The Expansion of Islam

Ira Lapidus

Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries Islam spread widely from its origins in Arabia—west through much of North Africa and southern Spain, and east to large portions of Asia. Historians have often debated the causes for this extraordinary expansion of Islam. In the following selection Ira Lapidus analyzes the balance of forces responsible for Islam’s spread throughout the Middle East and suggests reasons why so many people converted to Islam.

CONSIDER: How Lapidus’s analysis differs from those of earlier generations of European scholars; why the conversion of Arabian populations differed from that of other Middle Eastern peoples.

The expansion of Islam involved different forces. In North Africa, Anatolia, the Balkans, and India, it was carried by nomadic Arab or Turkish conquerors. In the Indian Ocean and West Africa it spread by peaceful contacts among merchants or through the preaching of missionaries. In some cases the diffusion of Islam depended upon its adoption by local ruling families; in others, it appealed to urban classes of the population or tribal communities. Its appeal was couched in interwoven terms of political and economic benefits and of a sophisticated culture and religion.

The question of why people convert to Islam has always generated intense feeling. Earlier generations of European scholars believed that conversions to Islam were made at the point of the sword, and that conquered peoples were given the choice of conversion or death. It is now apparent that conversion by force, while not unknown in Muslim countries, was, in fact, rare. Muslim conquerors ordinarily wished to dominate rather than convert, and most conversions to Islam were voluntary.

Even voluntary conversions are suspect to European observers. Were they made out of true belief, or for opportunistic political or social reasons? Surely there are innumerable cases of conversion to Islam by the illumination of faith or by virtue of the perceived sanctity of Muslim scholars and holy men, as well as by calculation of political and economic advantage. In most cases worldly and spiritual motives for conversion blended together. Moreover, conversion to Islam did not necessarily imply a complete turning from an old to a totally new life. While it entailed the acceptance of new religious beliefs and membership in a new religious community, most converts retained a deep attachment to the cultures and communities from which they came.

The first conversions to Islam occurred in the Middle East between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries. These took place in two-phases, the first being the conversion of animists and polytheists belonging to the tribal societies of the Arabian desert and the periphery of the fertile crescent; the second was the conversion of the monotheistic populations of the Middle Eastern agrarian, urbanized, and imperial societies.

The conversion of Arabian populations was part of the process of transmitting the civilization of the sedentized imperial societies to the nomadic periphery. Arabian peoples, standing on the margin of the agricultural and commercial zones of the Middle East, strongly influenced by Middle Eastern commerce and religious thought, found in Muhammad’s teaching a way to formulate a kind of Middle Eastern monotheistic religion parallel to but distinct from the established Christian and Zoroastrian religions. The conversion of pagan Arabian peoples to Islam represented the response of a tribal, pastoral population to the need for a larger framework for political and economic integration, a more stable state, and a more imaginative and encompassing moral vision to cope with the problems of a tumultuous society. Conversion, then, was the process of integrating Arabians into a new cultural and political order defined in monotheistic religious terms.

The conversion of sedentary Middle Eastern peoples to Islam was a different process. In this case Islam was substituted for Byzantine or Sasanian political identity and for Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian religious affiliation. The transformation of identities among Middle Eastern peoples took place in two stages. In the first century of the Islamic imperium the Arab conquerors attempted to maintain themselves as an exclusive Muslim elite. They did not require the conversion as much as the subordination of non-Muslim peoples. At the outset, they were hostile to conversions because new Muslims diluted the economic and status advantages of the Arabs. Nonetheless, Muslim rule offered substantial incentives for conversion. It formed a protective umbrella over Muslim communities and conferred the prestige of the state on Muslim religious life. Political patronage allowed for the establishment of mosques, the organization of the pilgrimage, and the creation of Muslim judicial in-

stitions. The establishment of an Arab empire made Islam attractive to elements of the former Byzantine and Sassanian aristocracies, including soldiers, officials, landlords, and others. Arab garrison cities attracted non-Arab migrants who found careers in the army and administration open to converts. Merchants, artisans, workers, and fugitive peasants seeking the patronage of the new elite were also tempted to accept Islam.

