

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM A: Part 1 Beginnings and Expansion

TEACHING NOTES

By Keith Small

Introduction: A Broad Outline

This session will introduce you to the broad outline of the history of Islam from just before its beginning until the Modern Age. Our aim is to help you understand why things are the way they are today. One thing I hope to demonstrate is that today's growing conflict between the West and certain forms of Islam has more to do with the history and nature of Islam, than because of any particular political policies of the West. Politics can certainly aggravate things, but the seeds for the present conflicts are old and deep. This presentation will help you understand how Islam began, how it grew, the kinds of contact it has had with the West, and why today we see a growth in violent fundamentalism. We want you to understand these things so that you can see what Islam is bringing from its heritage and its beliefs to world events.

Your notes are divided into three sections. Section 1 will contain the formative years of Islam, from its small beginnings in Arabia to it having an Empire larger than the Romans in just 100 years. Section 1 will also present Islam's growth as it engaged in wars, trade, and theological discussions with the West, as well as its further expansion in Southeast Asia. Section 2, which Andy Bannister will lead, will present the period coinciding with our Reformation and the rise of Colonialism, when Islam's domains contracted, and when Islam started its uneasy relationship with the current Western political and ideological domination of the world. This will bring us to the present. Section 3 will be led by Jay Smith, and he will present to you the current demographics of Islam as well as Islamic groups active in our world.

2. Beginnings

2.1 The World at the time of Islam's inception, c. AD 600.

Islam came into a world of empires. Immediately next to Arabia were the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanian Persian Empire. One was Christian, and one was Zoroastrian with a large Christian minority. These two had been at war for centuries, and in 614 the Persians succeeded in conquering Palestine and Egypt from the Byzantines, only for these areas to be re-conquered by the Byzantines in 628. Wider afield, The Chinese were embarking on the Tang Dynasty (618-907), which was to become one of its most glorious empires. The Mayas were building their empire in the Americas, and the British Anglo-Saxons were turning from paganism to embrace Christianity through the efforts of missionaries like Augustine and Paulinus.

The Arabian Peninsula was on the outside of these developments, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious backwater. There was limited trading within the peninsula and from it to northern Arabia, but the major powers had bypassed it for many centuries for more fertile and strategic regions. Also, it had become something of an area of freedom for those groups that had come to be regarded as heretics in the Byzantine Empire. Major groups known as Nestorians and Monophysites found a home there, as well as

Gnostic groups, Jews, and many minor sects. There were also polytheistic groups and possibly generic monotheists, with no fixed allegiance to any of the great monotheistic faiths of the time.

Though the major cultures around Arabia were literate with developed forms of national literature, the Arabian tribes relied on oral storytelling to preserve their religious and cultural heritage. If writing was used to any degree, it was mainly for business transactions. Jewish and Christian groups in Arabia were known to have books of Scripture and to be more literate than their Arabian neighbours. It should be noted, though, that they seemed to rely on their traditional literatures like the Midrash and apocryphal books more than on the actual books of the Bible.

2.2 Muhammad

Into this world Muhammad was born around AD 570. He was born in Mecca, at that time a minor trade center with a pilgrimage site- a building that apparently was used to house idols of the pagan deities of the region. This building, the Ka'ba, is what Muslims have as the center of their pilgrimage today, though it is now dedicated exclusively to Allah. Muslims are taught that originally this building was built by Abraham and Ishmael for worship of the one God but that later Arabs corrupted their religion into polytheism. Near Mecca was also a place where regular trading fairs were held. These fairs brought people together from all over Arabia and were times when poetry was recited, storytellers entertained, evangelists and rabbis preached, and inter-tribal hostilities were put on hold.

Muhammad was a member of one of the prominent tribes of Mecca, though not one of the most powerful ones. His grandfather is said to have been the guardian of the Ka'ba. Muhammad's father died in his infancy, and his mother died when he was six. His grandfather died when he was eight and from then on he was fostered by his uncle, who was a poor man. As he grew up, he worked as a shepherd and in the caravan-trading business. When he was twenty-five, he married a wealthy caravan owner named Khadija, who was forty. They had two sons and four daughters, but only the daughters survived infancy.

Within a few years Muhammad started retiring to the desert for a month of the year to meditate in a nearby cave. In AD 610 while doing this, he claimed that while he was sleeping he heard a voice commanding him to recite what was said to him. When he at first refused, he felt as if he was being strangled, and this feeling persisted until he obeyed and recited the words that supposedly have been preserved in chapter 96:1-5 of the Qur'an. Though his experiences were similar to soothsayers and poets of his day who claimed to be possessed by spirits, Muhammad denied he was possessed and for the next 23 years he claimed to receive verbatim communications from God. Muslims claim that the most important of these have been preserved as the contents of the Qur'an.

