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## A Comparative Study of Religions

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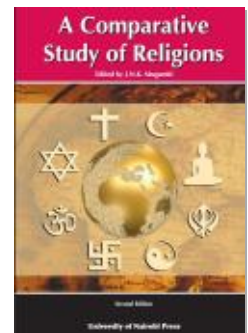
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## **Islam: A Living World Religion**

*D.W. Waruta*

### **Introduction**

Islam is the youngest of the world's major religions. Its phenomenal expansion has made Islam one of the biggest religions of mankind with millions of adherent all over the world ranging from countries which are wholly Islamic to those with only small Muslim communities. In this chapter we shall see how Islam has come to be a global religion and how its influence has become a force to reckon with in our modern world.

### **The Expansion of Islam in the Early Years**

After the death of Muhammad in 632 AD, his first disciple and successor, Abu Bakr , challenged the small Muslim community to take seriously the task of spreading the faith to all who did not have it. When Muhammad died, he left not only a religion but a federation of states that had come to accept the Islamic faith. The head of the state was known as the "Caliph" (khalifa) or the "successor" of Muhammad. From Medina, the Caliphs embarked on raids on the neighboring tribes and states with sweeping successes. Because of the decline of the empires of Byzantium and Persia, the forces of Islam rose quickly to fill the power vacuum.

After their new conquests, the Islamic caliphs did not return to Medina with their spoils, but used the new territories as forward base camps for more expeditions into new territories. They used this strategy, to occupy Egypt, Syria and Iraq within twelve years after the death of Muhammad. From there they advanced

westwards into Libya and eastwards into what is now Iran. The areas which surrendered to the forces of Islam were given the status of “protected minorities” as long as they agreed to pay tax to their new Muslim rulers. The status of protected minorities were given to the so called “people of the book”, that is, any people who believed in one God and possessed a written scripture such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. All the other peoples were considered pagans, to be converted to Islam by any means.

### **The Expansion of Islam During its First Century**

Islam continued its westward expansion, occupied all of North Africa to the Atlantic Ocean entered Spain in Europe and for some years held the southern area of France, particularly around Naronne. Muslim advance in France was halted by the famous battle of Tours in A.D 732, although this did not mean Muslim defeat in Europe, especially in Spain.

Northward, the Islamic forces advanced as far as Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey) but were unable to occupy Asia minor (Turkey). Eastward the Islamic forces occupied the whole of Persia (modern Iran) and Afghanistan, crossing the Indus River into Pakistan in Asia. Up to AD 750, the Umayyad Dynasty ruled this entire region and continued in its Islamization. The inhabitants of these territories did not become Muslims at once but at first were required to become “protected minorities”. While it is not quite correct to say that Islam only won converts through force (Jihad or Holy War), the so-called minorities found themselves becoming second class citizens in their own countries and quite often opted to become muslims. The Islamization of these peoples continued in the entire Middle Eastern region until what once had been the original home of Christianity became almost Muslim. In the seventh century, too, Zoroastrianism, which was the official religion of the Persian Empire, was on the decline and so conversion from Zoroastrianism to Islam was accomplished easily and fast. By A.D 750, Islam had become the religion of all North Africa, the Middle Eastern lands of Syria,

Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and stretched even across the Indus River into what is now Pakistan.

### **Islamic Consolidation During the Abbasid Dynasty**

From Baghdad, Iraq, the Abbasid dynasty embarked on its rule of the entire Islamic world (with the exception of Spain) after overthrowing the Umayyad Dynasty based in Damascus, Syria.

The Abbasid Dynasty was preoccupied not with Islamic expansion but with Islamic consolidation. Many of the cultural characteristics of a great Islamic empire flourished. Islamic law, the Sharia was developed and formed the basis of Islamic social structure. The Sharia was derived partly from rules extracted from the Quran but also from stories about Muhammad's example. These stories about Muhammad were known as the Hadith (sometimes translated traditions) and were mainly about his deeds and sayings. The compilation and development of the Sharia became the basis of Islamic education.

The text of the Quran, its interpretation and the development of doctrine was also accomplished during this period. Islam became interested in the "sciences" of other traditions, such as Greek philosophy, medicine, mathematics and natural sciences. These were translated into Arabic and as a result Islam advanced in sciences, literature and the arts of government and administration. This period of consolidation strengthened Islam as a faith and made it attractive and worthy of those interested in learning and cultural advance. Islam was able to absorb and use the cultural heritage of the people it conquered which in turn transformed it, creating a viable, all-embracing culture of great excellence.

