

A GENERAL HISTORY OF ISLAM

From 'Introduction to Islam' by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

The history of Islam means practically the history of the world during the last fourteen centuries. What we can attempt here is just a modest sketch in broad lines of the chief events of this history.

Orthodox Caliphs

490. In the year 632 (11 H.) Prophet Muhammad breathed his last. During the twenty-three preceding years, he had toiled successfully for the formulation of a religion as well as the creation from nothingness of a State, which beginning as a tiny city-state in a part of the town of Madinah embraced in the short span of ten years the administration of the whole of the Arabian Peninsula together with certain southern parts of Palestine and Iraq. Further, he left a community composed of several hundreds of thousands of adherents, with the fullest faith and conviction in his doctrines and capable of continuing the work he had begun.

491. The temporal success of the Prophet of Islam prompted certain adventurers, during the latter part of his life, to advance pretensions to prophethood. For several months, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the task of his successor, Abu-Bakr, consisted in suppressing these impostors, who had been joined by a few others, emboldened by the death of the Prophet.

492. At the moment of the Prophet's demise, there was a state of war with Byzantium, and almost the same with Iran. It will be recalled that a Muslim ambassador had been assassinated in Byzantine territory (cf. supra 442); and instead of making amends, the emperor had not only rejected all the alternatives proposed by the Prophet, but had even intervened militarily to protect the murderer against the punitive expedition of the Muslims. As regards Iran, for several years there had been bloody skirmishes between that country and its protectorates in Arabia. Certain tribes inhabiting these regions had embraced Islam. The acts of aggression and repression on the part of the Iranians could no more be passed over without provoking complications on an international

scale. It may be recalled that the Byzantine and Sassanid empires constituted, at the time, the two Big Powers of the world; whereas the Arabs possessed nothing enviable, being but a handful of nomads with neither military equipment nor material resources!

493. With a courage and boldness of spirit which can never be too greatly admired, the Caliph Abu-Bakr undertook a war against both these Big Powers simultaneously. In the first encounter, the Muslims occupied certain regions of the frontier. Then the Caliph sent an emissary to Constantinople in order to seek out a pacific solution, but all in vain. The defeat of the commandant at Caesaria, however, alarmed the emperor and he raised new troops. Abu-Bakr judged it necessary to transfer certain elements of the Muslim army from Iraq (Iranian empire) to Syria. In 634 a new victory was obtained at Ajnadain (near Jerusalem) followed a little later by another at Fihl (Pella); as a result of which Palestine was definitely lost to Byzantium. The old Caliph Abu-Bakr died at this time, and his successor, 'Umar, had no alternative but to continue the task which he had inherited. Very soon Damascus, and later Emesa (Hims) in North Syria opened their gates to Muslims. Facts show that the people of these regions received the Muslims not as conquerors and enemies, but as liberators. After the capture of Emesa, the concentrated final efforts of Emperor Heraclius obliged the Muslims to evacuate the town along with certain other regions, for the purpose of a better regrouping and organization. When the evacuation was decided upon, the Muslim commandant ordered that all the taxes collected from the people of the place, (all non-Muslims) should be returned to them, since the right to utilize levies did not hold good when protection could no more be extended to the subjects. It is not surprising therefore that the vanquished shed tears on seeing their erstwhile conquerors obliged to retire. In his *Memoire sur la conquete de la Syrie*, De Goeje writes: "In fact the disposition of the men in Syria was very favourable to Arabs, and they merited it, since the leniency with which they treated the vanquished contrasted strongly with the dire tyranny inflicted by the preceding (Byzantine)

masters." Shortly after their tactical retreat, the Muslims returned again with added strength and popularity.

494. The fate of Iran was not very different. The first incursions led to the occupation of Hirah (modern Kufah), and some other fortified localities. The departure of some detachments to Syria created a momentary calm, but a few months later the struggle recommenced, and the capital Mada'in (Ctesiphon) was occupied with ease. Emperor Yazdgird appealed for aid to the Emperor of China, the King of Turkestan and other neighbouring princes, but the help he received did not serve his ends, and his allies also suffered great losses.

