

Islamic History as Global History

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The Legacy of Europe's Encounter with Islam

Some years ago, Harold Isaacs wrote *Scratches on Our Minds*, a hook probing the images that ordinary Americans held about China and India. Subjecting his informants to the techniques of psychoanalysis, the author also wanted to learn where, when, and how such images as "inferior" Chinese and "fabulous" Indians had been formed. If Isaacs had written another hook scratching American minds respecting Islam or Islamic history, one suspects he would have uncovered some fairly lurid images: of grim fanatical clerics seizing political power in the contemporary Middle East, of generals amputating the hands of thieves in the name of religion, or of women held in a state of permanent domestic bondage. Had he scratched a hit more, he might have found images, informed perhaps by youthful readings of *The Arabian Nights*, of Arab princes lavishly entertained by sensuous women, of sumptuous banquets, or of genies and lamps—all set in an atmosphere of Oriental splendor and decadence. He might also have dredged up from the minds of his informants images of medieval violence: of fierce warriors on horseback wielding broad scimitars or of caliphs delivering swift and arbitrary justice via the executioner. Finally, well embedded in the subconscious of his hypothetical subjects, Isaacs may also have found some hazy notion of Islam as a religious heresy or of Muhammad as a false prophet.

Such images are part of the legacy of Europe's long and often hostile encounter with Muslim societies. For here was a religion that affirmed the one God of the Jews and Christians yet denied the Trinity; that accepted Jesus as sent to humankind and born of the Virgin Mary, yet rejected his divinity; that accepted the Torah and the Gospels and their adherents, the Jews and Christians, as "people of the Book," yet rejected the claims to exclusivity made by the former and the worship of Jesus as practiced by

the latter. Unlike Hinduism or Buddhism, which were rendered relatively innocuous by their geographical and theological distance from Europe and Christianity, Islam was simply too close to Europe—both geographically and theologically—to be created with anything like equanimity. Hence the Crusades: the Europeans' forcible attempt to reconquer Palestine for the Cross and, by extension, to uproot the so-called heresy that Arabo-Islamic civilization supposedly represented. Contemporary impressions of Arab Muslims are vividly reflected in the *Chanson de Roland*, the French epic poem, crystalized in the eleventh century, that depicts Muslims as idolaters, polytheists, and, above all, as the archvillains of Christendom; while the Emperor Charlemagne is portrayed as the snowy-bearded defender of Christendom who leads the French into a mighty struggle waged in the name of the Christian God.' The poem thus expresses a worldview rigidly split into a we–they opposition that is about as absolute as any to be found in Western literature.

Since the eleventh century, it was the fate of Islamic civilization to serve in the European imagination as a wholly alien “other,” a historic and cosmic foil against which Europeans defined their own collective identity as a world civilization. Gradually, however, Western scholars became aware of the primary textual sources on which Islamic civilization was built. Beginning with the Crusades and continuing throughout Europe's medieval period, a handful of scholars learned Arabic and began editing, translating, interpreting, and publishing the immense corpus of primary texts that had accumulated during the rise and expansion of Islamic civilization. Some wished to refute the religious claims of what they saw as a Christian heresy; others sought to recover for classical scholarship those texts translated into Arabic by Muslims that had been lost in the Greek original. Then, in the late eighteenth century, when much of the Muslim world began falling under European colonial rule, institutional foundations such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the French Asiatic Society were established for the serious study of Islamic civilization, while in European universities chairs in Arabic language and literature were founded. From these developments emerged a new cadre of scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—people like Ignaz Goldziher, D. B. McDonald, J. Wellhausen, Carl Brockelmann, C. H. Becker, Theodor Noldeke, Louis Massignon, Edward G. Brown, and Reynold Nicholson—who studied Islamic civilization as their primary field and not just as a subject ancillary to some other discipline.

