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ISLAM

A Short History



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CONTENTS

List of Maps	vii
Preface	ix
Chronology	xiii
1 BEGINNINGS	
The Prophet (570-632)	3
The Rashidun (632-661)	23
The First <i>Fitnah</i>	33
2 DEVELOPMENT	
The Umayyads and the Second <i>Fitnah</i>	41
The Religious Movement	45
The Last Years of the Umayyads (705-750)	50
The Abbasids: The High Caliphal Period (750-935)	53
The Esoteric Movements	65
3 CULMINATION	
A New Order (935-1258)	81
The Crusades	93
Expansion	95
The Mongols (1220-1500)	96
4 ISLAM TRIUMPHANT	
Imperial Islam (1500-1700)	115
The Safavid Empire	117

The Moghul Empire	124
The Ottoman Empire	130

5 ISLAM AGONISTES

The Arrival of the West (1750-2000)	141
What is a Modern Muslim State?	156
Fundamentalism	164
Muslims in a Minority	176
The Way Forward	178

Epilogue	189
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Key Figures in the History of Islam	193
Glossary of Arabic Terms	203
Pronunciation Guide	207

Notes	209
Suggestions for Further Reading	211
Index	219

Discussion Questions	229
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MAPS

Muhammad's world: Arabia c. 610 C.E.	9
The Early Conquests	28
Expansion under the Umayyads	51
The Disintegration of the Abbasid Empire	82
The Seljuk Empire	89
The Crusader States in Palestine, Syria and Anatolia c. 1130	94
The Mongol World (during the reign of Hulegu, 1255-65)	99
The Safavid Empire (1500-1722)	119
The Moghul Empire (1526-1707)	126
The Ottoman Empire	131

THE PROPHET (570-632)

During the month of Ramadan in 610 C.E., an Arab businessman had an experience that changed the history of the world. Every year at this time, Muhammad ibn Abdallah used to retire to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira, just outside Mecca in the Arabian Hijaz, where he prayed, fasted and gave alms to the poor. He had long been worried by what he perceived to be a crisis in Arab society. In recent decades his tribe, the Quraysh, had become rich by trading in the surrounding countries. Mecca had become a thriving mercantile city, but in the aggressive stampede for wealth some of the old tribal values had been lost. Instead of looking after the weaker members of the tribe, as the nomadic code prescribed, the Quraysh were now intent on making money at the expense of some of the tribe's poorer family groupings, or clans. There was also spiritual restlessness in Mecca and throughout the peninsula. Arabs knew that Judaism and Christianity, which were practised in the Byzantine and Persian empires, were more sophisticated than their own pagan traditions. Some had come to believe that the High God of their pantheon, al-Lah (whose name simply meant "the God"), was the deity worshipped by the Jews and the Christians, but he had sent the Arabs no prophet and no scripture in their own language. Indeed, the Jews and Christians whom they met often taunted the Arabs for being left out of the divine plan. Throughout Arabia one tribe fought another, in a murderous cycle of vendetta and counter-vendetta. It seemed to many of the more thoughtful people in Arabia that the Arabs were a lost people, exiled forever from the civilized world and ignored by God himself. But that changed on the night of 17 Ram-

adan, when Muhammad woke to find himself overpowered by a devastating presence, which squeezed him tightly until he heard the first words of a new Arab's scripture pouring from his lips.

For the first two years, Muhammad kept quiet about his experience. He had new revelations, but confided only in his wife Khadija and her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian. Both were convinced that these revelations came from God, but it was only in 612 that Muhammad felt empowered to preach, and gradually gained converts: his young cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib, his friend Abu Bakr, and the young merchant Uthman ibn Affan from the powerful Umayyad family. Many of the converts, including a significant number of women, were from the poorer clans; others were unhappy about the new inequity in Mecca, which they felt was alien to the Arab spirit. Muhammad's message was simple. He taught the Arabs no new doctrines about God: most of the Quraysh were already convinced that Allah had created the world and would judge humanity in the Last Days, as Jews and Christians believed. Muhammad did not think that he was founding a new religion, but that he was merely bringing the old faith in the One God to the Arabs, who had never had a prophet before. It was wrong, he insisted, to build a private fortune, but good to share wealth and create a society where the weak and vulnerable were treated with respect. If the Quraysh did not mend their ways, their society would collapse (as had other unjust societies in the past) because they were violating the fundamental laws of existence.

This was the core teaching of the new scripture, called the *qur'an* (recitation) because believers, most of whom, including Muhammad himself, were illiterate, imbibed its teachings by listening to public readings of its chapters (*surahs*). The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad verse by verse, *surah* by *surah* during the next twenty-one years, often in response to a

crisis or a question that had arisen in the little community of the faithful. The revelations were painful to Muhammad, who used to say: "Never once did I receive a revelation, without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me."⁷¹ In the early days, the impact was so frightening that his whole body was convulsed; he would often sweat profusely, even on a cool day, experience a great heaviness, or hear strange sounds and voices. In purely secular terms, we could say that Muhammad had perceived the great problems confronting his people at a deeper level than most of his contemporaries, and that as he "listened" to events, he had to delve deeply and painfully into his inner being to find a solution that was not only politically viable but spiritually illuminating. He was also creating a new literary form and a masterpiece of Arab prose and poetry. Many of the first believers were converted by the sheer beauty of the Qur'an, which resonated with their deepest aspirations, cutting through their intellectual preconceptions in the manner of great art, and inspiring them, at a level more profound than the cerebral, to alter their whole way of life. One of the most dramatic of these conversions was that of Umar ibn al-Khattab, who was devoted to the old paganism, passionately opposed to Muhammad's message, and was determined to wipe out the new sect. But he was also an expert in Arabian poetry, and the first time he heard the words of the Qur'an he was overcome by their extraordinary eloquence. As he said, the language broke through all his reservations about its message: "When I heard the Qur'an my heart was softened and I wept, and Islam entered into me."⁷²

The new sect would eventually be called *islam* (surrender); a *muslim* was a man or a woman who had made this submission of their entire being to Allah and his demand that human beings behave to one another with justice, equity and compassion. It was an attitude expressed in the prostrations of the ritual prayer (*salat*) which Muslims were required to make

three times a day. (Later this prayer would be increased to five times daily.) The old tribal ethic had been egalitarian; Arabs did not approve of the idea of monarchy, and it was abhorrent to them to grovel on the ground like slaves. But the prostrations were designed to counter the hard arrogance and self-sufficiency that was growing apace in Mecca. The postures of their bodies would re-educate the Muslims, teaching them to lay aside their pride and selfishness, and recall that before God they were nothing. In order to comply with the stern teaching of the Quran, Muslims were also required to give a regular proportion of their income to the poor in alms (*sakat*). They would also fast during Ramadan to remind themselves of the privations of the poor, who could not eat or drink whenever they chose.