Despite these attractions, the mass of Middle Eastern peoples were not soon or easily converted. Only with the breakdown of the social and religious structures of non-Muslim communities in the tenth to the twelfth centuries did the weakening of churches, the awakening of Muslim hostility to non-Muslims, sporadic and localized persecution, and the destruction of the landed gentry of Iraq and Iran destroy the communal organization of non-Muslim peoples. Muslim teachers were then able to take the lead in the reconstruction of local communities on the basis of Islamic beliefs and identities.

The Muslim Pattern of Conquest

W. Montgomery Watt

The speed with which the Muslims were able to conquer vast areas of land, particularly in Spain, has fascinated historians. In the following selection, W. Montgomery Watt, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh, provides an explanation for the speed of the Muslim conquest. He points out that the Muslims had developed a pattern of conquest that had proved successful in the first campaigns of Muhammad. This same process was applied to Spain; thus the conquest may have come as a surprise to the Spanish inhabitants, but not to Muslims.

Consider: The nature of the razzia and the jihad and how Watt relates them to help explain the conquest of Spain; the motives for the Conquest of Spain according to Watt; the process that occurred in transforming a military victory into established political control.

Although to the inhabitants of Spain the invasion of 711 may have come as a bolt from the blue, to the Muslims it was the normal continuation of a process that had been going on since the lifetime of Muhammad. This process came about through a transformation of the nomadic razzia. For centuries nomadic Arab tribes had been in the habit of making raids or razzias on other tribes. The usual aim was to drive off the camels or other livestock of the opponents. The favorite plan was to make a surprise attack with overwhelming force on a small section of the other tribe. In such circumstances it was no disgrace to the persons attacked if they made their escape; and so in many razzias there was little loss of life. Occasionally, however, things might take a more serious turn. After Muhammad went to Medina in 622 some of his followers, especially those who had emigrated with him from Mecca, began to engage in what were really razzias. Perhaps it was to encourage others to join in the razzias that the Qur'an spoke of this as 'fighting in the way of God' or 'striving in the way of God.' The Arabic word for 'striving' or 'making efforts to secure a particular aim' is jihād with the verbal noun jihād. While the latter can be used of moral and spiritual effort, it has come to be especially associated with fighting against the infidel and is then translated 'holy war.' Although this translation is appropriate, I propose to retain the term jihād here, since there are differences between the Islamic conception of the Jihād and the Christian conception of the Crusade.

From the standpoint of the Muslims, the crossing of the straits of Gibraltar in 711 was part of the process of expansion that had been going on for three-quarters of a century. It was one more in a series of raiding expeditions which had been pushing ever farther afield. These might be thought of as Jihād or 'striving in the way of God,' but the acquiring of booty was a large part of the motive. After experiencing one or more such raiding expeditions the inhabitants of the countries traversed usually surrendered and became protected allies. Since it was too far for the Arabs to return to Arabia or even Damascus after each campaign, they established campsites such as Cairouan. These often became centres of administration and populous urban communities. From them further raiding expeditions went out, and in due course more advanced bases were established. This was what happened in Spain, except that existing towns were used as bases. Despite their limited manpower the Arabs were able within two or three years to occupy the chief towns and achieve a measure of pacification. The local population mostly submitted and received the status of protected allies.

The Islamic World

Albert Hourani

Islam expanded rapidly during the seventh and eighth centuries. Wherever Islamic people went, they carried their customs and institutions, over time creating what would be
recognized as an Islamic world. In the following selection Albert Hourani, a prominent historian of Arab history, analyzes the ways that a sense of identity was being established in the Islamic world, focusing particularly on the buildings and objects that allowed people to see and feel that they were within an Islamic land.

CONSIDER: How buildings, artifacts, and art might help create a sense of Islamic identity; in what other ways a sense of unity within Islam was created.