These scholars' strength was their mastery of philology and the principal languages of Islam: Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Many were veritable pioneers who ransacked obscure private collections all over Europe and Asia in search of original manuscripts, which were then edited, collated, or translated. Those who analyzed and published these texts more or less

consciously endeavored to give definition to Islam as a civilization, that is, as a unified body of beliefs, ideas, and values elaborated and transmitted in literature. And perhaps somewhat less consciously, these same scholars saw themselves as interpreters of that civilization to “the West,” their home audience. But there was a darker side to this intellectual enterprise. In their attempt to give definition to Muslim civilization, many of these scholars tended to present Islam as a “tradition” that was static, timeless, and uniform, and by implication, impervious to the dynamics of change or historical process. Moreover, recent critics have sensed a political motive in much of this scholarship. Scholarly concentration on the classical texts of Islam, and especially on those produced during the formative eighth to eleventh centuries, encouraged the belief that this particular period represented some sort of “golden age,” after which Islamic civilization was doomed to a slow and painful decline. The notion of a declining Islamic civilization suggested, in turn, that Europe’s relatively easy conquest of Muslim societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the continued European domination over them into the twentieth, had been not only inevitable but justified.

The Rise and Growth of Islam and Its Historians

For most Europeans and North Americans, the vision of Islam as a static monolith or as a mysterious, exotic “other” remained dominant until the mid-twentieth century. In the decades after World War II, however, and especially since the 1960s, American and European universities experienced a historiographical revolution that considerably expanded the conceptual framework within which Islamic history was studied. Whereas classical Islamicists had asked, “What can the *text* tell us of the *civilization*?” a new generation of historians began asking, “What can the *data* tell us of the *societies*?” Implicit in these very different questions was a whole range of issues, both conceptual and methodological, asked not only by historians of Muslim civilization but by historians throughout the profession who had been influenced by new intellectual currents, particularly the pioneering work of Marc Bloch and the *Annales* school of historical scholarship in post-World War I France. The new approach also signaled the influence of anthropology on history and all the social sciences.

To say that societies replaced civilization as the principal object of study implied a shift in focus from the literate elite classes from whose milieu the authors of the classical texts usually came, to those many other communities whom Eric Wolf has called the “people without history.” The new emphasis also recognized that Islamic civilization was not the monolithic entity that many had thought it to be but that, on closer examination,

it broke down into a diffuse plurality of communities that differed vastly over time and space. Many, in fact, rejected the concept of civilization altogether as a useful category in social analysis, since any reconstruction of Islamic history based primarily on the Muslim literary tradition would likely give undue importance to the normative social vision conveyed by Muslim literate elites. Furthermore, as the object of historical analysis changed, so did the questions asked. Earlier Islamicists had concentrated on political and intellectual history largely because classical Islamic texts were themselves preoccupied with these topics. But the new generation of historians began asking questions that ranged considerably beyond the political or intellectual, embracing such subdisciplines as economic history, the history of technology, historical demography, urban history, social history, political economy, nomadic history, microhistory, and historical linguistics.

The methodological techniques employed for addressing these questions also expanded. Truly, the immense corpus of Arabic and Persian texts on which older generations of Islamicists relied almost exclusively remains indispensable for any sort of inquiry into Muslim history. But such texts were frequently formal works written by Muslim chroniclers—many of them in the pay of political leaders—who were self-consciously writing about their own present or recent past with a view to posterity. Hence the texts such authors produced were deliberate constructions or reconstructions of people or events, carrying the same risks of bias, judgment, perspective, or interest that can accompany the endeavor of any author. What the new historians wanted to do was to supplement such texts with information that had not already been self-consciously packaged for them as "history" by intermediaries, that is, by the authors of the texts who stood between them and the events or processes they wished to describe. Once the principle of paying attention to sources other than primary texts was accepted, as increasingly has been the case among historians working since the 1950s, the search was on for contemporary literary sources generated outside the Islamic corpus or for any sort of contemporary artifact produced by the society in question that had survived into our own times. The new generation of historians thus uncovered an impressive variety of sources: commercial documents, tax registers, official land grants, administrative seals, census records, coins, gravestones, magical incantations written on bowls, memoirs of pilgrims, archeological and architectural data, biographical dictionaries, inscriptional evidence, and more recently, oral history.

We may illustrate some of the new questions and techniques for addressing these sources by examining specific issues that have occupied modern historians. These issues include some of the most remarkable movements in Islamic history and indeed in global history: the rise of Islam

among the tribes of seventh-century Arabia; the eruption of Arab Muslims out of the Arabian peninsula and their defeat of the two largest and culturally most advanced empires in western Asia, Sasanian Persia and Byzantine Rome; and the integration of most of the population of the Middle East into a newly constituted Islamic society that had become by the tenth century a world civilization.

THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC RELIGION IN ARABIA

There is a cliché that Islam, because it appeared in the seventh century, long after other world religions, arose “in the full light of history,” as if news reporters were on hand to record for posterity exactly what happened. But the widely differing historical interpretations of this event would suggest more obscurity than light, at least as concerns the earliest phase of Islamic history. In our day, three principal kinds of interpretations prevail: the traditional Muslim account based on Arabic sources that appeared in the early centuries of Islam; modern Western accounts that tease sociologically rational explanations out of those same materials; and modern Western accounts that look outside the corpus of Arabic sources.

Traditional Muslim accounts of Islamic history generally commence with the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, whose prophetic career began in the early decades of the seventh century. A western Arabian belonging to a mercantile clan, Muhammad often retreated to meditate on a mountain near his native city of Mecca. On one such occasion he was startled to hear a voice identified as that of the angel Gabriel, who addressed him with the command, “Recite!” Muhammad soon realized that he had in fact received a command from God:

Read: **I**n the name of thy Lord Who createth,
Createth **man** from a clot.

Read: **A**nd thy **L**ord is the Most Bounteous,
Who teacheth by the **pen**,
Teacheth **man** that which he knew not.²

On subsequent occasions Muhammad received further revelations, which were committed to memory by the small band of followers to whom he began preaching in Mecca and who were known later as Muslims, meaning those who had “submitted” to God. Several decades later Uthman (644–56), the third “successor” or caliph (*khalifa*) to Muhammad as leader of the growing community of believers, ordered that these verses be collected into the canonical scripture that constitutes the Qur’an. For Muslims, these revelations represent the last of several occasions on which God, through the medium of successive prophets, had broken through from the divine realm, where he alone resides, to the human realm. Thus

Muhammad is connected prophetically with Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets; yet because he came after the Hebrew prophets, his revelation was believed to have superseded those of his predecessors.

Initially, according to traditional accounts, the oligarchs who dominated Mecca rejected Muhammad's prophecy as a threat to their position. But the nearby city of Medina, which was at that time split into contentious factions, invited Muhammad to come and arbitrate their internal disputes. In the end they accepted not only Muhammad the arbiter but Muhammad the Prophet of God, and thus the first Muslim community emerged in Medina in the year 622. That Muslims date the beginning of Islam from this event indicates that it was not so much God's breakthrough to humankind that distinguished Islam from other world events. Rather, the year 622 was significant because it represented humanity's response to God's message, humanity's willingness to undertake the moral obligation of obeying God by forming a new human society—the community of believers called the *umma*—constructed around the divine message.

Since the late nineteenth century, Western scholars have developed interpretations of the rise of Islam using the same body of classical Arabic texts as those used by Muslim traditionalists, but they have done so with a view to finding in those texts explanations that conform to Western models of social development. Thus scholars like Montgomery Watt or M. A. Shaban, current representatives of this trend, have viewed the emergence of the new religion as a function of deeper socioeconomic changes held to have been occurring in sixth- and seventh-century western Arabia. During the half century or so before the emergence of Muhammad, Meccan merchants are said to have become long-distance traders who entered and even dominated international trade routes connecting Yemen to the south with Syria to the north and ultimately India with Europe. The rise of Mecca as the hub of an expanding international trade network, according to this view, was the cause of any number of social problems for Mecca and western Arabia generally: greater social stratification, greater social inequities, greater dependence of poorer clans on wealthier ones, general social disruption, and even spiritual malaise. In this situation the Prophet Muhammad emerged proclaiming a message intended to dissolve the tribal units altogether and replace them with a single pan-Arab community to be guided by a new and much higher authority—God. Since the new movement declared all people to be equal before God, converted communities whose aspirations had previously been blocked by social inequities now acquired, or expected to acquire, much greater socioeconomic mobility. Likewise, the movement's heavy emphasis on social justice and its rejection of all forms of hierarchy or privilege is said to have found a receptive audience among the disenfranchised classes of Arab society, especially the poor, slaves, and women—Muhammad himself had been an orphan—for whom the message guaranteed specific rights and forms of protection.