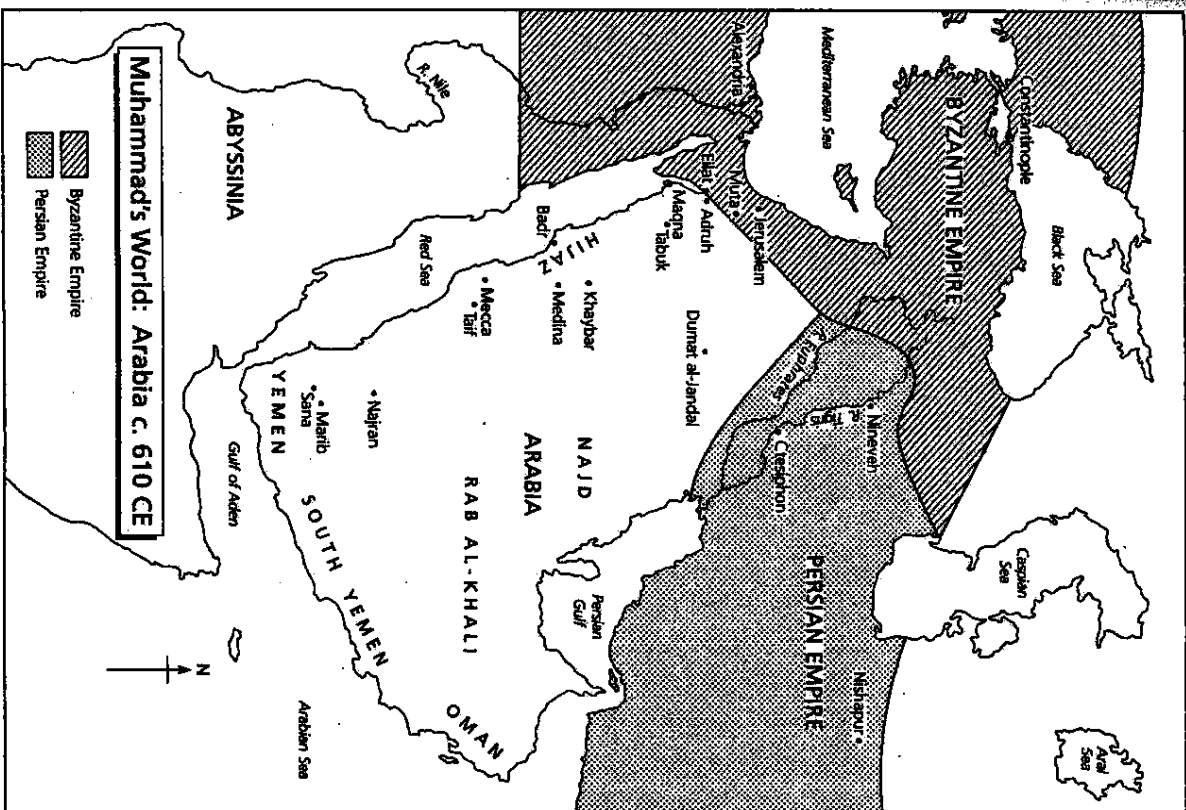
Social justice was, therefore, the crucial virtue of Islam. Muslims were commanded as their first duty to build a community (*ummah*) characterized by practical compassion, in which there was a fair distribution of wealth. This was far more important than any doctrinal teaching about God. In fact the Quran has a negative view of theological speculation, which it calls *zannah*, self-indulgent whimsy about ineffable matters that nobody can ascertain one way or the other. It seemed pointless to argue about such abstruse dogmas; far more crucial was the effort (*jihad*) to live in the way that God had intended for human beings. The political and social welfare of the *ummah* would have sacramental value for Muslims. If the *ummah* prospered, it was a sign that Muslims were living according to God's will, and the experience of living in a truly *Islamic* community, which made this existential surrender to the divine, would give Muslims intimations of sacred transcendence. Consequently, they would be affected as profoundly by any misfortune or humiliation suffered by the *ummah* as Christians by the spectacle of somebody blasphemously trampling on the Bible or tipping the Eucharistic host apart.

This social concern had always been an essential part of the visions of the great world religions, which had developed during what historians have called the Axial Age (c. 700 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E.), when civilization, as we know it, developed, together with the confessional faiths which have continued to nourish humanity: Taoism and Confucianism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent; monotheism in the Middle East; and rationalism in Europe. These faiths all reformed the old paganism, which was no longer adequate in the larger and more complex societies that evolved once people had created a mercantile economy capable of supporting this cultural effort. In the larger states, people acquired broader horizons, and the old local cults ceased to be appropriate; increasingly, the Axial Age faiths focused on a single deity or supreme symbol of transcendence. Each was concerned about the fundamental injustice of their society. All pre-modern civilizations were based economically upon a surplus of agricultural produce; they therefore depended upon the labour of peasants who could not enjoy their high culture, which was only for an elite. To counter this, the new faiths stressed the importance of compassion. Arabia had remained outside the civilized world. Its intractable climate meant that the Arabs lived on the brink of starvation; there seemed no way that they could acquire an agrarian surplus that would put them on a footing with Sassanid Persia or Byzantium. But when the Quraysh began to develop a market economy their perspective began to change. Many were still happy with the old paganism, but there was a growing tendency to worship only one God; and there was, as we have seen, a growing unease about the inequity of the new civilization that was developing in Mecca. The Arabs were now ready for an Axial Age faith of their own.

But that did not mean a wholesale rejection of tradition. The Axial Age prophets and reformers all built on the old

pagan rites of their region, and Muhammad would do the same. He did demand that they ignore the cult of such popular Arabian goddesses as Manat, al-Lat and al-Uzzah, however, and worship Allah alone. The pagan deities are said in the Quran to be like weak tribal chiefs, who were a liability for their people, because they could not give them adequate protection. The Quran did not put forward any philosophical arguments for monotheism; its approach was practical, and, as such, it appealed to the pragmatic Arabs. The old religion, the Quran claimed, was simply not working.³ There was spiritual malaise, chronic and destructive warfare, and an injustice that violated the best Arab traditions and tribal codes. The way forward lay in a single God and a unified *ummah*, which was governed by justice and equity.

