

Understanding Islam **Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message**

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Part Two: Islam spreads outside the Middle East

The “spread” of Islam brings two thoughts to mind: one is the spread of Muslim people and Islamic influence and rule, and the other is the spread of the faith of Islam by men and women converting to become Muslims. I want to look at both aspects here.

Only a minority of Muslims in the world today live in what Europeans call the “Middle East.” There are more Indonesian Muslims in the world than all the Arabs combined. How did this come about? How did a way of life that grew out of the Semitic heartlands come to influence the lives of some 20% of the world’s population today?

We have seen the way in which Muslim rule spread at a phenomenal pace, until one-hundred-and-twenty years after the death of Muhammad Muslims ruled from Spain and Morocco in the west, to Samarqand and the River Indus in the east, from Armenia and Azerbaijan in the north, to Yemen in the south. Like all other political empires in the world, this had been spread by force of arms and negotiated takes-over. What about the people who lived in these territories and now found themselves under Muslim rule?

The “protected people”

The majority of those people who came under Muslim rule during the first century were Christians, with Zoroastrians in Persia and Jewish communities in Spain and elsewhere. The Qur'an has a special name for these communities; they are the *Ahl al-Kitab*, the People of the Book. This term is applied to four communities in the Qur'an [Q. 2:62; 5:69; 22:17]: the Jews and Christians are named explicitly, then the group called the “Magians” is held to be the monotheistic Zoroastrians of Persia, and finally the “Sabeans,” which is generally held to be a reference to the Mandaeans, the ancient followers of John the Baptist (the Prophet Yahya), who were to be found mainly in Iraq. This is a recognition that these communities were founded by true Prophets of God, who, in the case of Jews and Christians explicitly, had been given earlier revelations and had established ways of living them out (*shari'a*). Thus they may be thought of as “the People of the Earlier Revelations.” By extension, at periods of Muslim rule in India under the Mughals, those Hindus who followed the Vedas were accorded the same status.

The *Ahl al-Kitab* living under Muslim rule in the historic Islamic empires had certain rights and privileges. They had the right to continue in the practice of their faith “in private,” namely in their homes and places of worship, but not “in public.” They had

the right to hand on their religion to their children but not to seek converts. They could keep and maintain their existing religious buildings but not build new ones. They could be employed in the administration of the Empire but they could not be part of the decision-making executive. They could be servants to Muslims but not have a Muslim servant. They were to be protected by the Muslim army, indeed they were called “the protected people” (*dhimmi*) and were to pay a military tax (*jizya*) to help support it. The army was the extension of the Muslim executive and therefore the *Ahl al-Kitab* were not allowed to serve in it; this had serious consequences at times of expansion because only the soldiers and the rulers were allowed a share of the booty (spoils of war), which was a major source of income for the period of the Umayyad Empire.

Taken as a whole, my judgement is that the *Ahl al-Kitab* had an institutionalised second class status in the historic empires. It needs to be said immediately that historians agree that it was better to be a Jew or Christian under Muslim rule than to be a Muslim or Jew under the rule of Christendom in Europe. For elite Jews and Christians, they did well with Muslim patronage; the Caliphs, for example, had Christian and Jewish personal physicians for centuries. The peasants bore the burden of additional taxes and there were few avenues for people who wanted “to aspire to better things” as long as they declined to convert to Islam. It is important to keep a historical perspective here as these earlier empires no longer exist and Muslim-majority nation states have to find a new way forward for all their citizens.

Initial conversion

One of the untruths that is repeated is that “people converted to Islam at the point of the sword.” This is to be distinguished from “the Islamic Empire spread by force of arms,” which is true in the initial period. The Qur'an does not permit forced conversion [Q. 2:256], which is not to say that it never happened in Muslim history because, like all peoples, Muslims are not always as good as their religion commands them to be.

The forms of Christianity represented in the lands conquered by the Umayyads were various. It may be that those forms that denied or did not emphasise the divinity of Jesus, e.g., the Arian Visigoths of North Africa and Spain and the Nestorians of Iraq and eastward along the Silk Road to China, found the step of conversion to Islam theologically easier. By contrast, those forms of Christianity that upheld both divinity and humanity or stressed the divinity, e.g., the Byzantines and Catholics in the eastern Mediterranean lands and Spain respectively, and the Copts in Egypt and Ethiopia, have been much slower to convert and substantial communities remain to this day. It is important to remember that the history of the Muslim Middle East has been one of religious plurality with Jews and Christians living peacefully under Muslim rule. The divisions and indeed religious segregation and persecution that we have witnessed in recent decades, with the denial of rights to worship, the expulsion of Jews to the State of Israel, and attacks on people and property are an aberration and not the historical rule.