Thus the emergence of Muhammad and the success of his preaching is interpreted in terms of the Prophet's solutions to specific, contemporary socioeconomic problems. But the premise on which these arguments rest—that the problems of Muhammad's day arose from the rapid wealth that accrued to Mecca as a result of its rise in international trade—has been seriously challenged by several scholars. In particular, Patricia Crone has recently published considerable evidence showing that far from occupying the hub of a vast and expanding commercial network, Mecca at the time of Muhammad was quite peripheral to world trade and in fact occupied an economic backwater on the fringes of the world's two superpowers, Sasanian Persia and Byzantine Rome. If Mecca was not the thriving commercial center that most social historians had alleged it to be, then the entire sequence of sociological arguments that rest on that assumption, and which are used to explain the rise of Islam, collapses.

A third cluster of scholars has sought to move beyond exclusive reliance on the vast body of Arabic commentaries, histories, biographies, and other texts that developed within the early tradition of Islamic scholarship and to study early Islamic history on the basis of contemporary literary materials written by non-Muslims in Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian? The discovery and use of such literary sources have truly revolutionized the field. The editor of a volume arising from a 1975 conference on early Islam that included a paper on Syriac sources wrote: "For the first time in our lives many of us became acquainted with the outlook of non-Arab, non-Muslim historians on the conquests and [their] perpetrators." By comparing the non-Arabic with the Arabic sources, or by combining both, scholars are now beginning to replace earlier, oversimplified views with more refined interpretations of early Islamic social history. It is as though a generation of World War II historians who had previously used only German sources for writing about the war suddenly discovered the mountains of wartime sources written in English, Russian, Japanese, and French.

If some historians wish merely to supplement Arabic sources with non-Arabic ones for the study of early Islam, others, such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, are more skeptical of the reliability of the Arabic sources altogether. For, apart from the Qur'an itself, these sources did not begin to appear until several centuries after the death of Muhammad, meaning that the primary materials historians had been using for writing the early history of Islam are far from contemporary. On crucial issues, moreover, these primary sources are ambiguous or even self-contradictory. By contrast, many non-Arabic sources were contemporary or nearly contemporary with the events they described, though as outside sources they also carried the possibility of anti-Muslim bias. It is hardly surprising, then, that scholars who have been most skeptical of the Arabic literary tradition and most receptive to using non-Arabic sources have reached extremely con-

troversial conclusions—for example, that the earliest Muslims considered themselves descendants of Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael, that the movement originated in northern Arabia and not Mecca, and that Palestine and not Medina was the movement's principal focus.⁵ Moreover, whereas the traditional Muslim position sees Islam as having appeared fully developed in the form of Muhammad's revelations in Mecca and Medina, contemporary non-Muslim sources depict the slow evolution in the centuries before Muhammad of a monotheistic cult that, heavily influenced by Jewish practice and Jewish apocalyptic thought, absorbed neighboring pagan cults in Arabia in the time of Muhammad!

In sum, the Muslim scholarly tradition generally postulates a dramatic break between the age of pre-Islam (the *jāhiliyya*, or "age of ignorance") and that of Islam. In contrast, modern Western interpretations, influenced by nineteenth-century European notions of social evolution, have come to regard the origins of Muslim history in distinctly organic terms, that is, as having logically grown out of earlier socioreligious structures. The important division among Western historians is between those whose work is confined to the traditional Arabic sources and those who have begun tapping into the contemporary non-Muslim sources, resulting in interpretations of Islam's origins and early development that are more complex, and in some instances far more controversial, than earlier understandings.

THE EARLY CONQUESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

During the ten years immediately following the Prophet's death, from 632 to 642, Arab Muslims erupted out of the Arabian peninsula and conquered Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and western Iran. The movement did not stop there, however. To the west, Arab ships sailed into the Mediterranean Sea, previously a "Roman lake," taking Cyprus (649), Carthage (698), Tunis (700), and Gibraltar (711), before conquering Spain (711–16) and raiding southern France (720). Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia suffered repeated pillaging during those years. Meanwhile, Arab armies during the 650s marched eastward across the Iranian plateau and completed the destruction of the Sasanian Empire, forcing the son of the Persian "king of kings" to flee to the Tang court in China. By 712 Arab armies had seized strategic oases towns of Central Asia—Balkh, Samarqand, Bukhara, and Ferghana—and would soon be meeting Chinese armies face to face. To the south, Muslim navies sailed to the coasts of western India where in 711 they conquered and occupied the densely populated Hindu–Buddhist society of Sind. Thus began the long and evenful encounter between Islamic and Indic civilizations, during which time Islamic culture would penetrate deeply into India's economy, political systems, and religious structure.