Radical as this sounded, the Quran insisted that its message was simply a "reminder" of truths that everybody knew.⁴ This was the primordial faith that had been preached to the whole of humanity by the prophets of the past. God had not left human beings in ignorance about the way they should live: he had sent messengers to every people on the face of the earth. Islamic tradition would later assert that there had been 124,000 such prophets, a symbolic number suggesting infinity. All had brought their people a divinely inspired scripture; they might express the truths of God's religion differently, but essentially the message was always the same. Now at last God had sent the Quraysh a prophet and a scripture. Constantly the Quran points out that Muhammad had not come to cancel the older religions, to contradict their prophets or to start a new faith. His message is the same as that of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, or Jesus.⁵ The Quran mentions only those prophets who were known to the Arabs, but today Muslim scholars argue that had Muhammad known about the Buddhists or the Hindus, the Australian Aborigines or the Native Americans, the Quran would have endorsed their



sages too, because all rightly guided religion that submitted wholly to God, refused to worship man-made deities and preached that justice and equality came from the same divine source. Hence Muhammad never asked Jews or Christians to accept Islam, unless they particularly wished to do so, because they had received perfectly valid revelations of their own. The Quran insists strongly that "there shall be no coercion in matters of faith,"⁷⁶ and commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians, whom the Quran calls *ahl al-kitab*, a phrase usually translated "People of the Book" but which is more accurately rendered "people of an earlier revelation."⁷⁷

Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evil-doing—and say: "We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we [all] surrender ourselves."⁷⁷

It is only our more modern culture that can afford to prize originality and jettison tradition wholesale. In pre-modern society, continuity was crucial. Muhammad did not envisage a violent rupture with the past or with other faith communities. He wanted to root the new scripture in the spiritual landscape of Arabia.

Hence Muslims continued to perform the customary rituals at the Kabah, the cube-shaped shrine in the heart of Mecca, the most important centre of worship in Arabia. It was extremely ancient even in Muhammad's time, and the original meaning of the cult associated with it had been forgotten, but it was still loved by the Arabs, who assembled each year for the *hajj* pilgrimage from all over the peninsula. They would circle the shrine seven times, following the direction of the sun around the earth; kiss the Black Stone embedded in

the wall of the Kabah, which was probably a meteorite that had once hurtled to the ground, linking the site to the heavenly world. These rites (known as the *umrah*) could be performed at any time, but during the *hajj* pilgrims would also run from the steps of al-Safa beside the Kabah across the valley to al-Marwah, where they prayed. They then moved to the environs of Mecca: on the plain of Arafat, they stood all night in vigil; they rushed in a body to the hollow of Muzdalifah; hurled pebbles at a rock in Mina, shaved their heads, and on the Id al-Adha, the final day of the pilgrimage, they performed an animal sacrifice.

The ideal of community was central to the cult of the Kabah. All violence was forbidden in Mecca and the surrounding countryside at all times. This had been a key factor in the commercial success of the Quraysh, since it enabled Arabs to trade there without fearing the reprisals of vendetta warfare. During the *hajj* pilgrims were forbidden to carry arms, to argue, to kill game or even to kill an insect or speak a cross word. All this was clearly congenial to Muhammad's ideal for the *ummah*, and he was himself devoted to the shrine, often made the *umrah* and liked to recite the Quran beside the Kabah. Officially, the shrine was dedicated to Hubal, a Nabatean deity, and there were 360 idols arranged around the Kabah, probably representing the days of the year. But by Muhammad's day, it seems that the Kabah was venerated as the shrine of Allah, the High God, and it is a mark of the widespread conviction that Allah was the same as the deity worshipped by monotheists that those Arabs in the northern tribes on the borders of the Byzantine Empire who had converted to Christianity used to make the *hajj* alongside the pagans. Yet for all this, in the early days of his mission, Muhammad still made the Muslims perform the *salat* prayer facing Jerusalem, the holy city of the *ahl al-kitab*, turning their backs on the pagan associations of the

Kabah. This expressed his longing to bring the Arabs into the monotheistic family.

Muhammad acquired a small following and eventually some seventy families had converted to Islam. At first, the most powerful men in Mecca ignored the Muslims, but by 616 they had become extremely angry with Muhammad who, they said, reviled the faith of their fathers, and was obviously a charlatan, who only pretended to be a prophet. They were particularly incensed by the Quran's description of the Last Judgement, which they dismissed as primitive and irrational. Arabs did not believe in the afterlife and should give no credence to such "fairy tales."⁸ But they were especially concerned that in the Quran this Judaeo-Christian belief struck at the heart of their cut-throat capitalism. On the Last Day, Arabs were warned that the wealth and power of their tribe would not help them; each individual would be tried on his or her own merits: why had they not taken care of the poor? Why had they accumulated fortunes instead of sharing their money? Those Quraysh who were doing very well in the new Mecca were not likely to look kindly on this kind of talk, and the opposition grew, led by Abu al-Hakam (who is called Abu Jahl, "Father of Lies," in the Quran), Abu Sufyan, an extremely intelligent man, who had once been a personal friend of Muhammad, and Suhayl ibn Amr, a devout pagan. They were all disturbed by the idea of abandoning the faith of their ancestors; all had relatives who had converted to Islam; and all feared that Muhammad was plotting to take over the leadership of Mecca. The Quran insisted that Muhammad had no political function but that he was simply a *nabih*, a "warner,"⁹ but how long would a man who claimed to receive instructions from Allah accept the rulings of more ordinary mortals like themselves?

Relations deteriorated sharply. Abu Jahl imposed a boycott on Muhammad's clan, forbidding the Quraysh to marry or

trade with the Muslims. This meant that nobody could sell them any food. The ban lasted for two years, and the food shortages may well have been responsible for the death of Muhammad's beloved wife Khadija, and it certainly ruined some of the Muslims financially. Slaves who had converted to Islam were particularly badly treated, tied up and left to burn in the blazing sun. Most seriously, in 619, after the ban had been lifted, Muhammad's uncle and protector (*walid*) Abu Talib died. Muhammad was an orphan; his parents had died in his infancy. Without a protector who would avenge his death, according to the harsh vendetta lore of Arabia, a man could be killed with impunity, and Muhammad had great difficulty finding a Meccan chieftain who would become his patron. The position of the *ummah* was becoming untenable in Mecca, and a new solution clearly had to be found.

Muhammad was, therefore, ready to listen to a delegation of chiefs from Yathrib, an agricultural settlement some 250 miles north of Mecca. A number of tribes had abandoned the nomadic way of life and settled there, but after centuries of warfare on the steppes found it impossible to live together peacefully. The whole settlement was caught up in one deadly feud after another. Some of these tribes had either converted to Judaism or were of Jewish descent, and so the people of Yathrib were accustomed to monotheistic ideas, were not in thrall to the old paganism and were desperate to find a new solution that would enable their people to live together in a single community. The envoys from Yathrib, who approached Muhammad during the *hajj* in 620, converted to Islam and made a pledge with the Muslims: each vowed that they would not fight each other, and would defend each other from common enemies. Eventually, in 622, the Muslim families slipped away, one by one, and made the migration (*hijrah*) to Yathrib. Muhammad, whose new protector had recently died, was almost assassinated before he and Abu Bakr were able to escape.

The *biyah* marks the start of the Muslim era, because it was at this point that Muhammad was able to implement the Quranic ideal fully and that Islam became a factor in history. It was a revolutionary step. The *biyah* was no mere change of address. In pre-Islamic Arabia the tribe was a sacred value. To turn your back on your blood-group and join another was unheard of; it was essentially blasphemous, and the Quraysh could not condone this defection. They vowed to exterminate the *ummah* in Yathrib. Muhammad had become the head of a collection of tribal groups that were not bound together by blood but by a shared ideology, an astonishing innovation in Arabian society. Nobody was forced to convert to the religion of the Quran, but Muslims, pagans and Jews all belonged to one *ummah*, could not attack one another, and vowed to give one another protection. News of this extraordinary new "supertribe" spread, and though at the outset nobody thought that it had a chance of survival, it proved to be an inspiration that would bring peace to Arabia before the death of the Prophet in 632, just ten years after the *biyah*.