495. During the time of 'Umar (634-44), the Muslims ruled from Tripoli (Lybia) to Baikh (Afghanistan), and from Armenia to Sindh (Pakistan) and Gujarat (India), and over the countries lying in between such as Syria, Iraq, and Iran, etc. Under his successor 'Uthman (644-56), they became masters of Nubia down to the outskirts of Dongola; they also occupied part of Andalusia (Spain); in the East, they crossed the river Oxus (Jaihun) and seized some regions from the Chinese. The islands of Cyprus, Rhodes and Crete became parts of the land of Islam. And in the course of defensive wars against the Byzantines, even Constantinople experienced a first Arab attack. Hardly fifteen years had passed after the death of the Prophet, when the East-West Muslim expansion spread from the Atlantic to the approaches of the Pacific, and an area was occupied that was as large as the whole continent of Europe. In this lightning conquest, what is surprising is that nowhere were the conquered discontented. This is proved also by the fact that in 656, when the Muslims were torn by their first civil war, no internal uprisings took place; and the Byzantine Emperor could not count in the least on his former subjects, but had to content himself with a small sum promised him by the cautious Muslim governor of Syria in exchange for the Emperor's neutrality.

496. It would be wrong to attribute this rapid expansion to any single cause. The weakness of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires as a result of their mutual conflicts, was offset by the lack of Arab conquerors in the matter of equipment, organization and other material resources. The Muslims could not spread en masse from China to Spain, and there were not enough Arabs to be distributed over all this immense territory. We have seen that the beginning of these wars was rather political. There was

absolutely no desire on the part of the Muslims to impose religion by force, their religion having formally prohibited such a thought. History also shows that at this time no compulsion was employed to convert the subjugated peoples. The simplicity and reasonableness of their religious doctrines together with the practical example in life which these Muslims set, no doubt attracted proselytes. Plunder and economic gain could form even poorer motives to explain the rapidity of the conquests. On the other hand, the change of masters was hailed by the vanquished as a change for the better. Contemporary administrative documents on papyrus, discovered recently in Egypt, attest to the fact that the Arabs had lightened the burden of taxes in Egypt. Therefore it seems certain that the same reforms were introduced everywhere in the conquered countries. The cost of administration was also much reduced, an effect not only due to the frugality of simple Arab life, but also due to the honesty of Muslim administrators. In Islam, the booty of war does not belong to the soldiers seizing it, but to the government, and it is this latter which distributes it among the members of the expedition in proportions fixed by law. Caliph 'Umar was often delightfully surprised at the honesty of the private soldiers and officers, who handed over even precious stones and other valuable objects which could have been easily concealed.

497. We may conclude this section by a contemporary Christian document. It refers to the letter of a Nestorian bishop, addressed to a friend of his, which has been preserved (cf. Assemani, *Bibl. Orient*, III, 2, p. XCVD): "These Tayites (Arabs), to whom God has accorded domination in our days, have also become our masters; yet they do not combat at all the Christian religion: on the contrary, they even protect our faith, respect our priests and our saints, and make donations to our churches and our convents."

The Umayyads

498. At the death of the third Caliph, 'Uthman in 656, the Muslim world faced a war of succession, which was renewed several times during the subsequent twenty years in the course of which as many as half a dozen sovereigns appeared on the scene and then vanished. With the accession to power of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705), the government was again stabilized, and a new wave of conquests began. Morocco and Spain on the one hand, and North of the Indo-Pakistani continent as well as Transoxiana on the other were added to the

