

## The Prophet and the Rashidun (570-661)

Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born in Mecca in 570. He had his first revelation in 610 and began preaching in 612. Most of his early converts were from the poorer clans and those dissatisfied with the growing inequity between rich and poor. Muhammad did not teach a new doctrine but brought the old faith in one God to the Arabs. He also warned his tribe, the Quraysh, that if they did not change their ways, their society would collapse because they were violating the fundamental laws of existence. Muhammad commanded the newly converted Muslims to build a just society characterized by practical compassion and a fair distribution of wealth. If their society prospered, it would be a sign that they were living according to God's will. In 616, a boycott was imposed on Muhammad's clan that lasted for two years. Desperate to find a solution, he made an agreement with some of the tribes in Yathrib. In 622, the Muslim community emigrated to Yathrib, marking the beginning of the Muslim era. Yathrib was later renamed Medina and would become a model city. The aim was to integrate the whole of life, both sacred and profane, into a unified community. During the next five years, the Muslim community fought a number of battles with Mecca. After a decisive victory in 628, Muhammad felt the time had come to begin a peace offensive. When Muhammad died in 632, he had made allies with almost all of the tribes of Arabia, bringing peace to the war-torn region.

The first four caliphs to succeed Muhammad were known as the *rashidun*, the "rightly guided" caliphs. They were all men who had been among the Prophet's closest companions. Abu Bakr became the first caliph and was mainly concerned with the tribes that had broken away from the *ummah* shortly after Muhammad's death. He handled the rebellions with both wisdom and clemency and was able to complete the unification of Arabia. Umar ibn al-Khattab became the second caliph when Abu Bakr died in 634. For centuries, Arabs had conducted raids against each other to supplement their scarce resources. Since it was not permitted to conduct a raid against fellow Muslims, the raids were now aimed at neighboring countries. Under Umar's leadership, the Arabs made a series of raids in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Persia. The object of these raids was to obtain needed goods and provide a common activity that would preserve the *ummah*. The conquered lands were left to the native people who paid rent to the Muslim State. This period of triumph came to an abrupt end when Umar was assassinated in 644. Uthman ibn Affan was elected as the third caliph. During Uthman's reign, the Muslims conquered Cyprus, most of Armenia, the Caucasus, and as far as Tripoli in North Africa. In the East, they penetrated as far as the River Oxus in Iran, Herat in Afghanistan and Sind in India. Uthman became unpopular by denying his generals rich estates in Iraq and granting the most prestigious posts to members of his own family, the Umayyad. In 656, the discontent grew into a mutiny and Uthman was killed in his home. The mutineers acclaimed Ali as the new caliph. The assassination of Uthman spurred a five-year civil war and Ali was attacked for not punishing Uthman's murderers. Ali took refuge in Kufah, where he made his capital. Ali gave his supporters top jobs but they were still not satisfied because he did not allow them to annex the rich agricultural land around Kufah. In Syria, opposition to Ali was led by Muawiyah, a member of the Umayyad family, who was bent on avenging Uthman's death. He had support from the wealthy Meccan clans and the Arabs of Syria. In order to avoid open conflict, the two sides tried to negotiate a settlement in 657, but the results were inconclusive. A group of neutral Muslims was asked to arbitrate and the settlement went in favor of Muawiyah. Encouraged by the outcome, Muawiyah sent troops into Iraq and had himself proclaimed caliph. Some of Ali's more radical supporters refused to accept the arbitration. Ali tried to suppress the rebellion but the movement was gaining support throughout the empire. Muawiyah's army eventually defeated the resistance to his rule. In 661, Ali was murdered by one of the rebels. The fate of Ali, a man betrayed by friend and foe alike, became a symbol of life's injustices.

## **The Umayyads (661-750)**

The Umayyad rulers gradually transformed the disparate regions conquered by the Muslim armies into a unified empire. As they strove to preserve peace, the government became more centralized and gradually changed into a monarchy. This went against the egalitarian ethic of the Quran as well as Arab traditions. The conflict between the government and Islam reached a crisis after Caliph Muawiyah's death in 680. He had arranged for his son to succeed him, but supporters of Ali wanted his son Husain to become the next ruler. Husain set out for Kufah with a small group of followers, but he and his entire party were massacred by Umayyad troops on the plains of Kerbala. The tragic death of the Prophet's grandson was mourned by all Muslims, but it was particularly painful for Shii Muslims. In 683, there was an uprising in Mecca and Medina in an attempt to return to the values of the first *ummah*. In central Arabia, Kharajite rebels formed an independent state and Shiis staged a revolt in Kufah to avenge the death of Husain. By 691, the Umayyad had defeated all of their rivals and a period of peace and prosperity followed. Meanwhile, the Umayyad continued pursuing a policy of centralization. Arabic replaced Persian as the official language, the isolation of Muslims from the local population was relaxed and indigenous people were permitted to convert to Islam. As segregation broke down, a growing resentment against the Arab Muslim elite developed.