Yathrib would become known as al-Medīnah (*the City*), because it became the pattern of the perfect Muslim society. When Muhammad arrived in Medina one of his first actions was to build a simple mosque (*masjid*: literally, place of prostration). It was a rough building, which expressed the austerity of the early Islamic ideal. Tree trunks supported the roof, a stone marked the *qiblah* (the direction of prayer) and the Prophet stood on a tree trunk to preach. All future mosques would, as far as possible, be built according to this model. There was also a courtyard, where Muslims met to discuss all the concerns of the *ummah*—social, political and military as well as religious. Muhammad and his wives lived in small huts around the edge of the courtyard. Unlike a Christian church, which is separated from mundane activities and devoted only to worship, no activity was excluded from the mosque. In the

Quranic vision there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political, sexuality and worship. The whole of life was potentially holy and had to be brought into the ambit of the divine. The aim was *tarbiyah* (making one), the integration of the whole of life in a unified community, which would give Muslims intimations of the Unity which is God.

Muhammad's numerous wives have occasioned a good deal of prurient interest in the West, but it would be a mistake to imagine the Prophet basking decadently in sensual delight, like some of the later Islamic rulers. In Mecca, Muhammad had remained monogamous, married only to Khadija, even though polygamy was common in Arabia. Khadija was a good deal older than he, but bore him at least six children, of whom only four daughters survived. In Medina, Muhammad became a great *zayid* (chief), and was expected to have a large harem, but most of these marriages were politically motivated. As he formed his new supertribe, he was eager to forge marriage ties with some of his closest companions, to bind them closer together. His favourite new wife was Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, and he also married Hafsa, the daughter of Umar ibn al-Khattab. He married two of his daughters to Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib. Many of his other wives were older women, who were without protectors or were related to the chiefs of those tribes who became the allies of the *ummah*. None of them bore the Prophet any children.¹⁰ His wives were sometimes more of a hindrance than a pleasure. On one occasion, when they were squabbling about the division of booty after a raid, the Prophet threatened to divorce them all unless they lived more strictly in accordance with Islamic values.¹¹ But it is still true that Muhammad was one of those rare men who truly enjoy the company of women. Some of his male companions were astonished by his leniency towards his wives and the way they stood up to him and answered him

back. Muhammad scrupulously helped with the chores, mended his own clothes and sought out the companionship of his wives. He often liked to take one of them on an expedition, and would consult them and take their advice seriously. On one occasion his most intelligent wife, Umm Salamah, helped to prevent a mutiny.

The emancipation of women was a project dear to the Prophet's heart. The Quran gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before Western women were accorded such status. The Quran prescribes some degree of segregation and veiling for the Prophet's wives, but there is nothing in the Quran that requires the veiling of *all* women or their seclusion in a separate part of the house. These customs were adopted some three or four generations after the Prophet's death. Muslims at that time were copying the Greek Christians of Byzantium, who had long veiled and segregated their women in this manner; they also appropriated some of their Christian misogyny. The Quran makes men and women partners before God, with identical duties and responsibilities.¹² The Quran also came to permit polygamy; at a time when Muslims were being killed in the wars against Mecca, and women were left without protectors, men were permitted to have up to four wives provided that they treat them all with absolute equality and show no signs of favouring one rather than the others.¹³ The women of the first *ummah* in Medina took full part in its public life, and some, according to Arab custom, fought alongside the men in battle. They did not seem to have experienced Islam as an oppressive religion, though later, as happened in Christianity, men would hijack the faith and bring it into line with the prevailing patriarchy. In the early years at Medina there were two important developments. Muhammad had been greatly excited by the prospect of working closely with the Jewish tribes, and had even, shortly before the *hijrah*, introduced some practices

(such as communal prayer on Friday afternoons, when Jews would be preparing for the Sabbath, and a fast on the Jewish Day of Atonement) to align Islam more closely with Judaism. His disappointment, when the Jews of Medina refused to accept him as an authentic prophet, was one of the greatest of his life. For Jews, the era of prophecy was over, so it was not surprising that they could not accept Muhammad, but the polemic with the Jews of Medina occupies a significant portion of the Quran and shows that it troubled Muhammad. Some of the Quranic stories about such prophets as Noah or Moses were different from those of the Bible. Many of the Jews used to scoff when these were recited in the mosque. The three main Jewish tribes also resented Muhammad's ascendancy; they had formed a powerful bloc before his arrival in the settlement, and now felt demoted and determined to get rid of him.

But some of the Jews in the smaller clans were friendly and enhanced Muhammad's knowledge of Jewish scripture. He was especially delighted to hear that in the Book of Genesis Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael (who became Ismail in Arabic), the child of his concubine Hagar. Abraham had been forced to cast Hagar and Ismail out into the wilderness, but God had saved them and promised that Ismail too would be the father of a great nation, the Arabs.¹⁴ Local tradition had it that Hagar and Ismail had settled in Mecca, that Abraham had visited them there and that together Abraham and Ismail had rebuilt the Kabah (which had originally been erected by Adam but had fallen into disrepair).¹⁵ This was music to Muhammad's ears. It seemed that the Arabs had not been left out of the divine plan after all, and that the Kabah had venerable monotheistic credentials.

By 624 it was clear that most of the Jews of Medina would never be reconciled with the Prophet. Muhammad had also been shocked to learn that the Jews and Christians (whom he

had assumed to belong to a single faith) actually had serious theological differences, even though he appears to have thought that not all the *ahl al-kitab* condoned this disgraceful sectarianism. In January 624 he made what must have been one of his most creative gestures. During the *salat* prayer, he told the congregation to turn around, so that they prayed in the direction of Mecca rather than Jerusalem. This change of *qiblah* was a declaration of independence. By turning away from Jerusalem towards the Kabah, which had no connection with Judaism or Christianity, Muslims tacitly demonstrated that they were reverting to the original pure monotheism of Abraham, who had lived before the revelation of either the Torah or the Gospel and, therefore, before the religion of the one God had been split into warring sects.¹⁶ Muslims would direct themselves to God alone: it was idolatrous to bow before a human system or an established religion rather than before God himself.

Verily, as for those who have broken the unity of their faith and become sects—thou has nothing to do with them.... Say: "Behold, my Sustainer has guided me to a straight way through an ever-true faith—in the way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him." Say: "Behold, my prayer, and [all] my acts of worship, and my living and dying are for God alone."¹⁷

The change of *qiblah* appealed to all Arab Muslims, especially to the emigrants who had made the *hijrah* from Mecca. Muslims would no longer tag lamely behind those Jews and Christians who ridiculed their aspirations, but would take their own direct route to God.