domain of the Muslims. We see Bordeaux, Narbonne and Toulouse (in France) also passing into their hands. The metropolis moved from Madinah to Damascus. When the blessed city of the Prophet yielded place to what was formerly a Byzantine locality, religious devotion was also weakened in favour of secular activities. Luxury and the squandering of wealth, favouritism and the consequent revolts and upheavals were not lacking. Conquests, however, grew in both intellectual and social fields. Industry received a great impetus and medicine was particularly patronized by the government, which undertook the translation of foreign medical works, from Greek and other languages, into Arabic. The short reign of 'Umar ibn 'Ab al-'Aziz (817-20) was particularly brilliant and epoch-making. Monogamous himself, he by his piety brought a renewal of the period of Abu-Bakr and 'Umar. He revised the old files of confiscations, in order to return property to its rightful owners or to their heirs. He abolished many unjustifiable taxes. He was rigid and unflinching for an impartial justice even when the oppressor was a Muslim and the victim a non-Muslim. He went so far as to order the evacuation of towns (Samarkand, for instance) which were treacherously occupied by Muslim armies. And he had not hesitated (cf. supra 434) to order demolition of part of the grand mosque of the capital, built on a usurped piece of land. The result was astonishing. At the start of this dynasty, the revenues of Iraq, for instance, amounted to hundreds of million dirhams, they fell to 18 million under the Caliph preceding 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz. But under him they climbed to as much as 120 million. His religious devotion produced a world-wide impression of good and the rajas of Sindh, Turkestan and Berbery-Land embraced Islam. Everyone began to take an interest in religious studies, and a whole galaxy of savants surged forth to set up peaks in the fields of science in the Muslim community. The rigorous suppression of corruption further popularised the administration everywhere.

499. From among the architectural monuments of this time, there is still the Dome of the Rock, at Jerusalem, constructed in 691 C.E. The ruins or remains of other monuments at Damascus and elsewhere bear witness to the equally precocious progress of Muslims in this field. Great development of music is also noted, although musical notation was not yet invented, and we are unable to have a definite idea of the progress affected. The two great sects among Muslims, the Sunnite and Shi'ite date from the same period. The difference between these two sects is based on a political question whether the

succession to the Prophet should take place by election or by inheritance among the close relatives of the Prophet. This became a question of dogma to the Shi'ites, and the schism split into ramifications of its own, and occasioned civil wars. It is one such uprising which swept away the Umayyad dynasty, and made it yield its place in 750 to the 'Abbasids, but the Shi'ites did not profit by the change. In our days, there are probably ten per cent Shi'ites among the Muslims of the world, the rest being almost all Sunnites, not to speak of the infinitesimally small sect of the Kharijites, which also came into existence at the same time.

The 'Abbasids

500. The rise into power of the 'Abbasids in 750 coincides with the division of the Muslim territory first into two, and later into ever increasing independent States. At Cordova (Spain), a rival caliphate was established, which never reconciled itself, till its downfall in 1492, to union with the East, where Baghdad had taken the place of Damascus as the seat of the caliphate.

501. The history of the 'Abbasids does not show any big military conquests, if we except the initiatives taken by regional chieftains, who though they recognized the caliph of Baghdad as their sovereign, did not depend on him in the least, in matters either of foreign policy or internal administration. We shall speak of the Indian sub-continent in this connection under a separate paragraph. The relations with Byzantium became more and more bitter and bloody, and the Greek empire had to leave Asia Minor definitely and be content for some time longer with its European possessions only.

502. The 'Abbasids inaugurated the policy of replacing popular armies of volunteers by standing armies of professionals recruited more and more from soldiers of Turkish origin, and this gave birth to feudalism and culminated later in the establishment of independent provinces, where one sees "dynasties" of governors. About a century after their assuming power, the 'Abbasid caliphs began to delegate (and even lose) their sovereign prerogatives in favour of centrifugal governors. And gradually their sovereignty was limited to their own palace, the rest being controlled by emirs, of whom the most powerful occupied even the metropolis. We see therein a 'strange contrast with the Papacy – The popes began without any political power, but later acquired it after some centuries, particularly with the creation of

the Roman Empire. For some time they became even more powerful than emperors, only to lose this authority in the course of time. The Caliphs began as all-powerful rulers, shared the power later with the Sultans, and finally became figure-heads and nominal sovereigns with no influence to exert.

