

Islam - A Brief History

Islam is one of a handful of major world religions which today combined claim the vast majority of adherents on a global basis. Other such religions include Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Muhammed - Founder of Islam

Islam was first promulgated by the Arabian merchant-trader Abu al-Qasim Muhammad, who was born in the city of Mecca on the Arabian peninsula circa 570 A.D.

Muhammad's father, Abd Allah, died before he was born. Because the climate of Mecca was considered to be unhealthful, Muhammad was given as an infant to a wet nurse from a nomadic tribe, and thus spent some of his earliest years in the desert.

When Muhammad was six, his mother, Aminah of the clan of Zuhra, died, followed two years later by his paternal grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib.

Although his grandfather had been head of the prestigious Hashim clan, and was prominent in Mecca politics, Arab custom did not permit minors to inherit property, and so Muhammad came under the care of the new head of the clan, his uncle Abu Talib.

Muhammad often accompanied his uncle on trading journeys to Syria. About 595, on such a journey, Muhammad was put in charge of the merchandise of a wealthy widow woman, Khadijah of the clan of Asad.

Marriage of Muhammad

Khadijah was so impressed with the young Muhammad that she offered him marriage. Although she was about 40 at the time, she eventually bore Muhammad at least two sons, both of whom died young, and four daughters, of whom the best known was Fatimah, the wife of Muhammad's cousin Ali, who is regarded as Muhammad's divine successor by the Shi'ah branch of Islam.

The marriage was a turning point for Muhammad. Without inheritance of his own, his marriage to the wealthy Khadijah gave him access to sufficient capital to engage in greater trading activities. He took no other wife until after her death in 619.

Muhammad is said to have been of a reflective turn of mind, and apparently adopted the habit of spending nights in a cave on a hill near Mecca.

Visions and Revelations

About the year 610 A.D., during one of his solitary evenings on the hill, Muhammad is reported to have had a vision of a majestic being (later identified as the angel Gabriel), and to have heard a voice saying to him, "You are the Messenger of God!"

From this time until his death, at frequent intervals, Muhammad reported that he received many "revelations", or verbal messages that he believed came directly from God.

Sometimes, these revelations (as reported by Muhammad) were simply kept in memory by Muhammad and his followers, and sometimes they were written down.

About 650 A.D., after Muhammad's death, these scattered and remembered revelations were collected and organized into the form that is now known as the Qur'an (or "Koran"), which is the form in which they have endured. Muslims believe that these are sacred scriptures, divine revelations in the literal words of God (Allah) himself.

Muhammad is said to have been perturbed after his first vision, but to have been reassured by his wife Khadijah. In his later experiences of receiving messages it is said that there was normally no vision. Occasionally he would break out in a sweat (even on a cold day), or would hear a noise like a bell, but apparently never again a voice.

Such experiences however left him with a verbal message in his mind. With the help of Khadijah's Christian cousin Waraqah, Muhammad came to regard these messages as identical in nature to those sent by God through other great and well-known prophets or messengers, to Jews, Christians, and others..

By tradition, Arabs of the day did recognize several types of intermediaries to the sacred, including "kahins", or religious

specialists who delivered oracles in ecstatic rhyme and who read omens.

Thus the power of the recited word was well established in Arabic tradition and folklore. Because Muhammad's utterances seemed similar, at least in form, to those of the kahins, many of his listeners were willing to accept that he was one of the authorities with whom they were already familiar.

Muhammad quickly came to believe that by the virtue of his first great vision, and by the receipt of the subsequent messages, that he was indeed commissioned to communicate them as a prophet to his fellow citizens and to other Arabs.

In addition to proclaiming the verbatim of the messages that he "received", Muhammad also offered expanded explanations and expositions on them, as is evident in the large body of prophetic rhetoric that the Muslim community has preserved.

Early Years

Soon, Muhammad gathered around him several sympathetic friends who accepted his claim that he was a prophet as decreed by the angel of his vision, and so therefore by God, and who then began to join him in regular common worship and prayers.

These prayers each culminated in an act of prostration in which they touched the ground with their foreheads in acknowledgment of God's majesty -- still considered an essential act in Islamic worship.

In about 613 A.D. Muhammad began speaking and preaching publicly. The earliest passages of the Qur'an revealed by Muhammad emphasized the goodness and power of God as seen in nature, and as seen in the prosperity of the Meccans themselves.

Muhammad called upon his fellow Meccans to be grateful and to worship "Allah". Most people at the time in Mecca worshipped many gods, but some regarded Allah as a "high god" who stood above lesser deities.

Gratitude, preached Muhammad, was to be expressed in generosity with one's wealth, and avoidance of niggardliness. As sanction, he warned that they would appear before God on the Last Day to be judged according to their deeds, and thus be assigned to heaven or hell.