The second major development occurred shortly after the change of the *qiblah*. Muhammad and the emigrants from Mecca had no means of earning a living in Medina; there was not enough land for them to farm, and, in any case, they were

merchants and businessmen not agriculturalists. The Medinese, who were known as the *ansar* (the helpers), could not afford to keep them *gratit*, so the emigrants resorted to the *ghazu*, the "raid," which was a sort of national sport in Arabia, as well as being a rough-and-ready means of redistributing resources in a land where there was simply not enough to go round. Raiding parties would attack a caravan or contingent from a rival tribe and carry off booty and livestock, taking care to avoid killing people since this would mean a vendetta. It was forbidden to conduct a raid against a tribe that had become an ally or "client" (a weaker tribal group who had sought protection from one of the more powerful tribes). The emigrants, who had been persecuted by the Quraysh and forced to leave their homes, began to conduct *ghazu* against the rich Meccan caravans, which brought them an income, but to conduct a *ghazu* against one's *own* tribe was a serious breach in precedent. The raiding parties enjoyed some initial success, but in March 624 Muhammad led a large band of emigrants to the coast to intercept the largest Meccan caravan of the year. When they heard of this outrage, the Quraysh dispatched an army to defend the caravan, but, against the odds, the Muslims inflicted a stunning defeat on the Meccans at the well of Badr. Even though the Meccans were superior in terms of numbers, they fought in the old Arab style with careless bravado, each chief leading his own men. Muhammad's troops, however, were carefully drilled and fought under his unified command. It was a rout that impressed the Bedouin tribes, some of whom enjoyed the spectacle of seeing the mighty Quraysh brought low.

There then ensued desperate days for the *ummah*. Muhammad had to contend with the hostility of some of the pagans in Medina, who resented the power of the Muslim newcomers and were determined to expel them from the settlement. He also had to deal with Mecca, where Abu Sufyan now di-

rected the campaign against him, and had launched two major offensives against the Muslims in Medina. His object was not simply to defeat the *ummah* in battle, but to annihilate all the Muslims. The harsh ethic of the desert meant that there were no half-measures in warfare: if possible, a victorious chief was expected to exterminate the enemy, so the *ummah* faced the threat of total extinction. In 625 Mecca inflicted a severe defeat on the *ummah* at the Battle of Uhud, but two years later the Muslims trounced the Meccans at the Battle of the Trench, so called because Muhammad protected the settlement by digging a ditch around Medina, which threw the Quraysh, who still regarded war rather as a chivalric game and had never heard of such an unsporting trick, into confusion, and rendered their cavalry useless. Muhammad's second victory over the numerically superior Quraysh (there had been ten thousand Meccans to three thousand Muslims) was a turning point. It convinced the nomadic tribes that Muhammad was the coming man, and made the Quraysh look decidedly *parâ*. The gods in whose name they fought were clearly not working on their behalf. Many of the tribes wanted to become the allies of the *ummah*, and Muhammad began to build a powerful tribal confederacy, whose members swore not to attack one another and to fight each other's enemies. Some of the Meccans also began to defect and made the *hijrah* to Medina; at last, after five years of deadly peril, Muhammad could be confident that the *ummah* would survive.

In Medina, the chief casualties of this Muslim success were the three Jewish tribes of Qaynuqah, Nadir and Qurayzah, who were determined to destroy Muhammad and who all independently formed alliances with Mecca. They had powerful armies, and obviously posed a threat to the Muslims, since their territory was so situated that they could easily join a besieging Meccan army or attack the *ummah* from the rear. When the Qaynuqah staged an unsuccessful rebellion against Muhammad in 625, they were expelled from

Medina, in accordance with Arab custom. Muhammad tried to reassure the Nadir, and made a special treaty with them, but when he discovered that they had been plotting to assassinate him they too were sent into exile, where they joined the nearby Jewish settlement of Khaybar, and drummed up support for Abu Sufyan among the northern Arab tribes. The Nadir proved to be even more of a danger outside Medina, so when the Jewish tribe of Qurayzah sided with Mecca during the Battle of the Trench, when for a time it seemed that the Muslims faced certain defeat, Muhammad showed no mercy. The seven hundred men of the Qurayzah were killed, and their women and children sold as slaves.

The massacre of the Qurayzah was a horrible incident, but it would be a mistake to judge it by the standards of our own time. This was a very primitive society: the Muslims themselves had just narrowly escaped extermination, and had Muhammad simply exiled the Qurayzah they would have swelled the Jewish opposition in Khaybar and brought another war upon the *ummah*. In seventh-century Arabia an Arab chief was not expected to show mercy to traitors like the Qurayzah. The executions sent a grim message to Khaybar and helped to quell the pagan opposition in Medina, since the pagan leaders had been the allies of the rebellious Jews. This was a fight to the death, and everybody had always known that the stakes were high. The struggle did not indicate any hostility towards Jews in general, but only towards the three rebel tribes. The Quran continued to revere Jewish prophets and to urge Muslims to respect the People of the Book. Smaller Jewish groups continued to live in Medina, and later Jews, like Christians, enjoyed full religious liberty in the Islamic empires. Anti-semitism is a Christian vice. Hatred of the Jews became marked in the Muslim world only after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent loss of Arab Palestine. It is significant that Muslims were compelled to import anti-Jewish myths from Europe, and translate into

Arabic such virulently anti-semitic texts as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, because they had no such traditions of their own. Because of this new hostility towards the Jewish people, some Muslims now quote the passages in the Quran that refer to Muhammad's struggle with the three rebellious Jewish tribes to justify their prejudice. By taking these verses out of context, they have distorted both the message of the Quran and the attitude of the Prophet, who himself felt no such hatred of Judaism.

Muhammad's intransigence towards the Quraysh had been designed to bring hostilities to an end as soon as possible. The Quran teaches that war is such a catastrophe that Muslims must use every method in their power to restore peace and normality in the shortest possible time.¹⁸ Arabia was a chronically violent society, and the *ummah* had to fight its way to peace. Major social change of the type that Muhammad was attempting in the peninsula is rarely achieved without bloodshed. But after the Battle of the Trench, when Muhammad had humiliated Mecca and quashed the opposition in Medina, he felt that it was time to abandon the *jihad* and begin a peace offensive. In March 628 he set in train a daring and imaginative initiative that brought the conflict to a close. He announced that he was going to make the *hajj* to Mecca, and asked for volunteers to accompany him. Since pilgrims were forbidden to carry arms, the Muslims would be walking directly into the lions' den and putting themselves at the mercy of the hostile and resentful Quraysh. Nevertheless, about a thousand Muslims agreed to join the Prophet and set out for Mecca, dressed in the traditional white robes of the *hajji*. If the Quraysh forbade Arabs to approach the Kabah or attacked bona fide pilgrims they would betray their sacred duty as the guardians of the shrine. The Quraysh did, however, dispatch troops to attack the pilgrims before they reached the area outside the city where violence was forbidden, but the Prophet evaded them and, with

the help of some of his Bedouin allies, managed to reach the edge of the sanctuary, camped at Hudaibiyyah and awaited developments. Eventually the Quraysh were pressured by this peaceful demonstration to sign a treaty with the *ummah*. It was an unpopular move on both sides. Many of the Muslims were eager for action, and felt that the treaty was shameful, but Muhammad was determined to achieve victory by peaceful means.