As many Muslims questioned the legitimacy of the Umayyad leadership, Islamic piety as we know it today began to emerge. Many of the religious leaders of this period called for a return to the Prophet's ascetic lifestyle. Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) taught his followers that study of the Quran, self-examination, and a total surrender to God were the source of true happiness. He began a strong Muslim tradition of combining a strong interior life with political opposition to the government. Abu Hanifah (699-767) pioneered the new discipline of jurisprudence, which would have a huge impact on Islamic piety. The jurists wanted to establish legal norms, which would foster the creation of a just society. The political health of the community was central to Islamic piety.

By 705, the Umayyad dynasty had reached its peak. Like all agrarian societies, it eventually outran its resources. Other factors included the heavy losses that were incurred after a failed attempt to conquer Constantinople and the dramatic reduction in the poll tax as non-Muslims converted to Islam. The Umayyads were not popular with ordinary Muslims because they did not adhere to Islamic principles of government and recent converts to Islam felt like they were being treated like second-class citizens. Numerous uprisings occurred throughout the empire as Islamic sentiment became widespread. The Abbasid faction successfully promoted their leader largely because he was a descendant of the Prophet.

## **The Abbasids (750-1220)**

The Abbasids presented themselves in a way that gained acceptance with the Shiis. Once in power, they dropped the facade and demonstrated that they wanted to make the caliphate an absolute monarchy. To silence any opposition, they began by murdering all of the Umayyads they could find, and later focused on killing any Shii leaders they considered a threat. In order to appease the disaffected groups within the empire, they eliminated the practice of giving special treatment to Arabs. The capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad, where it was styled after the pre-Islamic Persian Sassanids. Caliph Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786-809) ruled like an old-style king with an elaborate court and a great deal of pomp and ceremony. He was isolated from his subjects, and left the running of the government to the vizier. The caliph was supported by the Persian army, which helped the Abbasids seize power. It was no longer a people's army, open to all Muslims. The Abbasids were politically and economically successful and were able to bring peace to the empire. Harun al-Rashid was a great patron of learning and inspired a cultural renaissance in literature, art and science. Although Islamic principles were not practiced among the ruling class, conversion to Islam was encouraged and the Abbasids pressed jurists into

providing a uniform code of law. A distinct class of religious scholars began to emerge along with religious institutions. By the end of Harun al-Rashid's reign, the empire was in decline. It was not possible for a single government to control such a vast empire indefinitely. To alleviate the problem, Harun al-Rashid divided the empire between his two sons. This led to civil war and al-Mamun emerged as the victor. During his reign (813-833), power was concentrated within two groups: the aristocracy and the religious factions. He tried to reach out to the religious factions but if he favored one, it would alienate the others. Caliph al-Mutasim (833-842) attempted to strengthen the monarchy by creating a personal army made up of Turkish slaves. This further separated the monarchy from the people while giving the Turks an opportunity to rise in stature. During the final years of Abbasid rule, the religious factions pulled together and what later became known as Sunni Islam emerged. Sunnis were more optimistic than Shiis. They believed that if Muslims lived according to the Shariah (Islamic Law), they could create a counter-culture, which would transform political corruption.

During the Abbasid period, four esoteric forms of Islam developed. Their doctrines were kept secret to avoid being misinterpreted by the general public and to prevent persecution. Mystical experiences could not be explained in a rational manner and required preparation in order to be fully understood. The esoteric groups were compatible with Islam and members observed the five Pillars (essential practices) of Islam. Anyone who remained faithful to the Pillars was a true Muslim, whatever his or her beliefs. The Jafari School was named after the sixth *imam* Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 765). Its followers wanted to experience God as directly as the Muslims of the first *ummah* did. The Ismailis believed that the world had been in decline since Satan had rebelled against God. The six Major Prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Muhammad) had been sent to reverse this downward trend. Each prophet had an "executor" who taught the inner meaning of his message to those who could understand. Like all true Muslims, they were concerned with the fate of the *ummah*, and believed that faith must be combined with political activism. The Falsafah were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and regarded human reason as a reflection of Absolute Reason. By purifying the intellect of everything that was not rational and living in a wholly reasonable way, man could ascend from the complexity of life below to the simplicity and unity above. Sufis were opposed to the growth of jurisprudence, which reduced Islam to a set of exterior rules. Muhammad was able to receive the revelations of the Quran because of his inner *islam* (surrender). This was the true foundation of the law. Sufis were open to finding knowledge anywhere that it could be found. They developed techniques that would enable them to experience a divine presence in the depths of their being. This was partially achieved by the gradual peeling away of layers of egotism. Some, like Hallaj, were executed by the *ulama* (religious scholars) for saying things considered blasphemous.