By proclaiming this message publicly, Muhammad gained followers. Most were young men under the age of 30 when they joined Muhammad. They included the sons and brothers of the richest men in Mecca, although most might be described as persons excluded from the most lucrative forms of commerce.

A number of his new followers were not themselves members of the main Meccan tribe of Quraysh, and were therefore not under the protection of any of its clans. As a well-connected merchant of some wealth, thanks to his wife, it is likely that Muhammad was able to offer a fair level of support and protection to his followers.

In spite of the revelatory nature of his vision and later experiences, Muhammad may not have attracted much attention had he not been able to take on the already-familiar persona and style of existing holy men of the day.

In addition, by focusing his source as the "one supreme being", whom he identified as "Allah" (the god) in a cultural environment that was polytheistic and had many (lesser) gods, he was gradually able to distinguish himself from many of the other prophets, oracles, holy men, and intermediaries then in Mecca.

Like many other successful leaders throughout history, Muhammad was also able to break through existing limitations to his influence by instinctively employing what today might be referred to as "transformative conservatism".

By combining familiar leadership roles with a less familiar one, he was able to expand his authority. By giving existing practices a new history, he was able to re-orient them to himself. And by assigning a new cause to existing problems, he resolved them - or at least appeared to provide a solution.

Early Opposition

Muhammad's early preaching was primarily philosophical. Implicit in it however was often criticism of the wealthy Meccan merchants.

Initial attempts were made to soften his criticism, by offering him a greater participation in trading activities, and a marriage alliance with one of the wealthier families, offers which he rejected.

By 615 A.D., more direct and vocal criticism was directed against the substance of his revelations, and financial pressures were brought into play against his supporters, and against those who followed him.

Both Muhammad's wife Khadijah, and his uncle Abu Talib died in about 619 A.D., and another uncle, Abu Lahab, succeeded as head of the clan. Closer and more influenced by the other wealthy merchants of Mecca, he withdrew the protection and support of the clan from Muhammad.

Now vulnerable and unable to safely carry on his activities in Mecca, Muhammad and some of his followers left hoping to find support and refuge in a neighboring town of at-Ta'if.

The Emigration to Medina

Unable to find the support or acceptance he needed among the residents of at-Ta'if, Muhammad negotiated the support of the head of another clan in Mecca, and returned there. In 620 A.D., Muhammad began negotiations with clans in Medina, who eventually invited him there in 622 A.D. to act as an arbiter in disputes between the clans.

In Medina, Muhammad was given a piece of land and had a house built, which eventually held apartments grouped around a central courtyard, one for each of his wives.

The followers and Medinans who had joined Muhammad's group, who now identified themselves as "Muslims", and their new sect as "Islam", often joined Muhammad for prayers at his home in Medina. After his death, this became the mosque of Medina.

As mostly outsiders, rather than members of existing clans or tribes, Muhammad's followers formed a community bound together by their acceptance of his role both as a prophet and messenger of God, and as an arbiter to the larger community. Membership in the Muslim community itself was an expression of faith, and status within the fellowship was largely a matter of piety and faithfulness to the leadership of Muhammad.

Band of Thieves

Muhammad was often able to use his "gift of revelation" to arbitrate disputes, as well as to direct community activities. Because the terms of his position as arbiter did not provide adequate financial support, he began to provide for the needs of his fledgling religious community through caravan raiding, a technique familiar to many local tribes.

By thus inviting hostility and retaliation, he pressured all of the Medinans to take sides. Conscious of his role as the arbiter of disputes in Medina, they of course were careful not to give him cause to rule against them.

Initial setbacks were followed by success, first at Nakhlah, where the Muslims defied Meccan custom by violating one of the established truce months. In 624 A.D. they prevailed against a large Meccan force. From then on, their record of military success was nearly unblemished, establishing in the eyes of Muhammad's followers a connection between divine favor and military success.

As his prestige and reputation grew, Muhammad constantly expanded his influence and authority, developing networks of alliances between his Muslim community and neighboring tribes.

As the leader, he strictly managed and distributed the proceeds of their plunder, keeping one-fifth for the community's overall needs, and generously distributing the rest among his followers. In return, members gave a portion of their wealth as zakat, to help to needy and to demonstrate their awareness of their dependence on God for all of their material benefits. As leader of the sect, it is likely that Muhammad took care of distributing these donations as well.

Muhammad took a hard line against those who did not support his activities fully. In particular, he agitated against the Jews. One of those clans, the Banu Qaynuqa, he expelled from Medina after a 14-day siege sparked by the killing of a Jew by a Muslim. When the Qurayzah clan of Jews refused to help him against the Meccan forces in 627 A.D., he had the men of the clan summarily executed, and had the women and children of the clan sold as slaves.

Activism in the name of God, military and otherwise, became an early part of Islamic piety. Given the societal environment in which Muhammad operated, it is unlikely that he or his community of believers would have long endured without it. Like any pirate captain, in order to compete as a leader and maintain his status, Muhammad needed to exhibit strength, military prowess, and the ability to amply provide for the material wants and needs of his followers.