Hudaibiyyah was another turning point. It impressed still more of the Bedouin, and conversion to Islam became even more of an irreversible trend. Eventually in 630, when the Quraysh violated the treaty by attacking one of the Prophet's tribal allies, Muhammad marched upon Mecca with an army of ten thousand men. Faced with this overwhelming force and, as pragmatists, realizing what it signified, the Quraysh conceded defeat, opened the city gates, and Muhammad took Mecca without shedding a drop of blood. He destroyed the idols around the Kabah, rededicated it to Allah, the one God, and gave the old pagan rites of the *hajj* an Islamic significance by linking them to the story of Abraham, Hagar and Ismail. None of the Quraysh was forced to become Muslim, but Muhammad's victory convinced some of his most principled opponents, such as Abu Sufyan, that the old religion had failed. When Muhammad died in 632, in the arms of his beloved wife Aisha, almost all the tribes of Arabia had joined the *ummah* as Confederates or as converted Muslims. Since members of the *ummah* could not, of course, attack one another, the ghastly cycle of tribal warfare, of vendetta and counter-vendetta, had ended. Single-handedly, Muhammad had brought peace to war-torn Arabia.

THE RASHIDUN (632-661)

The life and achievements of Muhammad would affect the spiritual, political and ethical vision of Muslims forever.

They expressed the Islamic experience of "salvation," which does not consist in the redemption of an "original sin" committed by Adam and the admittance to eternal life, but in the achievement of a society which puts into practice God's desires for the human race. This not only redeemed Muslims from the sort of political and social hell that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, but also provided them with a context within which they could more easily make that wholehearted surrender to God which alone can fulfil them. Muhammad became the archetypal example of that perfect submission to the divine, and Muslims, as we shall see, would attempt to conform to this standard in their spiritual and social lives. Muhammad was never venerated as a divine figure, but he was held to be the Perfect Man. His surrender to God had been so complete that he had transformed society and enabled the Arabs to live together in harmony. The word *islam* is etymologically related to *salam* (peace), and in these early years Islam did promote cohesion and concord.

But Muhammad had achieved this success by being the recipient of a divine revelation. Throughout his career, God had sent down the oracles that formed the Quran. When faced with a crisis or dilemma, Muhammad had entered deeply into himself and heard a divinely inspired solution. His life had thus represented a constant dialogue between transcendent reality and the violent, puzzling and disturbing happenings of the mundane world. The Quran had, therefore, followed public and current events, bringing divine guidance and illumination to politics. Muhammad's successors, however, were not prophets, but would have to rely on their own human insights. How would they ensure that Muslims continued to respond creatively and directly to this sacred imperative? The *ummah* that they ruled would be much larger and increasingly more complex than the little community of Medina, where everybody knew everybody else and

there had been no need for officialdom and a bureaucracy. How would the new deputy (*khalifah*) of Muhammad preserve the essence of the first *ummah* in very different circumstances?

The first four caliphs to succeed Muhammad grappled with these difficult questions. They were all men who had been among the Prophet's closest companions, and had played a leading role in Mecca and Medina. They are known as the *rasulidun*, the "rightly guided" caliphs, and their period of rule would be just as formative as that of the Prophet himself. Muslims would define themselves and their theology according to the way they assessed the turbulent, glorious and tragic events of these years.

After the Prophet's death, the leading Muslims had to decide what form the *ummah* should take. Some may not have believed that there ought to be a "state," a polity which had no precedent in Arabia. Some seemed to think that each tribal group should elect its own *imam* (leader). But the Prophet's companions Abu Bakr and Umar ibn al-Khattab argued that the *ummah* must be a united community, and should have a single ruler, as it had under the Prophet. Some believed that Muhammad would have wanted to be succeeded by Ali ibn Abi Talib, his closest male relative. In Arabia, where the blood-tie was sacred, it was thought that a chief's special qualities were passed down the line of his descendants, and some Muslims believed that Ali had inherited something of Muhammad's special charisma. But although Ali's piety was beyond question, he was still young and inexperienced, and therefore Abu Bakr was elected the first *khalifah* of the Prophet by a majority of votes.

Abu Bakr's reign (632-34) was short but crucial. He was chiefly preoccupied by the so-called wars of *ridalah* (apostasy) when various tribes tried to break away from the *ummah* and reassert their former independence. It would, however, be a

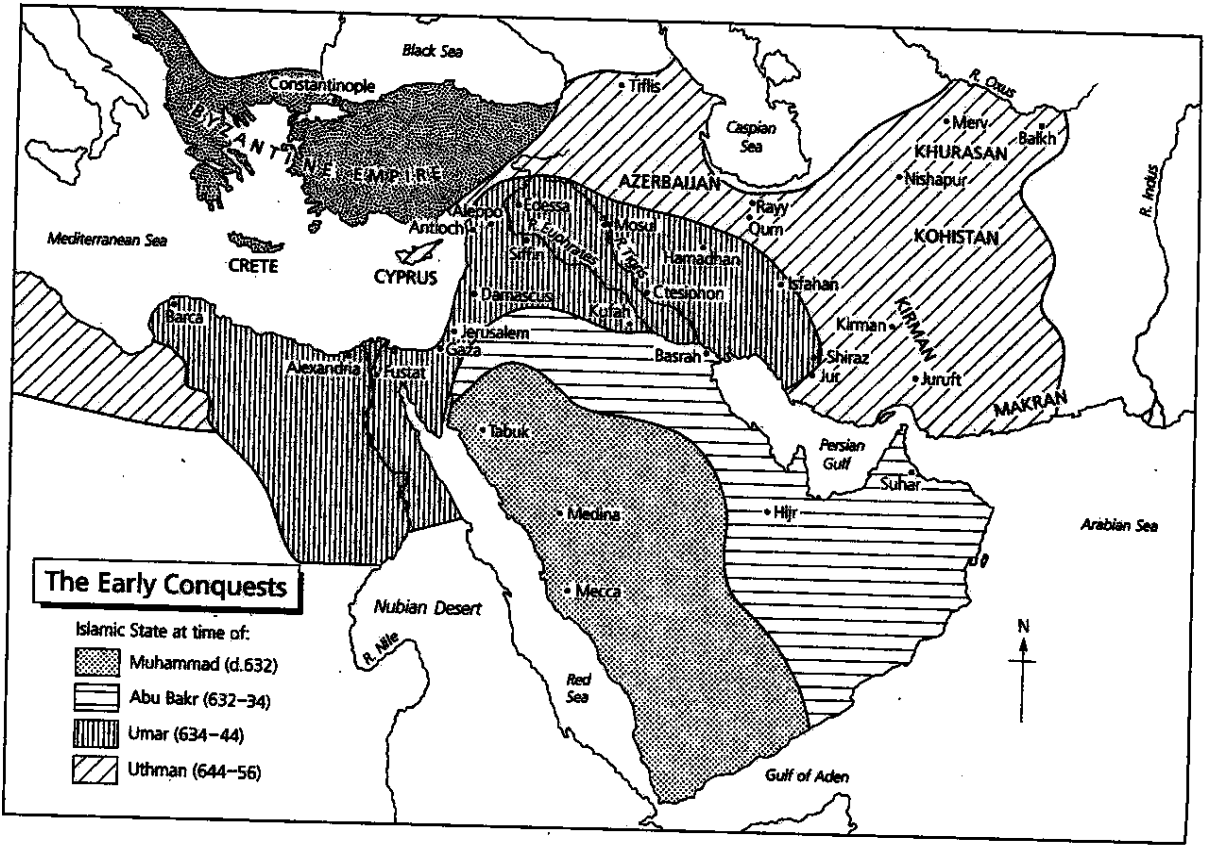
mistake to regard this as a widespread religious defection. The revolts were entirely political and economic. Most of the Bedouin tribes who had entered the Islamic Confederacy had little interest in the details of Muhammad's religion. The Prophet, a realist, had recognized that many of the alliances he had formed were purely political, a matter of one chief joining forces with another, as was customary in the Arabian steppes. Some chiefs may have believed that their pact had been only with Muhammad and not with his successor, and that after his death they were free to raid tribes in the *ummah*, thus calling upon themselves a Muslim riposte.