By the third and fourth Islamic centuries (the ninth and tenth century A.D.) something which was recognizably an 'Islamic world' had emerged. A traveller around the world would have been able to tell, by what he saw and heard, whether a land was ruled and peopled by Muslims. These external forms had been carried by movements of peoples: by dynasties and their armies, merchants moving through the worlds of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and craftsmen attracted from one city to another by the patronage of rulers or the rich. They were carried also by imported and exported objects expressing a certain style: books, metalwork, ceramics and particularly perhaps textiles, the staple of long-distance trade.

The great buildings above all were the external symbols of this 'world of Islam.' At a later period regional styles of mosque building would appear, but in the early centuries there were some common features to be found from Cordoba to Iraq and beyond. In addition to the great mosques were smaller ones for bazaars, quarters or villages, where prayer was offered but the Friday sermon was not preached; these were likely to be built of local materials and reflect local tastes and traditions.

A second type of building was that which expressed the power of the ruler. Among them were great works of public utility, caravanseraiis on the trade-routes, and aqueducts or other waterworks; in the parched countries of the Middle East and the Maghrib, to bring water to the inhabitants of the cities was an act of sound policy, and irrigation of the land was a practice which spread with the expansion of the Arabs in the Mediterranean. It was the palaces, however, which best expressed imperial greatness: pleasure pavilions set amidst gardens and running water, emblems of a secluded paradise, and official palaces, centres of government and justice as well as of princely life.

The houses built in this period by the Muslim population of the cities have disappeared, but enough has remained of the artefacts used in them to show that some of them contained works of art similar to those in the palaces. Books were transcribed and illustrated for merchants and scholars; glass, metalwork and pottery were made for them; textiles were especially important—floors were covered with carpets, low settee-frames had textile coverings, walls were hung with carpets or cloths. All these show, on the whole, the same kind of decoration as that of religious buildings, formalized plants and flowers, geometrical designs and Arabic words.

By the tenth century, then, men and women in the Near East and the Maghrib lived in a universe which was defined in terms of Islam. The world was divided into the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War, and places holy to Muslims or connected with their early history gave the Abode of Islam its distinctive feature. Time was marked by the five daily prayers, the weekly sermon in the mosque, the annual fast in the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Muslim calendar.

Islam also gave men an identity by which to define themselves in regard to others. Like all men, Muslims lived at different levels. They did not think of Judge, Hell and Heaven all the time. Beyond their individual existence, they defined themselves for most daily purposes in terms of the family or broader kinship group, the herding unit or tribe, the village or rural district, the quarter or city. Beyond these, however, they were aware of belonging to something broader: the community of believers (the umma). The ritual acts which they performed in common, the acceptance of a shared view of man's destiny in this world and the next, linked them with each other and separated them from those of other faiths, whether living among them in the Abode of Islam or beyond its frontiers.

Within this 'world of Islam,' at an intermediate level between it and the small cohesive units of everyday life, there were identities of a kind which did not, on the whole, create such strong and lasting loyalties. Service or obedience to a dynasty, particularly if it was long-lasting, could create such a loyalty. Sharing a language too must have created a sense of ease in communication, and a kind of pride.

The Eastern Orientation of Islam

Peter Brown

Westerners often assume that Islamic civilization centered around the Mediterranean and that, if not for the resistance put up by Europeans and the Byzantine Empire, Islam would have extended its control to the lands north of the Mediterranean. In the following selection, Peter Brown of Oxford and the University of California disputes this view, arguing...
that Persia acquired great economic importance as the Mediterranean cities declined. In turn, the Islamic Empire became centered in Persia and was oriented toward the East rather than the West.

Consider: How Persia pulled the Islamic Empire eastward; why, according to Brown, the foundation of Baghdad was more important than military defeats in halting the Arab advance on Europe.

Mesopotamia regained a central position that it had lost since the days of Alexander the Great. Baghdad, with its circular city wall, owed nothing to the great cities of the Roman empire: It was an avatar of the round cities of Asia and central Asia. The Mediterranean cities declined as the great caravans bypassed them, bringing trade by camel along the oceans of sand that stretched from the Sahara to the Gobi Desert. In North Africa and Syria, the villages that had sent their oil and grain across the sea to Rome and Constantinople disappeared into the sand. The Mediterranean coast, from being the heart of the civilized world, imperceptibly diminished in significance, as the numbed extremity of a great Eurasian empire.

