
Islam: A History of Submission

Titus 1:10-16; 2:11-3:8

Introduction

First of all we must provide a couple of disclaimers. First of all, this presentation is in no way a comprehensive treatment of the history of Islam. To do so would require a multi-volume work of immense detail. Even the “abbreviated” histories that exist contain more detail that can be delivered in a short discourse as planned for this evening. The most difficult part in the preparation of this “lesson” was the selection of a theme and the decisions as to what to include. Secondly, I am confessedly not an Islamic scholar, and this presentation does not represent the fruit of many years of involvement and reflection. It does represent an attempt to distill materials regarding the history and development of Islam that comes from several sources that are available to all. The four most prominent include both evangelical and non-evangelical authors.

Muhammad

...the Merchant

The late 6th and early 7th centuries held a world in many ways very different from our own and in many ways still the same. By this time in Christian history, Christianity had passed from being a “troublesome sect” to being the official religion of an empire. This “tolerance” had even advanced to the point of it being illegal to claim any religion save Christianity. This even in the minds of the least historical of us is a far cry from the picture of Christianity painted for us in the New Testament.

The Old Persian Empire still held some sway in that part of the world and espoused a religion known as Zoroastrianism. Named after its founder and “chief prophet” Zoroaster (a Greek adaptation of his Persian name) it came into prominence in the post-exilic Biblical period and reached its peak in the restoration of this empire during the Roman period of the world of the Mediterranean.

The land of the desert of Arabia was occupied by nomadic farmers and merchants who were “Arabic” and by descent were related to Abraham (and the Jews) through Ishmael. Their religion was thoroughly pagan and involved the worship of ancestors, personalized natural forces, and the use of charms and magical thoughts in its cultus. The culture was organized by clans and because the economy was difficult it was common “courtesy” to conduct raids on neighboring clans to plunder their goods. Mecca was however, a thriving trade city situated on a route from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean for spice trade to the farther East. Mecca also contained a shrine, the Ka’ba, a cube-shaped building that housed several idols and source of pilgrimage for many local clans and a great economic anchor for the city.

It was into this culture that Mohammad ibn ‘Abd Allah was born. His family was poor merchants and his mother and father died when he was a child. Muhammad was raised in his uncle’s family who seemed to have some influence in the city even though he was poor. He married an older widow whose family seemed to be more established in the city. Muhammad himself was apparently dissatisfied with much of the Arab culture and lifestyle. He met with some men who periodically went out into the hillsides to pray and meditate-- sometimes for an entire month.

...the Mystic

It was during one of these excursions that Mohammad claimed to have been visited by the angel Gabriel to be chosen to receive God’s final warning to mankind and to “share” this message. Mohammad, being illiterate, recited his revelations to his wife and family who in turned believed his experience and embraced his new-found faith. This initial vision was in the year of 610 and is celebrated as the “Night of Power.” Over the next 22 years Mohammad would have further encounters with God through Gabriel and the Qur’an, (the recitations) were completed.

After three years of privately practicing his new faith, Mohammad was instructed to publicly preach his message of the “oneness” of God and the support of the poor. He was met with considerable opposition that eventually led to his fleeing to the neighboring city of Yathrub now known as Medina (from Madinat al-Nabi, the city of the prophet) in 622 (known as the Hijra).

Karen Armstrong quotes an Islamic source and describes Mohammad’s revelatory experience: “Never once did I receive a revelation, without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me.” She goes on to say: In the early days, the impact was so frightening that his whole body was convulsed; he would often sweat profusely, even on a cool day, experience a great heaviness, or hear strange sounds and voices.”

...the Muslim

In Medina Mohammad was able to wisely end some civil strife and became well respected. But the tradition of pillage and plunder continued even for Mohammad and his followers. Medina was known for its cross-clan cooperation that was unheard of in its day. After several unsuccessful skirmishes, eventually his influence grew to such that he was able to return to Mecca as victor in a non-violent conquest in 629. He evidently displayed a charisma and leadership ability that caused many to seek his counsel and support. His religious ideals crossed the traditional clan borders and unified the Arabs in development of community the *ummah* . By Muhammad’s death in 632, he and his followers were in control of most of the Arabian peninsula with his followers in submission (*islam*) to his teachings.