By the tenth century, the empire was governed by independent rulers with the caliph acting as the nominal head of the *ummah*. Cultural centers sprung up in Cairo, Samarkand and Spain. This system of independent courts and rulers more closely resembled the egalitarian spirit of the Quran. This spirit was reflected in art. The arabesque gives each character equal emphasis – each contributes to the whole. The Seljuk Turks seized power in Baghdad in 1055. By 1100, the empire stretched from Kabul to Konya. The government was decentralized with amirs (military leaders) administering their own regions. The *ulama* provided unity to the disparate regions. They set up *madrasahs* for the study of Islamic sciences, which provided a uniform Muslim lifestyle throughout the empire. As amirs came and went, the *ulama*, along with the Shariah, became the only stable authority. Al-Ghazzali's masterpiece, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, became the most-quoted Muslim text after the Quran. It provides Muslims with a daily spiritual and practical regimen, which gives all the Shariah rules a devotional and ethical interpretation enabling Muslims to cultivate that perpetual consciousness of the divine that is advocated by the Quran. The Shariah had thus become more than a means of social conformity and a slavish exterior imitation of the Prophet; it became a way of achieving interior *islam*. Al-Ghazzali realized that a new religious solution was needed, that dependence upon an authority figure violates the egalitarianism of the Quran. He believed that Sufism could lead to a direct apprehension of the divine and urged religious scholars to promote this interior spirituality along with the external rules of the Shariah. Al-Ghazzali was considered the leading religious authority of his time and Sufism

became a popular movement. Sufi orders were formed throughout the empire and Sufi ideals greatly influenced the new brotherhoods and guilds for artisans and merchants.

Fighting among the amirs had made the region more vulnerable to attack from outside forces. In 1099, the Christian Crusaders attacked Jerusalem and massacred its inhabitants. They established states in Palestine, Lebanon and Anatolia. It was fifty years before the Crusaders were driven from Armenia, and it was not until 1187 that Saladin was able to retake Jerusalem. The first Crusade was brought on in part by the advance of Turkish troops into the ailing Byzantine Empire. In 1091, the Byzantine emperor asked Pope Urban II for help in fighting the Turks.

### **The Mongols (1220-1500)**

The Abbasid caliphate was brought to a violent and tragic end at the hands of Genghis Khan. Between 1219 and 1229, his army destroyed one city after another, leaving in its wake a trail of death and devastation from Iran to Syria. In 1231, a new series of raids began, which left Baghdad, Bukhara and many other great Muslim cities in ruin. The Mongol army's success continued until 1260, when they were defeated by Baibars in northern Palestine. The invasion of the Mongols was the greatest upheaval in the Middle East since the Arab invasions of the seventh century. The Mongols brought no spirituality with them, but built upon local traditions. They ran their empire like an army. Their two main goals were world domination and perpetuation of the ruling dynasty. They believed that the greater a ruler's power, the better the chances for peace and prosperity. Once in power, the Mongols rebuilt the cities they had demolished and promoted art, science, history and mysticism. The Mongols' power would influence future Muslim empires: in particular, the link between imperial rule and mass destruction. The Mongol invasion caused some Muslims to turn to the mystical movements, which helped them come to terms with the pain and loss that they had endured. Others responded by rejecting all that was new and struggled to maintain the status quo. In education, pupils memorized old texts by heart, debates were assumed to contain only one right answer and one wrong one, and there was no concept of question-and-answer style study. The *madrasahs* promoted ideas that would unify all Muslims and discourage dissension. The Mongols did not impose laws to regulate civil society; this was left to the religious leaders. Their influence tended to be conservative and they preferred to go back to basics rather than forge a new solution. Muslim fundamentalism was beginning to take root.

