopted one of the Abbasids' ancestors, thus granting them his claim as an heir to Ali. However, once they seized the title of caliph and defeated the Umayyads, the Abbasids quietly abandoned those claims and crushed their former Shia supporters. Instead, they focused on patronizing the new religious class of scholars and emphasized the need to follow the *Sunnah*, or the example of Muhammad. Thus, most Muslims to this day are Sunni Muslims.

Although the Shia were disappointed in the new regime, the Persian *mawali* were much more pleased with it. The Abbasids established a new capital in 762 not far from ancient

Babylon, and they named this city Baghdad. At its height, Bagdad was the largest and most prestigious city in the Western world. The Abbasid Empire also created a new culture that was an amalgamation of Arabic, Persian, and Greco-Roman culture. It was an Islamic Arabic dynasty but culturally it became increasingly Persian, and Persian along with Arabic became the main languages of the empire. Muslims also adopted Persian customs such as the enclosure of women and completely veiling them.

From Christians in Syria, Muslims under the Abbasids encountered much of the Greco-Roman intellectual tradition, from medicine to philosophy to geometry, and translated them into Arabic from Syriac with the assistance of Syriac Christians who had previously translated them from the original Greek. Influences from India also penetrated the Islamic world, including what became known as Arabic numerals and most revolutionary of all was the number zero. In Baghdad, Caliph al-Mam'un (r. 813-833) established the House of Wisdom, which was an advanced scientific academy open to all races and faiths. Among the scholars of the House of Wisdom was Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi who, drawing on the Hindu mathematical achievements, developed the science of algebra, from the Arabic word *al-jabr* literally meaning setting a bone.

However, there was a limit to this openness, especially when it touched upon the *Qur'an*. During the ninth century, a group of Muslim intellectuals known as the Mu'tazilites disputed the majority of Muslim scholars over a variety of theological issues. The main issue was that the Mu'tazilites rejected that the *Qur'an* as a reflection of God's mind was co-eternal with him and therefore uncreated. Breaking with tradition, Caliph al-Mam'un threw his support behind the Mu'tazilites in favor of a created *Qur'an*. In 827, he imposed the *mihna* (or test) on all *kadis* (religious judges) and teachers, requiring they accept the created nature of the *Qur'an* or be put

to death. The *mihna* controversy probably resulted in his assassination, though it continued under his next two successors until Caliph Mutawakkil abolished the *mihna* in 842 and declared in favor of the uncreated *Qur'an*. From this controversy, it became abundantly clear that the caliph did not wield significant doctrinal power. Rather, the *ulama*, or learned scholars, voiced the *ijima*, or consensus, and once they arrived at a consensus, no opposition was tolerated. This would have significant consequences for the future of Islamic intellectual achievements, but during the Golden Age of Islam, it fortunately did not greatly hamper the Abbasid Empire's achievements. In the future, much of its intellectual achievements, which combined Persian, Greco-Roman, and Hindu learning, would find fertile ground for further growth in Western Europe.

Despite this golden age that lasted until the end of the dynasty, within a century of its foundation, the Abbasid dynasty would begin its long decline, as regional differences and Shia-Sunni differences took hold and tore the empire apart. The first region of the Islamic world that broke away from the Abbasid caliphate was Andalusia or Spain, which a surviving Umayyad took control of in the 750s. By the end of the tenth century, the Umayyads in Spain proclaimed themselves caliphs, though by 1030 the Umayyad dynasty ceased to exist and Islamic Spain was fragmented between competing Islamic states. Within the Abbasid Empire, various governors or emirs in North Africa autonomously ruled their regions, paying only lip service to the Abbasid caliphate. Though the Abbasid Caliphate would remain in power until 1258 when the Mongols sacked Baghdad, by the ninth century a series of families, such as the Buyid dynasty from the mid-tenth through the mid-eleventh centuries, dominated the caliphs whose authority was reduced to being the symbolic leader of the fragmented empire.

In Tunisia, a Shia dynasty, known as the Fatimid dynasty rose to power, eventually conquering Egypt and establishing the city of Cairo in 969. There were multiple types of Shia Muslims. They all usually believed that God had taken one of the caliphs in the line of Ali, or imams, into occultation, or hiding, and he would some day return to restore Islam to its purity and usher in the end of the world. For the Shiites, the imams were not merely successors to Muhammad but divinely guided and infallible. Most Shia Muslims in the Abbasid Empire were Twelver Shia, believing that the twelfth imam, or the *Mahdi*, went into occultation, and would same day return to restore Islam to its purity and usher in the end of the world. The Fatimids, however, were Sevener Shia Muslims, who believed that the seventh imam went into hiding, and they held that their founding caliph was the *Mahdi*, or the hidden imam. Just like the Umayyad dynasty in Spain, the Fatimid rulers also claimed the tittle of caliph. The Shia Muslims remained a minority in the empire that the Fatimids carved out across Egypt, parts of North Africa, and Syria, and their version of Shia Islam was also a minority among the Shiites.

The Abbasid dynasty was not the only family to seize power in the mid-eighth century. Far to the West in Francia, an aristocratic family called the Carolingians received the blessing of the pope to seize the Frankish throne from the ruling Merovingian family, and just like the Abbasids had done in the Islamic world, the new Carolingian dynasty promoted an intellectual and religious revival, which historians often call the Carolingian Renaissance, and it is to the rise and fall of Carolingians we will now turn to in the final part of this lecture.