

## Organization and Impact of Islam

### From the Umayyads to the Abbasids

The Umayyad was a wealthy merchant clan from Mecca. Their dynasty solved the problem of succession (temporarily) and established the role and function of the Muslim *caliph*. The **caliph** was the head of state for the Muslim community as well as the supreme judge, chief religious figure and military commander.

Under the Umayyads Islam spread out of Arabia into the Mesopotamia, Palestine, Persia, North Africa, and Western Europe. (overhead map) To control such a vast area they ruled the *dar al-Islam* as military conquerors and showed strong favoritism toward the Arab military aristocracy. Non-Arab Muslims, whose numbers were increasingly growing, resented this. The frustration of other Muslim was compounded when the Umayyad took to luxurious living and came to care little for Islamic doctrine or morality. Consequently, a rebellion in Persia headed by the **Abbasid** clan would overthrow the Umayyads and establish a more lasting dynasty from its center in Baghdad.

(The Abbasid exploited Shia discontent with the Umayyads. After warring with the Umayyads for years, the Abbasid invited them to a feast of reconciliation. While there, they arrested the entire Umayyad clan and slaughtered them.)

The Abbasid borrowed their ruling techniques from the Persians. The central authority was based in Baghdad where the caliph lived in opulent splendor. Each province had a governor who implemented the policies of the caliph.

### The dar al-Islam as an organizing social and political force

Islam became deeply rooted through the use of **ulama** and **qadis**. Ulama are specialists in the interpretation of the Quran and the sharia. It was their job to shape and apply public policy according to Islamic theology. Qadis were Islamic judges who heard cases and settled disputes among Muslims. They rendered their decisions according to sharia and the Quran. Both ulama and qadis assured the continuity of Islamic civilization and proved to be important forces in institutionalizing the religion.

One important result of these institutions was an increase in trade. Unlike Christianity, Islam did not originally have prohibitions against wealth and profit. Muhammad himself was a merchant. With the establishing of ulama and qadis, merchants were protected by Islamic law and had recourse to a systematic method of having disputes settled. **Banking** and credit flourished, easing financial transactions. Within this framework of legal protection and regulation, trade and financial transactions became much safer and easier.

Moreover, with the invention of a saddle for camels, the deserts of North Africa and Arabia were no longer as obstructive as before. Trade routes connected most all major urban centers of the dar al-Islam. Muslims opened up the eastern part of the Silkroad trade routes with China. After learning about the **compass** from the Chinese, and the **lateen sail** from Asia (borrowed from the Hindu dhows), the Muslim entered into the lucrative **Indian Ocean trade network**.

Several important diffusions took place among different regions of the dar al-Islam. In addition to the compass and lateen sail mentioned above, the western portion of the Islamic world benefited from crops brought over from India and the east. They included wheat, rice, sugarcane, vegetables such as spinach and eggplant, fruits such as citrus, melons and coconuts. Because of the climate of much of the Arab world, there was only a small window of opportunity to practice agriculture. But because many of these new crops could be grown in dry hot climates, the introduction of new crops made year round farming possible in some areas of southwest Asia and North Africa. Diets became more varied and healthy, and the increase in food production allowed the population to grow. Muslims also spread the cultivation of **cotton**, which spawned a new industry in textiles.

Islam would spread across these trade routes and impact a large portion of the world. Much of this religious diffusion was the result of the rise of **Sufism** in Islam. Sufis rebelled against the intellectual and formalized version of Islam that emerged among scholars in Baghdad. While maintaining traditional Muslim theology and beliefs, the Sufis stressed a more emotional practice of religion. They rejected the academic approach to religion and strove instead for a mystical union with Allah. The Sufis were enormously important because of their missionary activity in spreading Islam. Their version of Islam required devotion rather than the mastery of complex doctrine. Many practiced **asceticism** and gave themselves to feeding the poor and helping the unfortunate.

### The Spread and Effect of Islam

As Islam spread across the Arabian Peninsula and later across North Africa and the Middle East, it had an aggregating effect. The occupants of these areas had been nomadic tribes for a very long time. They were polytheistic and reaped all the political problems associated with polytheism. Remember, although tribes or regions may share the same pantheon of gods, they tend to place primary importance on different individual gods. Consequently, the belief in many gods lends itself very readily to conflicting loyalties and competition in politics. This had long been an impediment to peace or unification in many areas into which Islam would spread.

Conversion to monotheism meant that these barriers were no longer relevant and unification became easier. Likewise, one's ancestral bloodline—once the unifying bond within a tribe—gave way to a new loyalty based on a common faith in one god. As a result, Islam facilitated the rise of large empires in areas once characterized by small kingdoms, marauding bandits or tribal nomads.