Mecca

During these 23 years Muhammad had two distinct phases to his career. The first was in Mecca from AD 610-622. During this period he claimed to be a prophet like the biblical prophets, but sent to the Arabs. His message was twofold: that they turn from

idolatry to worship the one true god, whom he named Allah, borrowing the name of the high god of the Arab polytheists, and that they follow the laws he was being given by this god. He had a small number of converts and within 12 years, he had angered the leaders of Mecca and disrupted the life of the city so much that he and his converts had to flee for their lives. They fled to Medina, a nearby city with Jewish and Arab tribes. This inaugurated the second period of his career.

Medina

Early in the 10 years Muhammad had here until his death, he was able to come to power in the city and take over control of it for his followers. During this time the character of his messages changed as well. He claimed to receive laws for setting up a new nation that had Allah as its head with Muhammad as his authoritative and unquestioned spokesman. During this period, Muhammad claimed to receive revelations authorizing him to use assassination, treaty-breaking, genocide and all means of military force to secure the rule of Islam, which means “submission” (“Muslim” means one who submits). Within those 10 years, Muhammad was able to subjugate Mecca and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula through battles and alliances with strategic tribes. As he increased in power, he required all other tribes to swear allegiance to his religion and to him as their prophet.

Islam’s Two New Ideas

It is important to note that in this beginning period certain attitudes and views were fostered that commonly continue among Muslims to this day. These attitudes are evident in the earliest histories of Muhammad, as well as in the Qur’an itself and in the earliest Islamic traditions. One man has noted that the Qur’an brought mainly two new religious ideas to the world:¹

1. Muhammad is the final prophet bringing the final religion that supercedes all prior ones; and
2. It is Allah’s will that this religion should be imposed on the world by force of arms as a religious duty. (It was not until the Crusades that Christians embraced this view for Christianity.)

Though Muslims have developed their views of holy war to include personal struggle against sin, these two basic ideas are still foundational to Islam and to the sense of identity Muslims share. It is not a faith that finds it easy to share power, territory, or ultimate truth claims with other faiths.

2.3 Muhammad’s Successors: Conquest and Consolidation

After a brief illness, Muhammad unexpectedly died in AD 632, at approximately 62 years of age. He left neither successor nor any instructions for who should lead the young Islamic religion and nation. Leadership passed to four men, all intimate friends of Muhammad, who have come to be called by most Muslims the “rightly-guided”

¹ Stanton, H. U. Weitbrecht, *An Outline of the Religion of Islam*, Westminster: The Missionary Equipment and Literature Supply, Ltd., 1925, p.16.

Caliphs. Their combined thirty years of rule are considered by the majority of Muslims as being the best and most consistent with Muhammad's teachings in the history of Islam.

Caliph 1: Abu Bakr (ruled AD 632-634)

Muhammad's immediate circle put in power Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's earliest converts and a close personal friend. He reigned less than two years, putting down a rebellion of the Arabs and continuing the religious policies Muhammad had instituted. After possibly being poisoned, on his deathbed, he nominated his successor, another of Muhammad's inner circle, Umar ibn al-Khattab.

Caliph 2: Umar (ruled AD 634-644)

Umar reigned for ten years and rapidly expanded the Islamic empire outside of Arabia. He conquered Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, and Libya. These conquests were victories against both the Byzantines and the Persians. He also established many early religious and legal precedents and organized the administration of the growing empire. He was stabbed by the Persian slave of his governor of Basra and before he died he set up a committee to choose the next caliph.

Caliph 3: Uthman (ruled AD 644-656)

The committee chose Uthman ibn Affan, another early convert and a member of a prominent Meccan family. During his twelve year rule, Uthman continued the policies of Umar, but as the conquests continued huge factions also developed and threatened to plunge the whole of the empire into civil war. In an attempt to impose unity, Uthman is said to have ordered the production of the first official edition of the Qur'an. With its distribution he gave the order for all previous versions to be burned. Though this was carried out, it failed to bring religious and political unity, and in the midst of rising tensions Uthman was assassinated, leaving the empire in disarray.

Caliph 4: Ali ibn Ali Talib (ruled AD 656-661)

Ali, another early convert, was of the same clan as Muhammad and was both cousin and his son-in-law. Ali was able to restore some order by suppressing some of the unrest, but he ended up in a prolonged war with a relative of Uthman's, the governor of Damascus named Mu'awiyah. Ali was assassinated by a survivor of one of the suppressed groups and his son Hasan succeeded him as Caliph for 6 months before he was overthrown by Mu'awiyah. Ali was known for his personal piety and close friendship to Muhammad.