503. It was under the 'Abbasids that the governor of Tunis of the Aghlabid dynasty was invited to intervene in the civil wars of Sicily. He occupied the island, and also much of the mainland of Italy itself advancing as far as the walls of Rome. The South of France was annexed as also a considerable part of Switzerland. This wave of expansion was the work of the Aghlabids, who were later replaced, by force evidently, by the Fatimids. These latter, of the Shi'ite sect, transferred their capital to Cairo, where they established a rival caliphate. Enlightened rulers in general, one of them however profaned, in a moment of folly, the sacred shrines of the Christians at Jerusalem. This produced such a great resentment in Europe, that even the Popes preached a holy war against Islam. A series of crusades ensued, which bled both the Orient and Occident for two hundred years. At the time of the first crusade, the Fatimids had already abandoned Palestine, and it was the innocent civil population that fell victim to the fury of the invaders. Even more pathetic is the fact, that sometimes these Fatimids collaborated with the crusaders in their war against the Islamic Levant. There was no central authority in the Islamic world at that time, but dozens of petty States – anachronistic City-States even-warring with each other. Of these rulers, the Kurds and Turks replaced more and more the Arabs in the struggle against the Occident. Salahuddin (Saladin), a Muslim hero of the time of the second crusade, not only expelled the Europeans from Syria-Palestine, but swept away the Fatimids of Egypt. Salahuddin and his successors recognized the caliphate of Baghdad, yet this latter never succeeded in recuperating its political power which remained divided among a host of fragmentary states. Some of these succeeded in extending the frontiers of the land of Islam.

504. In 921, the king of "Bulgar" (i.e., the region of Kazan, on the river Volga, in Russia) solicited a Muslim missionary from Baghdad. Ibn Fadlan was sent. According to the report of his travels, which is extremely interesting, the king of Bulgar embraced Islam, and created, so to say, an Islamic island in the midst of the non-Muslim regions. The Islamisation of Caucasus and the neighbouring regions continued

slowly.

India

505. The Ghaznavid dynasty of Afghanistan began the reconquest (cf. 495) of India. Other dynasties followed, which contented themselves with only the North of the country. Then came the Khajjids who pushed their conquests towards the South. A negro commander, Malik Kafur, in a lightning expedition proceeded as far as Cape Comorin, yet it is only later that Southern India saw the establishment of Muslim States in the region. The Great Mughals (1526-1858) are particularly celebrated in the Muslim history of India. For a long time, they ruled over almost the whole of this vast continent, and were considered among the "Bigs" of the world. Their central authority began to be weakened however by the action of provincial governors from the 18th century onwards. It was only in 1858 that the British chased them out and annexed three-fifths of the country for the Crown, the rest being divided among indigenous states, some of which were Muslim. These latter preserved the Indo-Muslim culture until our own time. One of these, Haidarabad, situated in the centre of India was as big as Italy, with over 20 million inhabitants. It was well known for the attention it gave particularly to the reform of Islamic education. In its university founded on Western lines with about a dozen faculties, there was also a faculty of Islamic theology. The university imparted teaching, at every level and in every faculty, through the medium of Urdu, the local language (with its script in Arabic characters). Specialization began in the school stage, when Arabic language, Fiqh, (Muslim law), and *Hadith* (documents on the life and sayings of the Prophet), were obligatory beside other subjects such as English language, mathematics and other courses of modern education. In the university stage, the students of the Faculty of Theology learned not only English of a high standard, but also Arabic and subjects concerned purely with Islamic studies were prescribed. Moreover comparative studies became the vogue. With the *Fiqh* was modern jurisprudence; with *Kalam*, the history of Western philosophy; with Arabic, also Hebrew or some modern European language, French or German in particular. When the students prepared their theses, they were attached to two guides – one a professor of the Faculty of Theology, and the other a professor from the Faculty of Arts and Letters or Law as the case may be. This provided the means of mastering simultaneously both the Islamic facts and modern Western trends on the same subject. After thirty

years of experimentation and obtaining very happy results, there remains nothing now but a distant memory of it all. For, when the British left the country for good in 1947, dividing the country between Muslim Pakistan and non-Muslim Bharat, this latter not only incorporated its neighbouring indigenous States but even disintegrated and dissolved them in other administrative combination, creating linguistic "Nationalities" fraught with disintegration.