While Arab rule in Sind was being consolidated, other Arab armies continued the overland drive eastward. Requested by Turkish tribes to

intervene in conflicts with their Chinese overlords, Arab armies in 751 marched to the westernmost fringes of the Tang Empire and engaged Chinese forces on the banks of the Talas River. The Arabs' crushing victory there, one of the most important battles in the history of Central Asia, probably determined the subsequent cultural evolution of the Turkish peoples of that region, who thereafter adopted Muslim and not Chinese civilization. Although Muslims would never dominate the heartland of China or penetrate Chinese civilization as they would India, their influence in Central Asia gave them access to the Silk Route, which for centuries to come served as a conduit for Chinese civilization into the Muslim world. Moreover, Muslim Arabs had already established maritime contact with China, having begun trading along the Chinese coast in the late seventh century.

Thus, within 130 years of Islam's birth, Arab armies and navies had conquered a broad swath of the known world from Gibraltar to the Indus delta and had penetrated both China and Europe by land and sea. How to explain it? Whence came the energy that had propelled Arab Muslims out of the Arabian peninsula, laying the groundwork for the establishment first of an Arab empire and then of a world civilization? Traditionalist Muslim sources generally accounted for these momentous events in terms of a miraculous manifestation of Allah's favor with his community, an interpretation consonant with Islamic understandings of the relationship between divine will and the historical process, but one that tells us more of Islamic theology than of Islamic history.

Theories of the Muslim conquests advanced by many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Islamicists are hardly more helpful. The general tone is captured in the following lines penned in 1898 by Sir William Muir, a Scot, whose interpretation of the Arab conquests sounds rather like the screenplay for a Cecil B. De Mille film, complete with technicolor, panoramic vision, and stereophonic soundtrack:

It was the scent of war that now turned the sullen temper of the Arab tribes into eager loyalty. . . . Warrior after warrior, column after column, whole tribes in endless succession with their women and children, issued forth to fight. And ever, at the marvellous tale of cities conquered; of rapine rich beyond compute; of maidens parted on the very field of battle "to every man a damsel or two" . . . fresh tribes arose and went. Onward and still onward, like swarms from the hive, or Rights of locusts darkening the land, tribe after tribe issued forth and hastening northward, spread in great masses to the East and to the West.'

In the end, though, after the thundering hooves have passed and the dust has settled, in attempting to explain the conquests, Muir leaves us with little of substance, apart from simply asserting the Arabs' fondness for the "scent of war," their love of "rapine," or the promise of "a damsel or

two." Muir's vision of a militant, resurgent Islam gone berserk reflected, in addition to the old European stereotypes, colonial fears that Europe's own Muslim subjects might, in just such a locustlike manner, rise up in revolt and drive the Europeans back to Europe. Sir William, after all, was himself a senior British official in colonial India as well as an aggressive activist for the Christian mission there. But his was no fringe school concerning the rise of Islam or the subsequent conquests; indeed, his understanding dominated for decades to follow and, like the traditionalist Muslim interpretation, tells us more about the narrator than the subject.

In the early twentieth century, scholars introduced the thesis that around the time of the Prophet's death, Arabia's grazing lands had suffered from a severe, short-term desiccation that drove the nomadic Arabs to search, literally, for greener pastures. Although it lacked convincing evidence, this theory found plenty of advocates then, as it continues to do today. Variations on the desiccation theory, also lacking firm evidence, held that poverty, overpopulation, or other such social miseries had driven the Arabs out of their homeland. Still other historians shifted attention from the Arabs themselves to Byzantine Rome and Sasanian Persia, the two great empires of western Asia, whose domains included, respectively, Syria and Iraq. These empires were portrayed as "exhausted" from several hundred years of mutual warfare, thus enabling the more "vigorous" Arabs to walk over both with ease. But this thesis likewise lacked empirical evidence, and, above all, failed to account for the Arabs' continued expansion into lands far beyond the domain of either empire. Meanwhile, the notion of the Arabs' supposed militancy, legitimized by the religious doctrine of *jihad*, or holy war, generally still informs popular sentiment about Muslims and has continued to find its way into history textbooks to the present day, though in a somewhat less lurid version than Muir's portrayal.