Conquest

...and Caliphs

Here is where we could go on forever. Muhammad and his followers saw their religion as *the* truth from God and *the* answer to the world's (at least the Arab's) problems and sought to inculcate this truth even by force if necessary. This was not much different to the "religious" wars they had seen between the Christian empire and the Persians and the oppression of the Jews as well. Islam as a political force very quickly took control of Palestine and Jerusalem and then overcame the Persian empire. The successors of Muhammad were his closest friends and relatives (he had no male heir). These men were known as caliphs (successors) and continued the expansion of Islam's influence. Eventually his nephew Ali was caliph and there is to this day a sect that feels that Ali was the rightful successor and the power of the caliphate belongs to a descendent of Muhammad. These are known as Shi'a Ali or Shi'ites, the other main sect are Sunnis (*al aw sunni*, the people of custom).

...and Culture

Eventually the Islamic world included many other cultures other than Arabs and developed a complex central government to continue its rule. Eventually they built a new city as the center of Islamic community, Baghdad. While the Romans were struggling with the Germanic "barbarians" in Europe, Muslims were building a rich and glorious empire in the east. Baghdad was soon one of the greatest cities in the world.

Trade, shipping, architecture, science and the arts all flourished in the Islamic empire. The entire Mediterranean was under Islamic control as well as India. Several different dynasties held control and sometimes various parts of the empire seemed to rule themselves. Arabs, Turks, Persians, and many other ethnic peoples "embraced" this religion and rule.

...and Cause

Islam continued in its interesting blend of religion and politics with its defense of the Holy Land against the Crusaders in the 1100's, and its incorporation of the Mongols after their conquest under Genghis Kahn in the 1200's. Many factions and rifts occurred but eventually the Muslims gained control of all but central Europe. The Ottomans, descendents of Osman I, had organized the Turks, now the dominant ethnic group among the Muslims and had taken the city of Constantinople in 1453. At the time it was considered a symbolic victory indication God's vindication of the Islamic quest.

Revolution

...to Resist

The Ottomans played a significant role in the development of European history and found themselves as allies of the Germans in the WWI. The old Middle Eastern empire had lasted around 600 years and the Ottomans had continued 600 years more. The defeat of the Germans led to a distribution of the lands of the Turks but eventually they were able to regroup and to establish their political independence once again. But this time a more Western secular government was established, in Turkey even with the adoption of Latin as the official language for a time. The country was still nominally Islam but was attempting to resist the marginalization that seemed to be facing those cultures that refused to “advance.” This same movement occurred for a time in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran.

...to Reform

However, not all Muslims desired the Westernization of their culture and significant calls for true “religious reform” continued to ring out. In the mid 1700’s an influential Muslim scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab began a movement that denounced nearly all other Muslims as idolators and infidels because of their lack of commitment to the Qur’an. His movement eventually gained alliance with Muhammad ibn Saud whose descendents captured and ruled the Arabian peninsula and established Saudi Arabia. Because of their oil-wealth, Wahhabis or Salafis have influenced much of the Muslim world through their support of education.

Some who are descendents of the Shi’a, those Muslims who stood for Ali as the successor of Muhammad came to power in Iran and have also led a reform for Quranic law and religious leadership.

...to Reclaim

In this stew, is the re-unification of the Arab-Muslim world. Not all are in agreement with each other but are aligned more closely than they are with the economies and cultures of the West. They recognize their current positions as “the oppressed” and “the poor” and wish to reclaim the glory of the Moslem world of yesteryear. For many Moslems history is more that just a story of the past but the record of insults and wrongs that need correcting (therefore the need to correct the sin of Ali not being Muhammad’s successor.) Islam is a growing and influential world-view that needs to be understood from the viewpoint of Evangelical Christianity.

Conclusion

Let's reread our Biblical text... From this text we see that all of us whether Western or Middle Eastern stand under the hand of God's judgment. Our religious banner is one of rebel and infidel, whether we are culturally Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu or Buddhist. Whether we were born in Africa, Asia, Europe or North America, our peace is found because of God's great mercy. The kindness and grace extended to us is because of the work of his Son in his dying for our sins. That is the message of love and we should be zealous for submission to good deeds that bring peace and the message of grace to those around us. Our story should be his story the drama of redemption and our submission to Him as our Savior and King!

Notes