Islamic World Through 1450

Allah will admit those who embrace the true faith and do good works to gardens watered by running streams.
—The Quran, Chapter 47

The fastest growing major religion in the world today, Islam, is rooted in faith in one God, Allah, as taught by several prophets. The last of these prophets was Muhammad (570-632 C.E.), who lived in the desert lands of the Arabian Peninsula.

In the course of the first century after Muhammad's life, Islam expanded rapidly, reaching from Persia to Spain. Today, Islam remains the predominant religion in the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in non-Arab countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Niger.

Pre-Islamic Bedouin Culture

In the sixth century, the Bedouins were well established in the Arabian Peninsula. Their culture was mostly nomadic, tribal, and polytheistic. In each clan or tribe, a sheikh ruled with consent of a tribal council. Shaping a sheikh's decisions was a feeling of allegiance to other clans or tribes in the region. Polygyny, in which a man has more than one wife at a time, was allowed, partly as a way to care for widows whose husbands had died in raids or warfare.

Although polytheistic, the religion of the Bedouins included worship of a supreme deity: Allah. Each tribe had a sacred stone, but the most revered of all was a large black stone at the city of Mecca. The entire tribe was a part of the religion, and there was no separate class of priests. Tribal values emphasized honesty and generosity. All of these features—except polytheism—would provide some continuity when incorporated into Islam.

Land trade routes via camels formed the basis of the Arabian economy. When fighting calmed between two nearby empires, the Byzantine to the north and the Sassanid to the north and east, water travel by the Red Sea and Arabian Sea became more popular than overland routes and the Bedouin trade caravans suffered. The Bedouins had to compete with the coastal merchants and traders, whose wealth was growing.
Muhammad and Islam

Muhammad was born into the Bedouin world in 570. He became a caravan manager. In the course of his work, Muhammad regularly came into contact with Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Muhammad married a rich widow in Mecca and settled there. Over the course of many years, he experienced revelations that he attributed to an angel of the deity he referred to as Allah. These revelations were later collected by those who had heard his message in the Qur'an (also spelled Koran, meaning “recitation”). Muhammad criticized polytheism, tribal loyalties, and commercial practices in his society. He called for social justice, including alms for the poor.

The Spread of Islam Slowly at first, Muhammad’s ideas spread through his preaching. According to tradition, it took Muhammad three years to gather 30 people to follow Allah. Muslims, those who accepted Muhammad’s teachings, viewed him as a great prophet, the final one in a line that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But Muslims did not, and do not today, worship Muhammad as divine. This contrasts with the position of Jesus in Christianity, who is considered divine by almost all Christians.

Muhammad’s teaching led to conflict with Mecca’s existing leaders. They rejected the idea that Muhammad was the agent of the one true deity and began to persecute his kin and those who worshipped Allah. Due to the persecution, Muhammad and his followers fled the city in 622 and escaped to Medina (the flight is called the Hegira). There he formed the first Muslim community. Muhammad returned ten years later to conquer Mecca and declare the building housed the sacred black stone there—the Ka’aba—a shrine of Islam.

During Muhammad’s lifetime, most of the Arabian Peninsula was united under Islam. Conditions in Arabia contributed to the rapid spread of Islam. A drought, combined with the desire of the rulers of Islam to extend their trade routes, encouraged the new converts to move out of the Arabian Peninsula. As they moved, they carried their faith with them and introduced it to others. Islam was also expanded through military conquest. But after an area was conquered, Islamic rule was relatively tolerant: No one was forced to convert to the faith. If conquered peoples paid a tax, they could become exempt from military service. The strong allegiance among Arabs to Islam and the egalitarian nature of the religion attracted many new converts.