Whereas older theories saw the invasions as a random or unorganized influx of ragtag hordes pushed out of the peninsula by population pressure or drawn by the love of rapine, recent research has revealed methodically planned and well-executed military maneuvers directed by a central command in Medina and undertaken for quite rational purposes. There was the economic need to provide the growing community with material support—accomplished by the movement's capture of lucrative trade routes and new surplus-producing regions—which the relatively meager economic resources of Arabia could not provide. And there was the political need to contain and channel the tremendous energies released by the Prophet's socioreligious revolution. In this latter sense, the initial Arab conquests resemble the French or Russian revolutions, in which socioideological energies generated in the process of consolidating the original movement proved so intense that they could not be contained geographically and spilled over into adjacent regions.

Above all, what is missing from earlier explanations is any mention of Islam itself. One does occasionally come across references to the lure of an Islamic paradise filled with dark-eyed beauties awaiting the frenzied believer who would martyr himself in battle, but such romantic allusions appear to be holdovers from older stereotypes associating Islam with sex and violence. By and large, Western historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries displayed a chronic inability to accept the possibility that the religion itself could have played a fundamental, as opposed to a supportive, role in the movement. In recent years, however, there has been an effort to bring religion back into the discussion by focusing on the Muslim community's social fragility during the earliest years of its formation, and especially the volatility of divine revelation as the basis of its authority. Thus the death of Muhammad in 632 confronted the community of believers, then confined to the population of western Arabia, with their first genuine crisis: How would the charismatic authority of the Prophet, who for ten years had provided both spiritual and political leadership to the growing *umma*, be sustained or channeled when he was no longer present? Some tribes, apparently supposing that with the loss of the Prophet the continuing authority of revelation had ended, simply withdrew from the community altogether. Others began following rival prophets — at least two men and one woman sprang up in the Arabian interior — who claimed to be receiving continuing revelations from God.

With both the political and the religious basis of the fledgling community thus threatened, Muhammad's first successor as leader of the community, Abu Bakr, moved vigorously to hold the volatile movement together. First, he forbade any tribe to leave the community once having joined; and second, in order to prevent the movement from splintering into rival communities around rival prophets, he declared that Muhammad had been the last prophet of God. These moves amounted, in effect, to a declaration of war against those tribes who had abandoned the *umma* or subscribed to other self-proclaimed prophets. Thus the initial burst of Muslim expansion after the Prophet's death was directed not against non-Muslims but against just such Arab tribes within the peninsula. In the process of suppressing these rebellions, however, Abu Bakr made alliances with tribes on the southern fringes of Iraq and Syria, and as the circle of such alliances widened, Muslim Arabs soon clashed with client tribes of the Sasanians and Byzantines and eventually with Sasanian and Byzantine imperial forces themselves.

Once launched, the movement continued to be driven by powerful religious forces. Islam had derived its initial power from Muhammad's ability to articulate the collectivization of Arabia's deities into a single supreme God, together with the collectivization of its tribes into the single, corporate *umma* under the direct authority of God. After the Prophet's

death, these movements gained momentum as the masses of Arab soldiery participating in the expansion came to regard the movement's social ideals as immediately attainable. Hence, for them the distribution of the riches of conquered lands among members of the community, which looked to the rest of the world like senseless plunder, served to actualize the ideal, preached by the Prophet, of attaining socioeconomic equality among all believers. The importance of this factor is underscored by the fact that one of the first and most serious dissident movements in Islam, the Kharajite movement, was spearheaded in conquered Iraq by men of piety whose military stipends had just been reduced. Leaders of the revolt, which resulted in the assassination of the Caliph Uthman in 656, justified their actions by emphasizing the radical egalitarianism, including social equality for women, that had been preached by the Prophet. In short, recent explanations of the early Arab conquests, unlike earlier European theories, have focused on social processes rather than social stereotypes, and on the internal dynamics of early Muslim society and religion.