The conversion of people to Islam in the initial Umayyad and Abbasid Empires took generations and centuries but it is obvious that the majority of those who live in those lands today are Muslims. Five streams of conversion can be indicated. First, there were those people who recognised the godliness of the message and the piety of its followers and thus came to faith in God as expressed in the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet. Second, those people who wanted to relieve themselves of the burden of paying the *jizya*, although it has to be said that they would then become liable to pay *zakat*, which would not always be a great reduction. Third, those who wanted to join the army and thus receive a share in the booty. Fourth, those who wanted to take a place in the executive and the running of the Empire. Fifth, those who wanted to rise socially, perhaps by marrying into established Muslim families.

We will return to the theme of the spread of Islam by conversion later but first we have to look at the spread of Muslim influence and rule outside the Middle East.

The vehicle of trade

The Arabs had been traders before the rise of Islam but now the sense of their increased importance as the bearers of the final message and their growth in wealth and prestige increased this impulse. The Muslim Arabs traded down the coast of East Africa establishing trading bases from Mogadishu, in the north, to Kilwa in the south, with the special mention of Mombasa and Zanzibar. This trade was underway from the seventh century and the first recorded mosque is on Lamu Island off the coast of Kenya in 750. The principal items of trade were gold, ivory and gem stones, with a thriving trade in slaves, especially based on the island of Zanzibar with them being shipped to the Arab lands. Muslim settlement tended to be in the coastal regions, where the language of Kiswahili was developed from local languages with much Arabic influence. Penetration into the interior was by traders or raiding parties going to capture slaves. Conversion of the peoples inland did not really begin until the 19th century.

There were two trading routes that took Muslims as far as China. One was the great Silk Road that passed up through Central Asia and that had been a medium of trade for centuries. The other was by ship and Muslim sailors sailed as far as China in the eighth century. The first Chinese sea port with a Muslim settlement was in the south-east at Canton, founded in the early eighth century. There is a record of a mosque at Quanzhou on the coast of the South China Sea from around 1009. The Uighurs were mainly converted through contact with those who came to trade overland from the ninth to the 12th centuries. The northern Turkic, Kirghiz and Kazakh peoples were converted to Islam in the 15th and 16th centuries.

India was a crucial staging post in the trade routes to the east. From here, the routes went on to Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and eventually to China. China was the source for silk, porcelain and jade especially, with pepper and spices being important elements of trade with the "Spice Islands." It is not easy to know when traders became settlers but

the first Indonesian Muslim gravestone so far discovered has been dated to 1082. Other Muslim settlements are recorded in northern Sumatra in 1275 and Java from 1475. Muslim settlements on the Malaysian coast date from the 15th century. Some of these merchants brought wealth and a knowledge of wider life and culture and thus were welcomed to marry into ruling families and thus the influence of Islam spread. In other instances, it appears that the Muslim traders were more interested in commerce than religion and confined their Islamic engagement to the areas around their settlements and mosques.

The spread of Islam into West Africa is also linked to trade coming from Egypt and North Africa across the Sahara. Gold was the principal attraction of trade especially in the Kingdom of Ghana. By the eighth century, there was a clear Arab route to trade for gold in Ghana; to facilitate their journeys, the Arabs dug wells at strategic places on the route. The Berbers came overland to Gao in the late seventh century and yet another route led Arabs to the area around Lake Chad from about 800 onwards. Significantly, conversion to Islam amongst the local populations came some centuries later: The Muslim Kingdom of Songhai was established around Gao from 1010, the rulers of the Lake Chad area became Muslim from 1085, and widespread conversion in Ghana only took place in the 11th and 12th centuries.