All Roads Lead To Mecca

In spite of his numerous successes and prosperity in Medina, Muhammad continued to nurse a festering grudge against his old detractors in the rich commercial center of Mecca. He also knew that as a commercial center of trade, Mecca was key to his growing vision of a Islamic empire.

As more and more of Medina was absorbed into the Muslim community, and as the Meccans weakened, Muhammad's

authority expanded. He continued to lead a three-pronged campaign against non-supporters in Medina, the Quraysh in Mecca, and against opposing surrounding tribes.

Muhammad had also become an adept politician, using both carrot and stick to deal with his opponents. In part out of disdain for the Jews, in part to woo the support of sympathetic Meccans, and in part to fixate attention on the importance of "occupied" Mecca, he shifted his followers direction of prayer from Jerusalem, where it had been, to the city of Mecca.

He also decreed that, although Christians and Jews were to be second-class persons, that as monotheistic communities who also followed the revelations of earlier prophets, they would be entitled to pay for protection (dhimmah), a somewhat qualified though weak form of religious pluralism of sorts. It also provided a relief against going to war with every Jewish or Christian tribe during this early period of Islamic consolidation, and provided yet another form of revenue.

In 628 A.D. Muhammad set out with about 1,600 men on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The Meccans however were determined to prevent him from entering, and forced him to stop at al-Hudaybiyah, on the edge of the Meccan territory.

After several days of negotiations, the Meccans agreed in a treaty to allow the pilgrimage the following year. The Muslims withdrew, and two months later, to appease his followers and to reward them for their loyalty, Muhammad led them on a raid against the Jewish oasis of Khaybar, just north of Medina.

After a siege the Jews of Khaybar submitted, but were allowed to remain on the condition that they would send half of their date harvest to Medina.

Shrewdly, Muhammad again added to his power throughout 628 and 629 A.D., with more men coming to join the Muslims due to the material attraction of Muhammad's military successes.

Following secret negotiations during the pilgrimage of 629 A.D. for the surrender of Mecca, an attack by Meccan allies in late 629 on allies of Muhammad led to Muhammad's denunciation of the 628 treaty of al-Hudaybiyah.

In early 630, Muhammad marched on Mecca with over 10,000 Muslim fighters, where he was met with almost no resistance. Although he did not overtly insist on the Meccans becoming Muslims, many of them soon did so. To relieve the poorest among his followers, he demanded "loans" from some of the wealthy Meccans. When he marched eastward to his next battle, over 2,000 Meccan fighters marched with his legion.

Consolidation of Power

Muhammad had constantly been forming alliances with many of the nomadic tribes in the vicinity of Medina and later Mecca. At first these were probably no more than non-aggression pacts. When he was powerful enough himself to offer "protection", however, he made it a condition of alliance that the tribe should become Muslim.

With the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad was now militarily the strongest man in Arabia. Most tribes sent deputations to Medina seeking alliances with him, or at least assurances that they would not be attacked.

Muhammad also benefitted from the defeat of the Persian Empire by the Byzantine Empire, as minorities on the Persian Gulf that had relied on Persian support now turned to Muhammad for protection.

In late 630 A.D., Muhammad led an invasion of Syria, making agreements and arrangements with many of the conquered and captured peoples there. Some of the tribes near Syria were Christians that stubbornly adhered to the Byzantines, and chiefly because of this, much of the earlier ambivalence that he had felt for the Christians changed to hostility.

The Death of Muhammad

Muhammad died in Medina in June 632 A.D., following a lengthy illness. No arrangement had been made for his successor, which provoked a major crisis and schism among his followers.

Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's earliest followers and father of Muhammad's favorite wife, A'ishah, was selected by a small group of Muhammad's original followers from Mecca, to assume leadership of the Muslim community.

To prevent splintering of the new Islamic federation, Abu Bakr established several doctrines which still prevail in Islamic dogma:

First, he decreed that withdrawal from Muhammad's coalition would constitute sacrilegious ingratitude or denial of God (the concept of "kufir"). Thus he gave secession divine significance as an act of apostasy punishable, according to God's will revealed in messages to Muhammad, by death.

He further declared that Muslims, and therefore servants of God, became such by joining Muhammad, and were thus not free to withdraw their service from God or Muhammad. Nor could they be Muslims, and therefore properly loyal to God, under any leader whose legitimacy did not derive properly from Muhammad.

Finally, he declared that Muhammad was the last prophet that God would send, and therefore there could be no more "revealed messages" through any other individual claiming the status of prophet or messenger of God. Terms of the divine revelation as revealed to Muhammed and subsequently passed on to his followers would thus be henceforth fixed and immutable, and the words of Muhammed would be the final determinate in any matter.

To be continued ...