Early Islamic Civilization and Global History

From the perspective of global history, perhaps the most significant theme of early Islam is the evolution of a relatively parochial Arab cult into a world civilization, indeed history's first truly global civilization. For the Arab conquests inaugurated a thousand-year era, lasting from the seventh to the seventeenth century, when all the major civilizations of the Old World—Greco-Roman, Irano-Semitic, Sanskritic, Malay-Javanese, and Chinese—were for the first time brought into contact with one another by and within a single overarching civilization. What is more, Muslims synthesized elements from those other civilizations—especially the Greek, Persian, and Indian—with those of their Arabian heritage to evolve a distinctive civilization that proved one of the most vital and durable the world has ever seen. At work here were several factors: the emergence of state institutions and urban centers that provided foci for the growth of Islamic civilization; the conversion of subject populations to Islam; the ability of Muslim culture to absorb, adapt, and transmit culture from neighboring civilizations; and the elaboration of socioreligious institutions that enabled Islamic civilization to survive, and even flourish, following the decline of centralized political authority.

ISLAMIC STATES AND ISLAMIC CITIES

In the early years of the Islamic venture, the community had been ruled from Medina by an Arab merchant aristocracy led by four consecutive successors to Muhammad. By the second half of the seventh century,

however, political power had shifted outside Arabia and into the hands of two successive imperial dynasties—the Umayyad, which governed a de facto Arab empire from Damascus between 661 and 750; and the Abbasid, which overthrew the Umayyads and reigned, if not always ruled, from its splendid capital city of Baghdad until 1258. Thus while Mecca and Medina remained the spiritual hubs of Islamic civilization, reinforced by the annual pilgrimage to the Ka'ba shrine, the Arab rulers in Syria and Iraq inherited from the Persian and Roman empires traditions and structures that facilitated their own transition to imperial rule. These included notions of absolute kingship, courtly rituals and styles, an efficient bureaucratic administration, a functioning mint and coinage system, a standing army, a postal service, and the kind of land revenue system on which the political economies of all great empires of the Fertile Crescent had rested. Even the Iwan Kisra, the famous royal palace of the Persians on the banks of the Tigris River, had been conveniently vacated by the last Sasanian emperor, Yazdegird III, as if to beckon its new Arab occupants to embark on and fulfill their own imperial destiny.

This they certainly did. Earlier historians, writing under the spell of Arabic narratives dwelt on the swiftness and thoroughness of the conquests, emphasized the sense of discontinuity between the old and the new orders. More recent historians, however, especially those drawing on non-Arabic as well as Arabic sources, have tended to see more continuity between the two orders. In fact, recent research suggests that the Arabs' rapid transition from a life of desert nomadism to one of imperial rule resulted largely from the expectations of their non-Muslim subjects. In Egypt, the earliest Arab governor ratified the appointment of church patriarchs just as Byzantine governors had done: in Iraq, the Arab governors adjudicated disputes among Nestorian Christians at the insistence of the Nestorians themselves, for that was what the Sasanian government had done. For the first fifty years of their rule, the Arabs even continued to mint coins in the fashion of the Sasanians, complete with a portrait of the Persian shah on one side. The Persian office of *wazir*, or chief minister of state, was carried over into Abbasid government. And the caliphs, though technically the successors (*khalifa*) to the Prophet's leadership, adopted the regalia, the majestic court ceremonies, and the mystique of absolutism of their Sasanian predecessors, even adopting the titles "Deputy of God" and "Shadow of God on Earth." The caliphs also carried over the Sasanian practice of patronizing a state religion, substituting Islam for Zoroastrianism. They appointed *qadis*, or Muslim judges, and promoted the construction of mosques, just as the Persian shahs had appointed Zoroastrian priests and built fire temples. Moreover, having acquired the taste for urban life that their Sasanian predecessors had cultivated, the caliphs lavishly supported the whole gamut of arts and crafts that subsequently became associated

with Islamic culture: bookmaking, carpet weaving, pottery, calligraphy, ivory carving, wood carving, glassware, and tapestry, among others. Thus the centralized, imperial caliphate, though strictly speaking a violation of Islamic notions of the equality of believers, served as a vehicle for the growth of Islamic civilization in its widest sense.