Core Theological Principles of Muhammad Islam emerged as the third great world religion to come from Southwest Asia. Like the other two, Judaism and Christianity, Islam was a monotheistic faith that honored Abraham and other prophets. Because of these similarities, followers of Islam showed great respect toward these other People of the Book. Core theological principles of Islam include: the ideas of salvation and hope of an afterlife; the importance of submission to the will of Allah (the one true God); and a belief in the Qur'an as the sacred book providing guidance and laws for the followers.
Islam in Practice To put these principles into practice, Muslims have a core set of obligations that have become known as the Five Pillars:

1. Believing in only one God—Allah
2. Praying five times daily
3. Giving alms to the poor
4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan
5. Making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime

Another principle of Islam, and the most controversial one today, is the concept of jihad, or struggle to strive in the way of Allah and to improve both oneself and society. While many Muslims view jihad as an inner struggle, some have interpreted it as a requirement to go to war to preserve and extend Islam.

Shariah Developed by Muslim scholars after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic code of law called shariah outlines behavioral requirements for daily life. For example, it requires morality and honesty, and bans gambling, eating pork, and drinking alcohol. Polygyny is permitted in some circumstances, but Muhammad attempted to limit the practice to four wives. Also, Muslims were cautioned not to enslave Muslims, Christians, or Jews. Countries that in recent years have based their laws on shariah include Iran, parts of Nigeria, Afghanistan, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen.

The First Four Caliphs and Umayyads

At Muhammad’s death in 632, his followers split over who should become the leader of the Islamic community. Some supported his father-in-law, Abu Bakr. Others advocated for Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Abu Bakr won the dispute and took over as caliph, or head of state. He was responsible for guiding the Islamic world in accordance with the dictates of the Quran. Ali, who lost the dispute, eventually became the fourth caliph.

This succession dispute divided Islam into factions that still exist today. The supporters of Abu Bakr became the Sunni group, or Sunnis. They consider the first four successors the “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” Supporters of Ali became the Shia group, also known as Shiites. They consider Ali the first true caliph. Today, about 85 to 90 percent of Muslims are Sunni. Shia are strongest in Iran and Iraq. The term Dar al-Islam has come to refer to all of Islamic culture, including Shia and Sunni. (Test Prep: Make an outline comparing the division in Islam with the schism in Christianity. See page 134.)

As caliphs conquered lands beyond the Arabian Peninsula, they spread Islam, the Arabic language, and the cultivation of cotton, sugar, and citrus crops. Abu Bakr led raids into and seized land from the Byzantine Empire based in Constantinople and the Persian Sassanid Empire. Political conquest often led to religious conversion, but not always. Muhammad had taught that people should not be forced to become Muslims. Further, the conquering forces had a financial reason not to require religious conversion. Because Muslims were exempt from certain taxes, conversions reduced on tax collections.
Ali, the fourth caliph, ruled from 656 until he was assassinated in 661. At that time, a network of merchants from Mecca, aided by capable generals and strong armies, assumed power. They founded the Umayyad Dynasty. This Sunni dynasty moved its capital to Damascus, from where it governed its huge empire for approximately 90 years. Ultimately, the Umayyads' control reached as far west as Gibraltar, in the Iberian peninsula, and as far east as India. They controlled the largest territory of anyone since the Roman Empire.

Followers of Ali, however, resisted the Umayyad leaders, causing Shia beliefs to develop political as well as religious components. Their community leader became known as imam rather than caliph.

**Umayyads and Abbasids**

By the end of 90 years, the Umayyad rulers had grown weak and corrupt. In 750, their capital, Damascus, fell to a group known as the Abbasids. The new rulers founded a new city for their capital, Baghdad. Situated in an ideal spot for trans-Eurasian trade, Baghdad soon rivaled Constantinople in both wealth and population, and the Abbasid Caliphate became one of the most powerful and innovative empires of its time.