It was, however, significant that many of the rebels felt impelled to give their revolts a religious justification; the leaders often claimed to be prophets, and produced Quranic-style "revelations." The Arabs had been through a profound experience. It was not "religious" in our modern sense of the word, since for many it was not a private faith, following an interior conversion. The Prophet had broken the old mould, and suddenly—if momentarily—the Arabs had found themselves for the first time members of a united community, free from the burden of constant, debilitating warfare. For the brief years of Muhammad's career they had glimpsed the possibility of an entirely different way of life, bound up with a religious change. What had happened had been so astounding that even those who wanted to break away from the *ummah* could only think in prophetic terms. It was probably during the *riḍālah* wars that Muslims began to assert that Muhammad had been the last and greatest of the prophets, a claim that is not made explicitly in the Quran, as Muslims countered the challenge of these *riḍālah* prophets.

Abu Bakr quelled the uprisings with wisdom and clemency, and thus completed the unification of Arabia. He dealt creatively with the complaints of the rebels, and there were no reprisals taken against those who returned to the fold. Some

were enticed back by the prospect of taking part in the lucrative *ghazā* raids in the neighbouring lands, which gained dramatic momentum under the rule of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–44). These raids were a response to a problem that had arisen from the new Islamic peace in the peninsula. For centuries, the Arabs had eked out their inadequate resources by means of the *ghazā*, but Islam had put a stop to this because the tribes of the *ummah* were not permitted to attack one another. What would replace the *ghazā*, which had enabled Muslims to scratch out a meagre livelihood? Umar realized that the *ummah* needed order. Lawless elements had to be brought under control, and energies which had previously been expended in raiding and feuding now had to be channelled into a common activity. The obvious answer was a series of *ghazā* raids against the non-Muslim communities in the neighbouring countries. The unity of the *ummah* would be preserved by an outwardly directed offensive. This would also enhance the caliph's authority. The Arabs traditionally disliked kingship and would be leery of any ruler who assumed the style of a monarch. But they would accept the authority of a chief during a military campaign or while they were journeying to new pastures. Umar therefore called himself *amir al-mu'minin* (the commander of the faithful), and Muslims accepted his rulings in matters that concerned the *ummah* as a whole, but not on matters that individuals could decide for themselves.

Under Umar's leadership, therefore, the Arabs burst into Iraq, Syria and Egypt, achieving a series of astonishing victories. They overcame the Persian army at the Battle of Qadisiyah (637), which led to the fall of the capital of the Persian Sassanids at Ctesiphon. As soon as they had the manpower, Muslims would thus be able to occupy the whole of the Persian Empire. They encountered stiffer resistance in the Byzantine Empire, and conquered no territory in the



Byzantine heartlands in Anatolia. Nevertheless, the Muslims were victorious at the Battle of Yarmuk (636) in northern Palestine, conquered Jerusalem in 638, and controlled the whole of Syria, Palestine and Egypt by 641. The Muslim armies went on to seize the North African coast as far as Cyrenaica. Just twenty years after the Battle of Badr, the Arabs found themselves in possession of a sizeable empire. This expansion continued. A century after the Prophet's death, the Islamic Empire extended from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas. It seemed yet another miracle and sign of God's favour. Before the coming of Islam, the Arabs had been a despised outgroup; but in a remarkably short space of time they had inflicted major defeats upon two world empires. The experience of conquest enhanced their sense that something tremendous had happened to them. Membership of the *ummah* was thus a transcendent experience, because it went beyond anything they had known or could have imagined in the old tribal days. Their success also endorsed the message of the Quran, which had asserted that a correctly guided society must prosper because it was in tune with God's laws. Look what had happened once they had surrendered to God's will! Where Christians discerned God's hand in apparent failure and defeat, when Jesus died on the cross, Muslims experienced political success as sacramental and as a revelation of the divine presence in their lives.

It is important, however, to be clear that when the Arabs burst out of Arabia they were not impelled by the ferocious power of "Islam." Western people often assume that Islam is a violent, militaristic faith which imposed itself on its subject peoples at sword-point. This is an inaccurate interpretation of the Muslim wars of expansion. There was nothing religious about these campaigns, and Umar did not believe that he had a divine mandate to conquer the world. The objective of Umar and his warriors was entirely pragmatic: they wanted

plunder and a common activity that would preserve the unity of the *ummah*. For centuries the Arabs had tried to raid the richer settled lands beyond the peninsula; the difference was that this time they had encountered a power vacuum. Persia and Byzantium had both been engaged for decades in a long and debilitating series of wars with one another. Both were exhausted. In Persia, there was factional strife, and flooding had destroyed the country's agriculture. Most of the Sassanian troops were of Arab origin and went over to the invaders during the campaign. In the Syrian and North African provinces of Byzantium, the local population had been alienated by the religious intolerance of the Greek Orthodox establishment, and were not disposed to come to their aid when the Arabs attacked, though Muslims could make no headway in the Byzantine heartlands of Anatolia.