As the social historian Ira Lapidus has shown, all of this growth took place in the context of the extraordinary urbanization that soon followed the conquests, which became one of the hallmarks of Islamic civilization. While older cities like Damascus, Jerusalem, Isfahan, Merv, and Cordova were simply occupied, others, like Cairo and Basra, began as garrison cities for Arab soldiers, a development resulting in part from a policy of settling and urbanizing otherwise potentially turbulent nomads. Cities, both new and old, also grew in response to the caliphate's need for administrative centers, and these, once in place, drew in and absorbed the surrounding population as urban proletariat classes. The most spectacular such case was that of Baghdad. Established in 756, the new Abbasid capital rapidly swelled to a population of about half a million, or ten times the size of nearby Ctesiphon, the former Sasanian capital. Everywhere from Cordova to Delhi there sprang up great cities, which, stimulated by the appetite of the ruling classes for luxury goods, became burgeoning centers and markets for the production and consumption of numerous crafts and industries. Also, by spatially dividing functionally autonomous communities into separate quarters, these cities projected a social vision, inherited ultimately from the Sasanians' policy toward their own minority communities, whereby the Islamic ruler extended to the communities recognition, tolerance, and protection in return for political loyalty and taxes. By virtue of such arrangements a Muslim city such as eleventh-century Toledo, Spain, could absorb a community of ten thousand Jews without experiencing the sort of anti-Semitic hostility typical of Christian cities of late medieval Europe.

CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Another dimension to the entry of Islamic civilization into global history was the mass conversion of Middle Eastern sedentary communities to Islam. Unlike other great conquests in which the foreign conqueror merely came and went—or perhaps came and assimilated—by the tenth and eleventh centuries Islam was well on its way to becoming the dominant religion in the Middle East. The dynamics of this movement have been fruitfully explored in Richard Bulliet's *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, a book whose subtitle illustrates the entry of new social science techniques into a field that had formerly been the exclusive preserve of classical, textual scholarship. Bulliet's concern was to plot the pace and direction of conversion by tabulating the

patterns of change in personal names recorded in biographical dictionaries for selected Middle Eastern communities.

Other recent studies have emphasized the striking extent of cultural continuity amid the conversion process. In an important study of the cultural effects of the conquests in Iraq, Michael Morony argued that non-Muslims found it easier to accept Islam when ideas, attitudes, or institutions already present in their own cultures shared affinities with those imported from Arabia. For example, the Muslims shared animal sacrifice with pagans and Zoroastrians and ritual slaughter with Jews; they shared circumcision with Jews and Christians; they institutionalized charity, like Jews and Christians; they covered their heads during worship, like Jews; they had a month-long fast followed by a festival, like many other groups; they practiced ritual ablutions, as did Zoroastrians; and their ritual prayer resembled that of Nestorian Christians. Studies like Bulliet's and Morony's thus show a distinct shift away from earlier and cruder models of religious conversion, which, in the tradition of William Muir, tended to conflate the conquests and the conversion of non-Muslims into a single process, thereby reducing Islam to a "religion of the sword."

Moreover, we are now beginning to see that by the late seventh century Muslims were regarding themselves as carriers of a global civilization and not just members of an Arab cult. In their newly won empire they found themselves ruling over a plurality of autonomous and self-regulating religious communities—Greek Orthodox Christians, Monophysites, Nestorians, Copts, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Jews—as well as a plurality of linguistic and literary traditions, including Greek; Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Middle Persian, and various dialects of Aramaic. In forging an independent Islamic identity amid these older religious communities, Muslims faced a critical choice: Either they could constitute themselves as one more autonomous community modeled on those they ruled—thereby preserving Allah as an Arab deity, Islam as an Arab cult, and Arabic as the language of the ruling class—or they could try to bring all these diverse communities and traditions together into a new cultural synthesis. During the initial decades after their conquest of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, Muslim rulers generally opted for the former alternative, as Islam remained the proud emblem of the Arab ruling elite. But by the eighth century they had turned to the latter alternative, a move that may have been decided as much on practical as on religious grounds. Convinced of the political imprudence of a tiny ethnic minority ruling indefinitely over an enormous non-Muslim majority, the caliphs openly encouraged their non-Arab subjects to convert. Henceforth the Arabic language and the Islamic religion would provide a sense of civilizational coherence by uniting hitherto separate religious and linguistic communities into a single ethnoreligious identity, initially transcending and ultimately supplanting all other such identities. Because