### **Islamic Expansion After AD 750**

There was no dramatic expansion of Islam into new territories after AD 750. An attempt to enter India was unsuccessful due to the fact that the majority of the peoples of India were Hindus, considered by Islam as the people of the book, and so India remained predominantly Hindu.

In other parts of the world, Islam spread mainly through peaceful means. Muslim traders with their camel caravans took Islam to West Africa and sea traders by way of their dhows, carried Islam to the East Africa coast. Islam was carried by traders as far as Malaysia and Indonesia and the Phillipines. Local people from these places were usually impressed by the apparent sophistication and excellence of Islamic culture and attracted to the religion. Muslims were also not unwilling to intermarry with the local populations, wherever they went, and in such ways won many to Islam. Muslims did not require the new converts to discard their customs at once but allowed a slow Islamization that took several generations to develop to universal Islamic standards. The numbers of Muslims kept increasing whenever such communities were established. Almost everywhere that Islam was established, it continued to grow, with the exception of Spain where military efforts by Christian troops were eventually successful in pushing the Muslims out of Europe. In 1492, the last Sultan of Granada surrendered, thus ending Muslim control of any European territory. The Muslims who were left in Spain were slowly exterminated either by executions or by being driven out by the Inquisition, carried out by the Church through local rules and princes, meant to destroy all heretics and infidels.

### **Islam in the Modern World**

Around AD 1500, European powers began to become a challenge to the expansion of Islam. In 1498, the Portuguese traveller Vasco da Gama reached India after sailing round the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, through East African ports to India. This was the beginning of the impact of European intervention in the areas where only Islam had hitherto touched. Christian missionaries accompanied European explorers and the era of countering Islam with the Christian religion and European cultural expansion had dawned.

The impact of European civilization on the Islamic world, particularly in Asia and Africa, was many-sided: economic, political, intellectual and religious. Beginning as legitimate trade,

it led to colonization. By the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, European technology had developed ahead of the other parts of the world. Modern communication systems, telephones, trains, electricity and military hardware attracted non-European, including Muslims, in their desire to benefit from the new technology. Western-type education was introduced in these areas to train artisans and junior administrators.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, European dominance in Muslim areas had become an acknowledged fact. While the Christian missions did not win many converts in the areas that were predominantly Muslim, western ideas and technology could not be resisted. Many Muslim countries adopted an essentially European educational system. The discovery of large quantities of oil in predominantly Muslim areas of the Middle East has given the area some considerable importance in the modern world. Though Muslim countries were united to resist European colonialism at the end of Second World War, to-day Muslim countries are divided between “progressive” and “conservative” countries. Muslim fundamentalism demanding a return to the traditional Islamic law, the Sharia, has been gaining strength in many Muslim countries. On the other hand, modern life demands a world where religious intolerance is not internationally acceptable, and many Islamic governments oppose the strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia with its insistence on the concept of Jihad (holy war) against all non-Muslims and particularly the infidels they consider hostile to Islam. However, Islamic fundamentalists have the upper hand only in Iran and are active in a few other Muslim countries. In many Muslim countries Islamic fundamentalists has been discouraged.

### **Future Prospects**

Today Islam has achieved the self-confidence of a major world faith with Muslim communities all over the world. The challenge to Islam is no longer Christianity but the increasing secularization of humanity and ideologies such as Marxism. Many Muslim countries have secularized their laws and economy contrary to the

requirements of the Sharia, while others have introduced radical ideologies to guide their national policies. What seems likely for Islam in the modern world is a return to its primitive past, as fundamentalist would like, nor the extreme secularization which has swept the western world, but rather to evolve and adapt itself to the demands of the modern world, Islam deserves the attention of all involved in the study of mankind history. In East Africa, where Muslims comprise a formidable segment of the population, the understanding of Islam is indispensable. The importance of Islam as a global faith demands a sympathetic understanding and a place in the panorama of human progress for harmonious progress of all.

### **Activity**

1. List the methods employed to spread Islam in its early years.
2. Write notes on the following aspects of Islam:  
Quran  
Hadith  
Sharia
3. Why did Islam not succeed in spreading into Europe?
4. How did Islam reach the coast of East and West Africa?