For the new commercial opportunities were in Persian hands. And, in Persian hands, the eternal lure of Further Asia reasserted itself, as in the early Sasanian period. The mosque and the fire temple could be seen beside the marketplaces of Lohang and Canton. Chinese prisoners of war from central Asia brought the art of papermaking to Baghdad in 751. Sinbad the Sailor would not have considered the Mediterranean worth his trouble: for the wealth and interests of the Abbasid empire poured eastwards, down the Tigris and Euphrates, to the sea route that linked Basra directly with Canton.

The eastward pull of the vast mass of Persia in the Islamic empire was the salvation of Europe. It was not the Greek fire of the Byzantine navy outside Constantinople in 717, nor the Frankish cavalry of Charles Martel at Tours in 732, that brought the Arab war machine to a halt. It was the foundation of Baghdad. With the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate, the slow-moving ideals of an organized and expensive imperial administration replaced the fearful mobility of the Beduin armies. In the new civilian world, the soldier was as much out of place as he had been among the otiose aristocrats of the fourth-century West. The bloodsucking relationships of the Holy War, by which the early Arabs had first impinged on the outside world, gave way to a meticulous diplomacy modelled on the protocol of the Persian ancien régime. At the court of the califs, the world appeared to revolve like clockwork round Baghdad, as in the dreamlike ceremonial of the king of kings. Just before he was crowned Roman emperor of the West in 800, Charlemagne received from Harun al-Rashid a great cloak and a pet elephant called Abul Abaz. Little did the Frankish monarch know it, but in this gift the calif had merely repeated the time-honoured gesture of Khusro I Anoshirwan when, at the great Spring festival, the king of kings had lavished gifts of animals and cast-off clothing on his humble servants.

In the western imagination, the Islamic empire stands as the quintessence of oriental power. Islam owed this crucial orientation neither to Muhammad nor to the adaptable conquerors of the seventh century, but to the massive resurgence of eastern, Persian traditions in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Chapter Questions

1. Explain the appeal and the rapid spread of Islam during these early centuries.

2. In what ways might it be argued that politically, militarily, and culturally, Islam owed its success to its qualities as an Arab civilization?

3. Drawing on sources from this and previous chapters, how might Islamic civilization be compared with the Christian and Indian civilizations it was challenging?
The expansion of Islam Seminar

1. List the ways Islam spread.
2. How have European scholars described the spread of Islam?
3. Is this view correct?
4. What two reasons did most people have to convert?
5. Describe the two phases of conversion in the Middle East?
6. How was conversion different for Arabs and the sedentary people of the Fertile Crescent?
7. How did the early Arab Muslims view converts?

The Muslim Pattern of Conquest

8. Describe the razzia.
9. What is jihad?
10. How did jihad lead to expansion of the Muslim Empire?
11. What is the nature of the razzia and the Jihad and how does Watt relate them to help explain the conquest of Spain?
12. What is the process that occurred that transformed Muslim military victory into established political control?

The Islamic World

13. List the ways external forms of Islamic culture were carried around the empire.
14. What practical public works travelled with Muslim rule?
15. How did Islam affect the daily life of the people of the Near East and the Maghrib?
16. How did Islam connect the men of the empire?
17. Explain how buildings, artifacts, and art helped create a sense of Islamic identity? In what other ways was a sense of unity within Islam created?

The Eastern Orientation of Islam

18. Why did the great cities of the Mediterranean decline?
19. What evidence does Brown present to show that Islam faced East and not West?
20. What factor turned Islam away from Europe and towards the west and Asia?
21. What Empire did the Muslim Empire model itself on?
22. What is the relationship between Baghdad and Europe in 800 A.C.E.?
23. How did Persia pull the Islamic Empire eastward?
24. How did the foundation of Baghdad become more important than military defeats in halting the Arab advance on Europe?