**Baghdad's Influence** In addition to serving as a capital city, Baghdad became a center of learning. Although the paper-making process originated in China, the invention of techniques to make thicker, more useful paper was an achievement of Baghdad. A cataloguer of books in the tenth century listed thousands of existing titles and authors, many from lands far from the caliph's court. The expansion of the intellectual world of Baghdad represented a "golden age" of learning.
The Influence of Persia When Islam was brought to Persia in 651, Arabic was the official language, and non-Arab believers such as Persians were treated as second-class citizens. In the ninth century, Persian Muslims began a movement against the privileged status of Arabs, arguing that the practice went against the Islamic principles of brotherhood and equality. Through such efforts, Persians were able to convert to Islam while maintaining their distinctive Persian culture and language. During the Islamic Golden Age that followed, Persia contributed remarkable scholars, scientists, and poets. The polymath known to the West as Avicenna (980–1037) advanced the science of medicine and wrote on numerous topics, including astronomy, geography, and logic. Rumi (1207–1273) was a Persian poet, theologian, and jurist. His poetry, mostly written in Persian, has been influential not only in Persia, but around the world. Rumi's teachings became the basis of the Sufi movement within Islam, which is described on page 155.

Problems for the Abbasids Even as Baghdad flourished in intellectual areas, the rulers confronted difficulties with tax collection and control of far-flung provinces. Grain and produce reached the city as partial payment for taxes from provincial governors, so the central administration tried to standardize tax collection to be in cash only. Administrators hoped that this reform would better support the government and minimize corruption by provincial officials.

Over time, the political empire became increasingly hierarchical with an ever-growing bureaucracy. Viziers (prime ministers) would communicate the will of the ruler to the people—the ruler himself was often seated behind a screen. Being a ruler was a dangerous occupation and leaders faced frequent assassination attempts. Some were successful.

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<th>Comparing Islamic Empires</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Abbasid Empire</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Location: Southwest Asia and North Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capital: Baghdad</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Both</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Branch of Islam: Sunni</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity of Leaders: Arab</td>
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<td>Foreign Policy: spread influence of Islam</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Umayyad Empire</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location: Southwest Asia, North Africa, and Southwest Europe</td>
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<td>Capital: Damascus and then Córdoba</td>
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Invasions and Trade Shifts

In the 1100s and 1200s, the Abbasid Empire suffered from a problem that plagued many prosperous empires in history: attacks from outside groups.

Four different groups successfully assaulted parts of the Abbasid Empire. All came from the west or north.

Mamluks Originating from Egypt, the Mamluks were a Turkic group that had formerly been military slaves. They took control of Egypt and established an empire across North Africa.
Seljuk Turks Like the Abbasids, the Seljuk Turks were Muslims. They originated from Central Asia. They seized parts of the Middle East, including Baghdad itself. Their leader took the title sultan, reducing the Abbasid caliph to the role of chief Sunni religious authority. The Turks almost immediately began threatening the neighboring Byzantine Empire.

Crusaders The conquest by the Seljuk Turks brought a third invader to the region: Crusaders from Europe. Under the Abbasids, Christians could travel easily to and from their holy sites in and around Jerusalem. When the Seljuk Turks limited this access, Christians in Europe organized Crusades to reopen access. The Crusades will be described in more detail in Chapter 12.

Mongols The fourth group to attack the Abbasid Empire were among the most famous conquerors in history: the Mongols. Like the Seljuk Turks, they hailed from Central Asia. The Mongols conquered what was left of the Abbasid Empire in 1258, and pushed Seljuk Turks out of Baghdad. They continued to push westward, but were stopped in Egypt by the Mamluks. The Mongols will be described in more detail in Chapter 13.

Economic Challenges The Abbasids faced economic as well as military challenges. In particular, trade patterns were shifting. Baghdad lost its traditional place on the southern Silk Roads route when goods began to move more frequently along northern routes. Over time, Baghdad lost population and its canals fell into disrepair and the countryside could not sustain the agricultural needs of the urban population. Slowly, the infrastructure that had made Baghdad a great city fell into decay.
Islamic Rule in Spain

While the Umayyads ruled only briefly in the Middle East, they had more success farther west. In 711, after Muslim forces had defeated Byzantine armies across North Africa, they successfully invaded Spain from the south. They designated Córdoba as their capital for Spain. They rapidly expanded northward, sending forces into France.