Later, when the Muslims had established their great empire, Islamic law would give a religious interpretation of this conquest, dividing the world into the Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam), which was in perpetual conflict with the Dar al-Harb (the House of War). But in practice the Muslims accepted that they had reached the limits of their expansion by this date, and coexisted amicably with the non-Muslim world. The Quran does not sanctify warfare. It develops the notion of a just war of self-defence to protect decent values, but condemns killing and aggression.¹⁹ Furthermore, once the Arabs had left the peninsula, they found that nearly everybody belonged to the *ahl al-kitab*, the People of the Book, who had received authentic scriptures from God. They were not, therefore, forced to convert to Islam; indeed, until the middle of the eighth century, conversion was not encouraged. The Muslims assumed that Islam was a religion for the descendants of Ismail, as Judaism was the faith of the sons of Isaac. Arab tribesmen had always extended protection to weaker clients (*mawali*). Once the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians

in their new empire had become *dhimmi* (protected subjects), they could not be raided or attacked in any way. It had always been a point of honour among Arabs to treat their clients well, to come to their aid, or to avenge an injury done to them. *Dhimmi* paid a poll tax in return for military protection, and were permitted to practise their own faith, as the Quran enjoined. Indeed some of the Roman Christians, who had been persecuted by the Greek Orthodox for their heretical opinions, greatly preferred Muslim to Byzantine rule.

Umar was determined to maintain good discipline. The Arab soldiers were not to enjoy the fruits of victory; the conquered lands were not to be divided among the generals, but left to the existing cultivators, who paid rent to the Muslim state. Muslims were not allowed to settle in the cities. Instead, new "garrison towns" (*amṣar*) were built for them at strategic locations: Kufah in Iraq, Basrah in Iraq, Qum in Iran, and Fustat at the head of the Nile. Damascus was the only old city to become a Muslim centre. A mosque was built in each of the *amṣar*, where the Muslim troops attended Friday prayers. In these garrison towns, the soldiers were taught to live an Islamic life. Umar stressed the importance of family values, was hard on drunkenness, and promoted the ascetic virtues of the Prophet, who, like the caliph himself, had always lived frugally. But the garrison towns were also Arab enclaves, where those traditions that could be accommodated with the Quranic world-view were continued on foreign soil. At this point, Islam was an essentially Arab religion. Any *dhimmi* who did convert had to become a "client" of one of the tribes and be absorbed into the Arab system.

But this period of triumph came to an abrupt end in November 644, when Umar was stabbed in the mosque of Medina by a Persian prisoner-of-war who had a personal grievance against him. The last years of the *raḥidun* were characterized by violence. Uthman ibn Affan was elected as

IMPERIAL ISLAM (1500-1700)

The discovery and exploitation of gunpowder led to the development of a military technology that gave rulers more power over their subjects than before. They could control greater areas more effectively, provided that they also developed an efficient, rationalized administration. The military state, which had been a feature of Islamic politics since the decline of Abbasid power, could now come into its own. In Europe also, monarchs were beginning to build large centralized states and absolute monarchies, with a more streamlined government machinery. Three major Islamic empires were created in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries: the Safavid Empire in Iran, the Moghul Empire in India and the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, Syria, North Africa and Arabia. Other impressive polities also appeared. A large Muslim state was formed in Uzbekistan in the Syr-Oxus basin; another state with Shii tendencies was established in Morocco, and even though Muslims were at this time in competition with Chinese, Japanese, Hindu and Buddhist traders for the control of the Malayan archipelago, the Muslims came out on top in the sixteenth century.

It was, therefore, a period of triumph. The three major empires all seemed to turn their backs on the egalitarian traditions of Islam, and set up absolute monarchies, however. Almost every facet of public life was run with systematic and bureaucratic precision and the empires developed a sophisticated administration. They were all influenced by the Mongol idea of the army state, but involved civilians in their imperial policies, so that the dynasties won more grass-roots support. But these empires were very different from the old

Abbasid state in one important respect. The Abbasid caliphs and their court had never been truly Islamic institutions; they had not been subject to the laws of the Shariah and had evolved their own worldly ethos. The new empires, however, all had a strongly Islamic orientation, promoted by the rulers themselves. In Safavid Iran, Shiism became the state religion; Falsafah and Sufism were dominant influences on Moghul policy; while the Ottoman Empire was run entirely on Shariah lines.

But the old problems remained. However pious an absolute monarch might seem to be, such autocracy was fundamentally opposed to the spirit of the Quran. Most of the people still lived in poverty, and suffered the injustices that were endemic to agrarian society. There were also new difficulties: Moghul India and Anatolia, the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, were both places where Muslims were relative newcomers. Both would have to learn to relate to their non-Muslim subjects, who formed the majority of the population. The establishment of a Shii Empire caused a new and decisive rift between Sunnis and Shiis, leading to an intolerance and an aggressive sectarianism that was unprecedented in the Islamic world but which was similar to the bitter conflict between Catholics and Protestants that erupted at the same time in Europe. There was also the challenge of Europe itself, which had hitherto been a backward region and of little interest to Muslims. Europe, however, was just beginning to evolve an entirely new kind of civilization, free of the constraints of agrarian society, which would eventually enable the West not only to overtake but to subjugate the Islamic world. The new Europe was beginning to flex its muscles, but in the sixteenth century it was still no real threat. When the Russians invaded Muslim Kazan and Astrakhan (1552-56), and imposed Christianity there, Muslims profited from this defeat by opening new lines of trade with northern Europe. The Iberian navigators who had discovered the Americas in

1492 and opened new sea routes around the globe had given Portuguese merchants added mobility. In the second half of the sixteenth century they tried to ruin Muslim trade in the South Seas by conducting a neo-Crusade in the Red Sea. These exploits of the Portuguese were of great importance to the West, but made little impact on the Islamic world. Muslims were far more interested in the establishment of a Shii Empire in Iran, the spectacular successes of the early Safavids were a severe blow to Sunni expectations. For the first time in centuries, a stable, powerful and enduring Shii state had been planted right in the heart of Islamdom.

THE SAFAVID EMPIRE

The Safavid Sufi order in Azerbaijan, which had converted to Twelver Shiism, had for some time been conducting *ghazau* raids against the Christians of Georgia and the Caucasus, but it had also incurred the wrath of the *amir* of Mesopotamia and western Iran. In 1500, sixteen-year-old Ismail succeeded to the *pir*-ship of the order and set out to avenge his father, who had died at the hands of the *amir*. In 1501 Ismail conquered Tabriz in the course of his campaign, and then went on to subjugate the rest of Iran during the next decade. He declared that Twelver Shiism would be the official religion of his new empire.

This was a startling development. Until this date, most Shiis had been Arabs. There were Shii centres in Iran, in Rayy, Kashan and Khurasan, as well as the old garrison town of Qum, but most Iranians were Sunnis. Ismail therefore set about eliminating Sunnism in Iran: the Sufi *iriyaqs* were suppressed, and the *ulama* either executed or deported. Members of the administration were required to curse the first three *rasulids*, who had "usurped" power that should by rights have been given to Ali. No Shii rulers had ever attempted anything on this scale before; modern weaponry was giving the reli-