

Printed by: alqasemm@mail.etsu.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

social reformer. Today there is much emphasis on the martial elements of Islam, but to comprehend fully Muhammad's mission, we need to consider the importance of Quranic passages like this one:

Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman,
and to orphans, and to the needy,
and to the neighbour who is of kin,
and to the neighbour who is a stranger,
and to the companion at your side,
and to the traveller.

(Sura 4)

THE ARAB CONQUESTS AND THE FIRST EMPIRE

When Muhammad died in 632, it would not have contradicted historical patterns if Arabia had rejected the Prophet's summons and taken up the old ways again. Instead, Muslim factions in Mecca and Medina resolved to continue the development of the new religious community and competed with one another to assert their control over it. Because Muhammad had no sons and because the Quran contained no clear instructions on how a successor should be chosen, the question of the leadership of the community was open to different interpretations. The early converts to Islam who had suffered with Muhammad in Mecca and participated in the *hijrah* to Medina preempted all other claimants by naming one of their own, Abu Bakr, as the new head of the community. The other factions accepted Abu Bakr's leadership, but the dispute over the first succession sowed seeds of conflict that have affected Islam throughout its history.

Abu Bakr (632–634) was simply called the successor—*khalif*—anglicized as caliph. Eventually the term *caliph* came to designate the religious and political leader of the Islamic community, and the office became known as the caliphate. Abu Bakr and his three successors, Umar (634–644), Uthman (644–656), and Ali (656–661), are known in Islamic history as the Rashidun (rightly guided) caliphs in recognition of their personal closeness to the Prophet and their presumed adherence to Quranic regulations. Although two of them were assassinated and their reigns were filled with political and social turmoil, Muslims of later and even more troubled times looked back with nostalgia on the era when the four companions of the Prophet launched the movement that thrust the Arabs out of the peninsula and into world history.

The second caliph, Umar, recognized the need to direct the raiding instincts of the tribes away from intercommunal conflict and authorized attacks against the southern flanks of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran. Thus began the epoch of the Arab conquests and the building of an Islamic empire.

The speed and extent of the Arab conquests were remarkable. In 637 the Arab forces defeated the imperial Sasanian army at the battle of Qadisiyya, an encounter that was quickly followed by the capture of Ctesiphon and the beginning of the difficult Arab campaign across the Iranian plateau toward the Indian subcontinent. Success against Byzantium was equally swift. The Arabs captured Damascus in 635, and in

641 they occupied parts of the rich agricultural province of Egypt. By 670 the western campaign against Byzantine and Berber resistance had reached present-day Tunisia, and in 680 the daring Arab commander

Printed by: alqasemm@mail.etsu.edu. Printing is for personal, private use only. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without publisher's prior permission. Violators will be prosecuted.

Uqba ibn Nafi led a small force from Tunisia through Algeria and Morocco to the Atlantic Ocean. The westward expansion of the Arabs culminated in the conquest of Spain in the first half of the eighth century. Within 100 years of the Prophet's death, Arab forces had reached the Indian subcontinent in the east, and in the west they had occupied Spain and crossed the Pyrenees into France before they were finally halted by the forces of Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers in 732. In this first wave of conquests, the Sasanian Empire was completely destroyed and its territory absorbed within an Arab-Muslim administration. Byzantium, although it suffered the loss of its core Middle Eastern and North African provinces, retained control of Anatolia and the Balkans and presented a formidable barrier to Muslim expansion until it was overcome by the Ottomans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Even more stunning than the speed and extent of the conquests was their durability: With the exception of Spain, which retained an Arab-Islamic presence until the fifteenth century, the areas occupied during the first century of expansion have remained Islamic, if not Arabic, to the present day. In North Africa, as in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean—the heartlands of Hellenism and early Christianity—and in the long-settled region of Iraq, the Arabic language and the Islamic faith became dominant. Persian language and culture eventually reasserted themselves in Iran, but they were expressed in an Islamic idiom.

The conquests would not have been so swift or so durable without the existence of a combination of social, economic, and religious factors that facilitated the local population's acceptance of the new Arab rulers. First, as we discussed earlier, monotheistic religions were widely practiced among the peoples in the conquered territories, and the Islamic assertion of monotheism placed it within the existing religious traditions. Second, Islam manifested considerable tolerance toward non-Muslims. The Quran commanded Muslims to protect "people of the Book"—that is, Jews and Christians who possessed a revealed scripture. In practice, this toleration was extended to the Zoroastrians of Iran and the Hindus of the Indian subcontinent. Forced conversions played only a small part in the Arab conquests, and for at least two centuries the majority of the inhabitants of the Islamic empire were non-Muslims. They were known as *dhimmis*, a term meaning followers of the religions tolerated by law. *Dhimmis* were allowed the freedom to practice their religion and to manage their internal affairs through their own religious officials. However, *dhimmis* were not regarded as the equals of Muslims and were required to pay a special poll tax (*jizyah*); they were prohibited from serving in the military and from wearing certain colors, and their residences and places of worship could not be as large as those of Muslims. Although these and other restrictions constituted a form of discrimination, they represented an unusually tolerant attitude for the era and stood in marked contrast to the practices of the Byzantine Empire.

The taxes imposed by the Arab-Islamic state were less burdensome than those levied by the Byzantine

and Sasanian empires. Moreover, the Arab rulers tended to leave existing administrative practices undisturbed and did not interfere with local customs. Although some of the conquered peoples adopted Islam, the Arabs did not encourage conversions during the first century of their rule. This was partly because the *jizyah* constituted an important source of state revenue and partly because the Arabs, at this early stage in the development of Islam, regarded it as an exclusively Arab religion.