Another effect of the spread of Islam was an increase in trade. Unlike early Christianity, Muslims were not reluctant to engage in trade and profit; Muhammad himself was a merchant. As new areas were drawn into the orbit of Islamic civilization, the new religion provided merchants with a safe context for trade. The application of **sharia**—Islamic law derived from the Koran—ensured a certain measure of uniformity in the application of criminal justice. Sharia law protected commerce and imposed stiff punishments for theft and dishonesty. Muslim jurists called **qadis** were established to resolve disputes through the application of sharia. Merchants were thus provided with a forum for making complaints and having them resolved in a consistent and systematic way. Trade and travel were not as risky or perilous as before and both thrived with the coming of Islam.

Despite these generalizations, Islam's effect in any given area was dependent on the institutions and belief systems already in place. It is necessary to look at some of these areas individually.

### **Sub-Saharan Africa**

The beginning of trans-Saharan trade, made possible by the domestication of the camel, profoundly influenced the world of sub-Saharan Africa. Gold, salt and slaves began to make their way across the desert. With them came Islam.

Because Islam does not separate religious authority from political authority, it was most appealing to tribal leaders because it strengthened the African concept of kingship. Kings who converted had more power and authority at their disposal. Several Muslim empires would emerge as a result.

The common people did not practice Islam in as pure a form as did the kings and other people of influence. Most people combined it with their established beliefs of ancestor worship and fetishes. Nor did it greatly affect gender roles. "Women in sub-Saharan Africa possessed more opportunities than did women in other parts of the world. Even the arrival of Islam did not substantially worsen the condition of women in sub-Saharan Africa."

For reasons described above, Islam dramatically increased trade in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also increased the slave trade. Muslims considered the enslavement of unbelievers as a step toward their conversion. Also, in Islamic law persons born to slave parents were not automatically slaves, as in the American South. This meant that there was a constant demand for slaves because each generation of slaves had to be purchased anew. Moreover, "private ownership of land was not an established institution in Sub-Saharan Africa, a fact that made the possession of slaves an important barometer of personal wealth. As many as ten million African slaves were shipped north as part of the trans-Saharan slave trade between 750 and 1500 C.E."

In summary, the coming of Islam to Sub-Saharan Africa facilitated the rise of political empires, encouraged trade and wealth, and increased the traffic in slavery. In its pure form, Islam was more attractive to kings because of its concept of the caliph combined political power with religious authority. And it did not greatly affect the lower classes or traditional gender roles.

### **South Asia**

Islam first came to India during the reign of Uthman, the third caliph, when Muslims conquered the Indian kingdom of Sind to resolve some trade disputes. Then again, after the Turks had converted to Islam they invaded India and established the **Sultanate at Delhi**. The social pattern of conversions in India was very different than in Africa. The authority and prestige of India's upper castes was entirely dependent upon Hinduism. Conversion would destroy the

notions of dharma and the hierarchy of castes themselves. The lower castes were more inclined to convert because Islam's stress on equality was more attractive to them. Converts also came from the Buddhists, another group with nothing to gain from the Hindu caste system. At any rate, since converts came primarily from people with little to no influence in society, Islam did not affect India's social or political structures in a fundamental way. In fact, the exchange of culture and ideas was basically one way, with Islamic civilization benefiting greatly from Hindu culture. The most important item in this regard is the Hindu numbering system. (Because the Muslim Arabs would introduce these to Western Europe, they would be incorrectly named **Arabic numerals**.) Muslims also borrowed important mathematical concepts from Hindus, such as a symbol for zero, negative integers and other things that would lead to more advanced forms of mathematics.

### **Western Europe**

Islam reached Western Europe through Spain having crossed the Straits of Gibraltar from North Africa. From Spain, it spread across the Pyrenees until the Franks routed the Muslim armies at the **Battle of Tours** in 732. Islam would retain a presence in Spain, however, until the last Muslim stronghold at Granada was defeated in 1492. Despite the impermanence of the Muslims in Western Europe, it would have several significant effects on European civilization. The Muslims came into contact with ancient Greek thought which they not only copied, but went beyond it. In science, medicine and geography no civilization had attained the level of learning the Muslim scholars had. The scientific writings of Aristotle were copied, taught, and preserved by Muslim scholars and eventually transmitted to Medieval European universities. The Greek thought of the Arabs thus exercised a strong influence upon the Christians of Europe in the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most important result of Europe's contact with Islamic civilization came out of the Crusades. Although unsuccessful, the Crusades introduced Europeans for the first time to the extravagance of Muslim civilization. When the Crusaders brought home silks, porcelain, spices and other goods, demand for these things in Europe began to grow, especially as the emerging bourgeois class of Europeans became a market for these luxury goods. The groundwork was laid for the age of trade and exploration.

### **Anatolia** (Modern Turkey)

The Muslim Abbasid dynasty began trade relations with the nomadic Turks who roamed the plains of central Asia and Anatolia. Eventually, these Turks converted to Islam and the religion had the same political effect there as it did in Africa. As monotheism replaced polytheism, warring tribes were able to unite and strengthen. Faith in Allah provided a broader basis for loyalty than blood or ancestry. One result of this political transformation was the rise of the **Seljuk Turks**. It was the advancement of these Turks into the Christian Holy Land (Palestine) and their threat to the Byzantine capital of Constantinople that provoked the **Crusades** by Pope Urban II.