Battle of Tours The Islamic military was turned back in 732 when it lost the Battle of Tours against Frankish forces. This defeat, rare for Islamic armies during the 700s, marked the limit of rapid Islamic expansion into Western Europe. Most of the continent remained Christians, but Muslims ruled Spain for the next seven centuries. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph tracing the Islamic influences on Spanish culture. See also pages 227–229.)

Prosperity Under Islam Like the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Umayyad rulers in Córdoba created a climate of toleration with Muslims and Christians coexisting easily. They also promoted trade, with Chinese and Southeast Asian products entering Spain, and through it the rest of Europe. Many of the goods in this trade traveled aboard ships called dhows. These ships, first developed in India or China, had long, thin hulls that made them excellent for carrying goods, though less useful for conducting warfare. The influence of Islamic architecture can still be seen in Spain today. Impressive buildings were constructed during this period, such as the palaces and fortresses of the Alhambra (thirteenth century), built outside present-day Grenada.

Scholars in Spain The Islamic state in Spain known as al-Andalus, became a center of learning. Córdoba had the largest library in the world at the time. Among the famous scholars from Spain was Ibn Rushd, known in Europe as Averroes (twelfth century). He wrote influential works on law, secular philosophy, and the natural sciences. Another great scholar of ethics during this period was Maimonides, who was Jewish.

Social and Cultural Life

Over time, the Islamic world fragmented politically but advanced culturally. Trade brought in new goods and fresh ideas. In addition to the cities of Baghdad and Córdoba, Cairo in Egypt and Bukhara in central Asia developed great universities.

Islamic centers of learning were not limited to the study of religious teachings. Indeed, in the sayings of the prophet Muhammad is the injunction to “Go in quest of knowledge even unto China.” Islamic scholars translated Greek literary classics into Arabic, saving the works of Aristotle and other Greek thinkers from oblivion. Scholars also brought back mathematics texts from India and techniques for paper-making from China. Medical advances in hospital care improved in cities such as Cairo, while doctors and pharmacists studied for examinations for licenses that would allow them to practice. Writers such as the Persian Omar Khayyam, author of The Rubaiyat, created works that remain well known throughout the world today.
Social Classes in the Islamic World

Before the era of Muhammad, farmers and sailors were more common in the Arabian Peninsula than pastoral nomads. However, the nomads led the camel caravans that built trade relationships between coastal and interior dwellers. As always, trade spread ideas. Trade between the Byzantine and Islamic empires created contacts between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Even as society changed, kinship remained the foundation of social relations in the early Islamic world. Clan members felt strong mutual loyalties, just as they had in the Bedouin world.

However, the increase of trade along the Red Sea caused the growth of a powerful merchant elite in many cities. Both Mecca and Medina in Muhammad’s day were stops on the long-distance camel routes. In these cities, mosques and shariah provided a common base for social and cultural life.

In the non-Arab areas of Islamic expansion, control by Islamic caliphs led to discrimination toward non-Arabs, though rarely to open persecution. This discrimination gradually faded in the ninth century. The caliph’s soldiers were forbidden to own territory they had conquered. The presence of a permanent military force that kept order but did not own property allowed life for most of the inhabitants of the countryside to remain virtually unchanged. However, people paid tribute to Islamic caliphs rather than to Byzantine rulers.

Commerce and Class

The role of merchants in Islamic society was more prestigious than in other societies in Europe and Asia at the time. Muhammad himself had been a merchant, as had his first wife. Merchants could grow rich from their dealings with far-flung trade routes across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia. They were esteemed as long as they maintained fair dealings and gave to charity in accord with the pillars of the Islamic faith.