506. To revert to our main subject. As a passive spectator, the Caliphs of Baghdad continued to witness the constant changes in the "provinces," where *coups-d'état* replaced governors, divided single provinces into two or more units, reunited different provinces under the same hands, and soon. Yet cases were rare when the land of Islam was occupied by non-Muslims. The Seljuk Muslims deserve special mention. With their rise to power in the 11th century, they subjugated early not only Central Asia, but extended their conquests even as far as the farthest ends of Asia Minor, with Konia (Iconium) as their capital. After some generations of brilliant rule, they yielded place to what we call the Ottoman Turks. It is these latter who crossed the Bosphorus and extended the Islamic dominion to the walls of Vienna. Their capital was first at Brusa (Bursa), then Constantinople (Byzantium, now Istanbul), and is at present Ankara (Angora, Ancyre). Their recoil began in the 18th century, with their evacuating region after region of the European soil, and reached its climax in 1919, when they lost everything in the first World War. Some happy incidents of an international character helped Turkey to rise again in the form of a republic, which was at the outset ferociously nationalist and secular, but being democratic by nature, its regime had to conform more and more to the religious sentiments of the public which are profoundly Muslim. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks ruled in Europe as far as Austria, in North Africa as far as Algeria and Chad, and in Asia from Georgia to Yemen passing in between through Mesopotamia, Arabia and Asia Minor. Some of their former Muslim possessions are now independent States, but others have passed under the Soviet domination, not to speak of regions with a non-Muslim majority which have detached themselves from Turkey.

507. In the 13th century, some of the Tartars had not yet embraced Islam. Hulagu led them, massacred hundreds of thousands en route, and destroyed Baghdad, the seat of the caliphate in 1258. However, his army was annihilated in Palestine at the hands of Baybars, Muslim

general of Egypt. Hulagu tried to lead another invasion, and invited even the crusaders to an offensive alliance, but without success. This marks the decline of Muslim science and the dawn of the Occidental science. (Today in the 20th century, Muslims are still far from equalling some of the Americans and Europeans in this field.) It might be noted that the efforts of Muslim mystics rallied these barbarian Tartars. And having embraced Islam, they not only took up the cause of Islam, but also immigrated to different countries of Europe and colonized them. There are living traces of them in the Muslim communities of Finland, Lithuania, Poland and USSR.

Andalusian Caliphate

508. As we have mentioned above, it is at the rise into caliphal power of the 'Abbasids that Spain detached itself from the Muslim Orient. After almost a thousand years of domination, in 1492, the last traces of a Muslim State were submerged there by the Castilian Christians. The Muslim period was a period of material progress and prosperity for Spain. The Muslim universities there constantly attracted non-Muslim students from all parts of Europe. The ruins of Muslim architecture, still to be seen in the Iberian Peninsula, show the astonishing progress which was attained in this field. After their political fall, the Muslims witnessed bloody persecutions in order to convert them to Christianity, and the mass destruction of their libraries, where hundreds of thousands of manuscripts were burned at a time when the printing press had not yet emerged. The loss was one which could never be repaired.

East Asia and Southeast Asia

509. The greater part of China has so far never known the political domination of Muslims. Advancing from Central Asia, the Muslims Islamicized the province of Eastern Turkestan (now Sin-Kiang); and voyaging probably by sea routes, they won to their faith the Southern province of Yun-Nan. Some ephemeral principalities came into being, but the numerous millions in China and Tibet were attracted to Islam above all by the pacific activities of Muslim missionaries. The great majority of the Chinese however has so far remained outside the monotheistic religion of Islam.