The Sunni-Shi'a Divide

With Ali's death and Mu'awiyah's victory came a leadership dispute, centered on Ali and his descendents. Ali became the pivot of the divide between the two major factions in Islam that survives until today. Those who sided against Ali and his descendents have become known as the Sunni's (full name: ahl as-sunnah wa-l-ijma, "the People of the custom of the Prophet and the Consensus"). They were basically the winners of the dispute and were the successors to Uthman. They have become the majority group among Muslims in the world. The Shi'ites (full name: shi'at Ali- "the

partisans of Ali”) held to the legitimacy of Ali’s rule and the rule of his descendents. Shi’ites make up about 10% of the world’s Muslims today and are found mostly in Iran and Iraq, though sizable populations occur in many Middle Eastern countries and in the West. Throughout most of Islamic history, Shi’as have lived under Sunni rule but have maintained and developed distinctive teachings and customs. In Persia they have maintained a majority and have ruled over large portions of Islamic lands. They venerate ‘Ali, Hasan, and especially Husayn, believing they have some ability to mediate for a Muslim before Allah. Husayn’s tomb is in Karbala, where he was killed trying to reinstate rule by a descendant of Muhammad. Karbala is in modern Iraq and is the sight of a major pilgrimage for Shi’ites.

3. Dynasties and Expansion

From its inception, Islamic rulers saw it as their duty to expand the frontiers of territory under the rule of Islam. The first three centuries of Islam saw Islamic armies overturn many established empires and countries. In this period Islam also became a universal religion in that people embraced it from a tremendous variety of cultures and ethnic groups. During the Umayyad dynasty, central rule over all of this territory became impossible, and competing dynasties started to arise. The following list is of some of the major dynasties that controlled large regions inhabited by Muslims, and especially highlights those groups that had significant contact with the West. Many of them fought against Western countries as well as traded with them and even, on occasion, allied with them against other Muslims. There have been periods when Islam and the cultures surrounding it have greatly contributed to one another.

3.1 The Umayyad Dynasty: AD 661- 750 (Damascus) AD 756-1031 (Cordoba)

This dynasty was the first one and was made up of the descendents of the powerful Meccan clan, the Banu Umayya, of which Uthman was a member. Its first caliph was Mu’awiyah, who deposed Ali’s son, Hasan, and was successful in setting up a hereditary caliphate in his own lineage. Though this dynasty was marked with continuing conflicts between competing Muslim groups, conquests were made of territories extending as far west as Spain and as far east as India. Even after its downfall in the Middle East, it continued as a dynasty in Muslim Spain until 1031, when it was replaced by what became known as the Almoravid Dynasty. The Umayyids were responsible for conquering lands which had large numbers of Nestorian Christians (Persia and Iraq), Orthodox Christians (Syria and Palestine), Monophysite Christians (Egypt), and Western Christians (North Africa and Spain). At first, many of these groups welcomed the Muslims as liberators from the rule of the Byzantines. However, none of these groups ultimately prospered under Islamic rule and found themselves more and more consigned to the role of second-class citizens as punitive taxes and customs were introduced.

The Almoravid dynasty in Spain is notable in that a larger degree of accommodation and cooperation was allowed with the Jews and Christians that had been conquered than elsewhere in the Muslim world. Also, Islamic scholars and Christian scholars in Europe kept up a lively interchange and debate, especially in theology. Perhaps the best known example is Thomas Aquinas responding to the views of Averroes (Ibn

Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina), whose views had a tremendous impact on European philosophy. The Muslims and Jews were driven out of Spain completely in 1491 and some of the wealth that was confiscated went to supporting Columbus' voyage to the New World.

3.2 The Abbasid Dynasty: AD 750-1258 (Baghdad) AD 1261-1517 (Cairo)

This period of this dynasty covers what has come to be considered the climax of classical Islamic civilization, with its greatest years being those centered at Baghdad. In Bagdad learning from the conquered cultures was encouraged and for a long period there was a lively culture of debate and translation of ancient Greek texts for the sciences, philosophy, and medicine. Christians and Jews were often found in high places of influence in government and the sciences as well. There were also periods of fundamentalistic reaction against liberal and unorthodox thinking, often with violent suppression of scholars and their works. The early Abbasid period was marked by a strong Persian influence in Islam, and the greatest works of classical Islamic scholarship were written by Persian Muslims. An interesting sidelight is that it was during this period under Muslim rule that both the Arabic text of the Qur'an and the Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament of ours) were developed to their phonetically complete scripts that are still in use by Muslims and Jews today.