Ibn Khaldun, a pioneer in the scientific study of history, believed that universal laws governed the fortunes of society. He noticed that as a ruling class became more accustomed to luxurious living, they no longer took notice of their subjects, in-fighting would occur and the economy would go into decline. This made it ripe for take-over by a new group, and the process would begin anew. By the second half of the fourteenth century, the Mongol empire was in decline. A Turk by the name of Timur ('the Lame') seized power and began reconquering Mongol territory with the same savagery as the original invaders. He saw himself as one who was going to put things right by establishing order and wiping out corruption. Between 1387 and 1404, he conquered most of the Middle East, along with parts of Russia and India. In 1404, he set off for China but was killed the following year. After his death, no one was able to keep his empire together.

### **Imperial Islam (1500-1750)**

Three major Islamic empires were created in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The invention of gunpowder enabled the new rulers to control larger areas of land more effectively. Each of these empires set up an absolute monarchy and was influenced by the Mongol idea of an

army state. Almost every aspect of public life was run with bureaucratic precision. Unlike the Abbasid caliphs of the past, they all had a strong Islamic orientation. However, autocratic rule was fundamentally opposed to the egalitarian ideal of the Quran, and most of the people still lived in poverty and suffered the inequities of an agrarian society.

In 1501, sixteen-year-old Ismail became leader of the Safavids in Azerbaijan. To avenge his father's death at the hands of the *amirs*, he conquered Tabriz and, during the next decade, went on to seize control of the rest of Iran. Ismail claimed to be a descendent of the *imams* and made Twelver Shiism the official state religion. His successor, Shah Abbas I (reigned 1588-1629) imported Arab Shii religious leaders to teach orthodox Twelver Shiism, provided them with financial support and built schools where they could teach. The empire reached its zenith under Abbas. He achieved important territorial victories against the Ottomans, and his capital at Isfahan enjoyed a cultural renaissance. The religious leaders had a great deal of power, but many were literal-minded and suppressed philosophy and mysticism. They promoted rituals in which people were urged to participate. Many rituals aroused yearnings for justice, but the revolutionary potential of these rites was carefully suppressed. Some of the religious leaders remained true to the older Shii traditions, and their ideas would inspire reformers and revolutionaries throughout the Muslim world. They saw political reform as inseparable from spirituality. Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) describes in his masterpiece, *The Fourfold Journey*, the mystical training a leader must go through before he can start to change the mundane world. He was deeply disturbed by the idea that ordinary Muslims were incapable of interpreting the basic principals of faith for themselves. This idea gained widespread support by the end of the seventeenth century as the empire began to decline.

Babur (d. 1530) fled the Safavid-Uzbek war and became a refugee in Kabul. He founded a power base in Northern India, which eventually led to the Mogul Empire. One of his descendants, Akbar, established an integrated state in 1560, which controlled Hindustan, Punjab, Malva, and Deccan. He developed an efficient, centrally controlled government backed by a powerful and well-disciplined army. The ruling Muslim minority did not persecute or try to convert the local people. Akbar encouraged generosity of spirit among the people, which greatly reduced conflict, and he was considered by many as the ideal philosopher-king. Guru Nanak (d. 1469) founded the Sikh religion, which sought to find unity and compatibility between Hinduism and Islam. This further enhanced peace and prosperity in a country with a diverse population. By the end of the seventeenth century, the army and the court were becoming too expensive, and agriculture, the source of wealth, was being neglected. Aurengzebe (1658-1707) made matters worse by his intolerance towards the Hindus, doubling the tax for Hindu merchants and destroying Hindu temples. Hindus and Sikhs revolted, demanding their own independent state in Punjab, and Muslim governors ruled their regions independently. The Mogul rulers managed to hold on to power until 1739. Muslims were becoming a beleaguered minority, which had to contend not only with Sikh and Hindus, but also with the rising power of the British traders. For the first time, Muslims were on the defensive; to survive, they would have to unite.

The Ottomans conquered Constantinople (later renamed Istanbul) in 1453. They established an absolute monarchy complete with an elaborate court modeled after the Byzantines. They had a strong central government and a huge army as did their predecessors – the Mongols. The Ottomans held back the advancing Safavid armies and conquered Syria, Egypt, North Africa and Arabia. Their armies moved into Europe, reaching the as far as Vienna. The Sultan did not force uniformity upon the conquered people, which enabled them to live together peacefully. The empire reached its peak under Suleiman al-Qanuni (1520-66). During this time, there was a cultural renaissance in architecture, painting, history and medicine, and information flowed freely with the West. The Ottoman Empire had become the most powerful state in the world. The religious and moral link between the sultan and his subjects helped people to accept Turkish rule. A rare integration between public policy and Muslim conscience was achieved for a time, but as religious leaders became dependent upon state subsidies, they lost their independent voice. They began to provide undue support for the monarchy, became conservative in their thinking and resistant to change. As expansion began to outpace agricultural output and military discipline