Military invasions

India experienced a number of Muslim invaders, whose influence spread over various areas of the subcontinent. After the initial Sind invasion of Muhammad ibn Qasim (695-715) from 711, deeper penetration came about through Mahmud of Ghazna from 1019. By the 12th century, Muhammad Ghuri ruled an area from Afghanistan to Bengal. There was also the Slave Dynasty of Bengal from 1206-1290. Subsequently came the Khiljis (1290-1320), the Tughluqs (1320-1412) and the Lodis from Afghanistan (1451-1526). There was also the raid of Tamerlane, who sacked Delhi in 1398. The most extensive Muslim empire in India was that of the Mughals from 1526 to 1858 but, in spite of all these episodes of Muslim invasion and rule, the number who converted to Islam was always localised and relatively modest. Kashmir had also received attention from Muslim traders from the 11th century.

The Mongols began to move out from Central Asia in 1219 and had swept down to take Baghdad and execute the last Abbasid Caliph in 1258. The Mongols have the distinction of being converted by the people that they conquered. In their northern division, the Golden Horde, also known as the Tartars, became Muslim in the 14th century when they were at their geographical peak, with a territory that stretched from the Urals to the Danube, and from Siberia to the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains. Ottoman Turkey was also extending its territory in the same period by moving as far as Bulgaria and Bosnia in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Sufis and scholars

In Indonesia and Malaysia, the influence of sufis and Muslim teachers, especially from India, is noteworthy. They actually moved out with missionary zeal rather than for trade or conquest. They were able to present Islam in a way that appealed to the natural religious sentiment of the people and could assist people to resist the attraction of Hinduism stemming from Java.

Various individual sufi holy men were instrumental in the spread of Islam in West Africa, with famous centres at Timbuktu, which was the base of the Mali Empire (c1230-c1600). Here we encounter another phenomenon, which is not limited to West Africa, and that is conversion from one form of Islam to another. From the 17th to the 19th century, West Africa saw reform movements to purify Islam from what they took to be elements of African tradition. These were often led by scholars (*ulama*) and were sometimes known as *jihads* as they were fighting for the cause of “pure Islam.” A scholar often associated with this movement was Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817), who led such campaigns in northern Nigeria, and whose son, Muhammad Belo, set up the Sultanate of Sokoto and became the first Sultan.

Back to the spread of Islam by conversion

It took four to five hundred years for Islam to become the dominant religion from Spain, through North Africa, to the Middle East. During this time, significant developments took place in terms of theology, philosophy, mysticism and law so that the Islam that went to the mission lands further afield from the 13th century onwards was significantly developed from the initial phase of Islam. This greater diversity within Islam made room for different religious emphases in the new lands. This can be seen especially in the more accommodating nature of sufi schools of Islam that gave scope for local traditions.

There is a difference in the nature of conversion between the pioneer generation and those who embrace the faith some centuries later when it is more socially established. To this must be added notions of group conversion rather than individuals who feel called to Islam. When kings and other forms of local leadership embraced the faith, they often brought their people along with them. Later generations, who had been enculturated into Islam, were more adept at conveying the message to their neighbours than the foreign imports of the early years.

There could be economic dimensions to conversion. The Mughal landlords who went to establish businesses in East Bengal, for example, were likely to have openings for Muslim workers. On occasion, the Ottomans paved the way for converts economically. It was not unusual in situations where there was a deeply established pre-Islamic religious tradition, for example in India, for new Muslims to have multiple religious identities and for there to be a certain wavering of religious belonging for some time.

It is notoriously difficult to obtain quantitative data about rates of historic conversion amongst peoples. Much of our evidence dates from some generations later when there can be a degree of folk legend incorporated into the accounts of conversion. This can be seen with miraculous accounts attributed later to early sufi holy men, which give people an agreed legend about their religious origins.

In a situation such as Indonesia, for example, where there was no history of conquest or shared borders with Muslim peoples, it is not easy to determine from where the missionaries came who brought Islam. Elements such as legends, the occurrences of names, for example on early tombstones, and the prevalence of a particular law school could suggest origins; but were the missionaries from Bengal, Gujarat or directly from southern Arabia?

There is also the question of whether missionary movements were making converts to Islam from the local religious traditions or were they perhaps reinvigorating Muslims who had an embryonic faith from earlier missionary work? The arrival of sufi brotherhoods in China is such a case. Similarly in Indonesia, there was a scholarly settlement in northern Sumatra from the 13th century but little impact appears to have been made until some four hundred years later with the return of indigenous Indonesian sufi groups who had been to study in the Arab lands. Were they able to present a more acceptable version of Islam to the local people?