Around 1050, the Seljuk Turks took over the eastern part of the Abbasid Empire while retaining the name Abbasid and worked to expand their territories westward into the Byzantine domains. This was one of the causes of the Crusades, when the ruler in Constantinople turned to the West and asked for help repelling these invasions. During this period, the Fatimids were able to dominate the once-Abbasid lands in Egypt and North Africa.

During this dynasty India was conquered by the Ghaznavid Dynasty from Afghanistan. They were a dynasty that was not under Abbasid rule that was Turkish in descent with a Persian cultural heritage.

In 1257 The Tatars, having already conquered Russia, were converted to Islam which put Russia and much of eastern Europe under Muslim rule until the late 1400's.

In 1258 the Mongols sacked Baghdad and an Abbasid puppet-caliphate was established by the Mamluk rulers in Cairo until it this was abolished by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Selim I in 1517.

3.3 The Fatimid Dynasty: AD 909-1171 (Cairo)

This group controlled from Palestine to Tunisia during most of its reign. It was Shi'ite rather than Sunni and it had set itself up as a rival to the Abbasids of Baghdad. They had good relations with the Byzantine Empire for much of their rule, although one of their rulers, al-Hakim (d. 1021) had the Church of the Holy Sepulchre destroyed in Jerusalem in 1009, which was one of the events that inspired the Crusades. The Crusaders during this period were fighting both with the Turkish Seljuks, who dominated Syria when they conquered Antioch in 1098, and the Fatimids when they captured Jerusalem in 1099.

3.4 Mamluk Sultanate AD 1250-1517 (Egypt) AD 1260-1516 (Syria)

Mamluk Sultans ruled under Abbasid figurehead caliphs but were the real power. They were descended from Turks and other non-Arabs who had been military slaves who were the backbone of the Fatimid armies. In the end they seized power for themselves and put one of their own on the throne. Their rise to power in Egypt came as a result of resisting the Crusade under St. Louis in 1249. Their further rise in Syria was in response to the Mongol invasion in 1259. They were conquered by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I in 1517 and their domains were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire.

3.5 Ottoman Dynasty AD 1281-1924 (Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Arab lands)

The Ottoman dynasty started in what is now western Turkey in the late 1200's. They expanded their empire westward conquering Bulgaria, Macedonia, much of Greece, and most of Serbia. They went on to conquer the rest of Greece and Serbia, Albania, Romania, Hungary, lands around the black Sea, as well as Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. They captured Constantinople in 1453, and put Vienna under siege in both 1529 and 1683. Between this time and World War I the Empire declined gradually losing land and influence. The Empire was lost after Turkey sided with the Germans in World War I and all her possessions were carved up among the Western powers. Also, shortly after the war, the Islamic government was overthrown by the secularist Kemal Attaturk, putting an end to the Caliphate, which the Ottomans had claimed could be traced all the way back to Muhammad.

During the Reformation in Europe, the threat of an Ottoman Islamic invasion of Europe was a constant fear. Transylvania was the easternmost boundary of the European Reformation with both Calvin's teachings and Luther's teachings making great inroads in the 1500's. Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote vehemently against Islam and used it frequently in his writings as an example of a debased and false religion.

3.6 Southeast Asia

A special note needs to be made concerning Southeast Asia, today comprising the lands of Indonesia, Malaysia, and part of the Philippines. In contrast to the other regions of the world that had been conquered by Islam, Islam became established in Southeast Asia through traders and Sufis. Rather than conquerors replacing existing regimes with new ones, the rulers of the old regimes gradually became Muslim by conversion, and then they forcibly imposed Islam on their lands. There was also a large degree of syncretism with existing religious and cultural practices.

3.7 Sufism

While Sunni and Shi'ite distinctions have been mentioned, one significant movement has existed almost from Islam's outset and has also spread within all of the major

groupings within Islam. This movement is Sufism, otherwise known as Islamic Mysticism. It is the “New Age Movement” within Islam and stresses “hidden” meanings in the text of the Qur’an and the quest for a mystical experience of union with the divine through achieving an altered state of consciousness. There is also an emphasis on the importance of Islamic “saints” who are considered to be people with power and extra close links with Allah. Many Islamic dynasties were influenced by Sufism and it was the dominant form of Islam in the Ottoman Empire, in Persia and India, in Southeast Asia, and in many parts of North Africa. It is very popular among Muslims in the West and many Western converts embrace Sufi versions of Islam. Sufism is present in almost all forms of popular Islam. Many Fundamentalist groups openly object to it and they make it a target of persecution wherever they can.

Andy will take it from here.