weakened, the sultan began losing his grip on power. Economic decline led to corruption, revenues decreased, and trade was lost to the more efficient Europeans. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) established an independent state on the Arabian Peninsula. Wahhabism, which is still practiced today in Saudi Arabia, is a fundamentalist form of Islam that adheres to a literal interpretation of the Quran and the early Islamic traditions. In North Africa and Yemen, Ahmad ibn Idris (1780-1836) worked to educate people to become better Muslims. Muhammad Ibn Ali al-Sanusi (d. 1832) started a reform movement in Libya, which is still predominant to this day. These reformers encouraged people to rely on their own insights and model themselves upon an ideal human being such as the Prophet. By the end of the eighteenth century, Europe had overtaken the Ottomans and their empire was at a critical stage. An agrarian-based society has a limited lifespan and they had reached the end. At the same time, the power of the West was on the rise.

### **The Arrival of the West (1750-2000)**

By the thirteenth century, Western Europe had caught up with the rest of the world. Over the next three hundred years, Europe and the American colonies evolved from an agrarian society to one based on technology. Advances in science gave the West greater control over the environment. By the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Efficiency became a top priority. People needed to be educated for new jobs and make above-subsistence wages to buy mass-produced products. Religious differences and spiritual ideas must not impede progress. In order to be efficient and productive, a modern nation must be secular and democratic. The need for an industrial economy to continually expand leads to colonization. Colonies produced raw material in exchange for cheap Western goods. This arrangement ruined local economies. Colonization was invasive, disturbing and alien; local people resented the loss of control. Colonies were forced to modernize too rapidly, which often resulted in violence and disorientation.

The Islamic World felt the brunt of modernization early because of its vastness and strategic location, and they quickly became dependent upon the European powers. Colonization began in Moghul India during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Indians stopped growing crops for themselves and began producing raw materials for Western markets. Advances in health and hygiene caused the population to soar, creating widespread crowding and poverty. Colonization spread to other parts of the Middle East and North Africa until the early part of the twentieth century. Even countries that had gained independence were often controlled economically. Some Middle Eastern intellectuals wanted to import Western-style education and government as a way of limiting tyranny. Many countries tried to modernize too quickly, but their attempts were often superficial and their methods brutal. Iranian activist Jamal al-Din (1839-97) could see the dangers of shallow imitation of Western life and encouraged Muslims to hold on to their Islamic cultural traditions. The humiliation of the *ummah* at the hands of Western powers was not only a political catastrophe, but also a sign that something had gone very wrong. Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abu (1849-1905) believed that education was the answer. He greatly admired the political, educational and legal systems of the West and wanted to combine them with traditional Islamic ideas in a way that people could understand. Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) founded The Society of Muslim Brothers, which became a mass movement throughout the Middle East. He believed that political and social reform must go hand in hand with spiritual reform.

The West found it necessary to separate religion and politics in order to free government, science and technology from conservative religion. In Islam, the two have always been connected. Attempts at secular government have invariably led to attacks on religion. Reza Shah Pahlavi (reigned 1921-41) replaced religious law with a civil system, suppressed religious ceremonies and prohibited Islamic dress. His son, Muhammad Reza Shah (reigned 1944-79) closed religious schools, and religious students who dared to protest were shot in the streets. Nationalism

replaced religious allegiances in the West during the nineteenth century, but nationalism was undermined in the Muslim world because borders were arbitrarily drawn up by Western powers. Muslim countries that tried to introduce representative forms of government were prevented by dictators with the help of Western governments. The struggle to come up with an ideal government, which combines democracy, modernization and adherence to Islamic principles, remains a formidable challenge.

Islamic fundamentalism is, in part, a reaction to modern secular culture. The threat of western domination has made Muslims defensive and they feel it their duty to fight back. Fundamentalism is also a response to extreme secularism in the Middle East, and has led to the assassination of government leaders such as Anwar Sadat and the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79. Fundamentalist leaders use religion as a tool of oppression to maintain control and suppress dissent.

Most Muslims want their government to conform more closely to Islamic norms and reject Western secularism because they believe that human beings need spirituality. They want to hold on to their religious and moral traditions while incorporating the best aspects of Western civilization. The West must recognize that Muslims have a right to incorporate Islamic ideals into their government and not expect them to be an imitation of the West. It is in everyone's best interest that Islam remains healthy and strong.