510. Quite different is the story of South-East Asia. During these last centuries, Muslim merchants of South Arabia as well as of South India travelled to this part of

the continent and thanks to their selfless efforts for propagating the faith, not only the Malay Peninsula, but also thousands of islands in this region have almost completely been won over to Islam. In Indonesia, and also in the Southern islands of the Philippines, Islam became predominant. Broken as it was into a large number of principalities, this region fell gradually under the yoke of the Europeans, particularly the English and the Dutch. After several centuries of foreign domination, Indonesia with its 70 million of Muslims has now regained her independence; and the Malay Peninsula, heading towards complete sovereignty inside the British Commonwealth, has obtained it more peacefully.

Africa

511. North Africa, from Egypt to Morocco, was attached to Islamic territories since very early times. In the rest of this continent, different regions have their own tales of development. East Africa was naturally the first to be influenced by Islam, thanks to its proximity to Arabia. Not only vast regions there are strongly Islamicized, but there have grown up Muslim states of considerable importance.

512. West Africa began to know Islam later, but the energetic efforts of certain Muslim rulers there, (efforts consistent with the indigenous culture) won over a large part to the faith. One meets there veritable Muslim empires throughout the centuries. According to Arab chroniclers, it is the adventurous sea-faring population of this region which discovered first the route to America, particularly to Brazil. The earliest Europeans under Christopher Columbus and his successors, found negro inhabitants there. In spite of the destruction of many historical documents, there is every reason to believe that the Muslims of Black Africa, and the Berbers participated in the colonization of America – as the name of Brazil suggests, since Birzalah is a well-known Berber tribe, and the collective name of the members of this tribe is precisely Brazil. The island of Palma, in the Atlantic, was formerly called Bene Hoare, after the name of the Berber tribe Beni Huwara – this strengthens the supposition. The relation of the Muslim West Africa with America continued till the fall of Muslim Spain and the commencement of the European voyages to America. Africa also fell a prey to European powers, such as France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain Portugal and Belgium. There are vast regions in the continent that never knew Islamic domination, and yet

Islam is spreading there even in these days in spite of the vigilance kept and obstacles set up by their Occidental masters, and wire-pullers. With the recent decolonization, most of the countries with an Islamic majority have become independent, though some of them are subjected to the tyranny of non-Muslim dictatorship and persecutions. Other regions are marching towards ever-increasing autonomy.

Contemporary World

513. From Indonesia to Morocco, there are over forty Muslim States which are already members of the United Nations. If in Europe there is Albania, there are inside USSR other Muslim republics whose autonomy seems to increase gradually even in matters of Islamic religion. The commonwealth evolved by the British shows that accession to a collectivity of non-Muslim States does not stand in the way of the real independence of its Muslim associates, provided the men on the helm of affairs have intelligence and disinterestedness preferring national interest to the personal one. If Spain, France, Russia, India, China and others educate their Muslim dependencies for veritable autonomies, the actual struggle for liberation will lose its *raison-d 'etre*, and every body will be able to live in concord and co-operation, with a sense of universal well-being.

514. Islam is represented now, in fact has been since long centuries, in all the principal races, with the exception of the Red Indians of America. The Arabic speaking peoples base their importance particularly on the fact that it is their language which is the custodian and repository of the original teaching of Islam, above all the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Indo-Pakistanis and Malay-Indonesians constitute two of the most numerous ethnic groups. The black race enjoys the particular privilege of having preserved its energies up to our own time. Erudite savants, like Prof. Arnold Toynbee of London, do not hesitate to think that the next stage of human civilization will have negroes as its leaders. Islam is actually gaining quite numerous followers in this race. And the zeal that is displayed by new converts is well known.

515. The exact number of the Muslims in the world can hardly be determined to an exact figure, for there are deaths and births, and there are conversions of which a certain number is never declared owing to personal reasons. But from all the evidence available, there is no doubt that between one-fourth and one-fifth of the

descendants of Adam and Eve already turn their faces every day towards the Ka'bah (in Mecca) to proclaim aloud "Allah-u-Akbar," that God alone is Great! [for more info click here.]