Slavery

Although Islam allowed slavery, Muslims could not enslave other Muslims. Also exempt were Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Slaves were often imported from Africa, Kievan Rus, and Central Asia, but the institution of hereditary slavery did not develop. Many slaves converted to Islam, after which their owners freed them, and their children were considered free.
Slave women might find themselves serving as concubines to Islamic men who already had wed their allotment of four wives. Slave women were allowed more independence—for example, to go to markets and to run errands—than the legal wives. Only slave women were permitted to dance or perform musically before unrelated men. This opportunity sometimes enabled female slaves to accumulate enough money to buy their freedom.

Free Women in Islam

Some practices now associated with Islam were common cultural customs in Central Asia and the Byzantine Empire before the time of Muhammad. For example, women often covered their heads and faces. This practice solidified under Islam, with many women observing hijab, a term that can refer either to the practice of dressing modestly or to a specific type of covering. Men often wore head coverings, from turbans to skull caps. While women could study and read, they were not to do so in the company of men not related to them.

Muhammad’s Policies Muhammad raised the status of women in several ways. He treated his wives with love and devotion. He insisted that dowries, the price a prospective husband paid to secure a bride, be paid to the future wife rather than to her father. He forbade female infanticide, the killing of newborn girls. Maybe most important was that Muhammad’s first wife was educated and owned her business, which set a pattern for recognition of women’s abilities.

The Status of Women Overall, Islamic women enjoyed a higher status than Christian or Jewish women. Islamic women were allowed to inherit property and retain ownership after marriage. They could remarry if widowed, and they could receive a cash settlement if divorced. Under some conditions, a wife could initiate divorce. Moreover, women could practice birth control. Islamic women who testified in a court under shariah were to be protected from retaliation, but their testimony was worth only half that of a man. One gap in the historical record is written evidence of how women viewed their position in society: most of the records created before 1450 were written by men.

As elsewhere, the rise of towns and cities resulted in new limitations on women’s rights. Their new status might best be symbolized by the veil and the harem, a dwelling set aside for wives, concubines, and the children of these women.

Sufism

As Islam spread, it became more varied. In India and Persia, Islamic groups called Sufis began to appear. Notable for their shaved heads, Sufis followed rituals and ecstatic chants in attempts to unite with God. Sufi groups abstained from earthly pleasures, and some used whirling dancing to express religious ecstasy. Unlike Muslims who focused on intellectual pursuits, such as the study of the Quran, Sufis emphasized introspection to grasp truths that they believed could not be understood through learning. Sufism may have begun as a mystical response to the perceived love of luxury by the early Umayyad Caliphate.
**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHAT IS ISLAM'S LEGACY IN SPAIN?**

In the early 1800s, many Europeans and Americans viewed the Islamic era in Spain as exotic. So, when American writer Washington Irving put together a collection of tales and observations that covered this period, under the title *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), he focused on how picturesque and romantic the era was. Readers were fascinated, and Irving’s book was a success.

**Spanish Nationalism** As Spanish nationalism grew stronger in the early twentieth century, historians focused on Spain’s distinctiveness in Europe. A Spanish historian who lived in Argentina, Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, traced it to the pre-Islamic era. He argued that the essential character of Spanish culture was established before Muslims arrived, quietly persisted during their rule, and reemerged when they were forced out. Albornoz viewed the impact of the Muslims on modern Spain as relatively minor.

In contrast, Américo Castro, a Spanish historian who lived in the United States, argued that the impact of Islam was immense. Castro concluded that the fusion of Islamic culture with older Spanish traditions made Spain “Spanish.”

**Toleration** In recent decades, Christian-Muslim clashes have prompted historians to explore again how people interacted in al-Andalus. For example, María Rosa Menocal, in *Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2002), praised Spain as a place where scholars “saw no contradiction in pursuing the truth, whether philosophical or scientific or religious, across confessional [religious] lines.”

**KEY TERMS BY THEME**

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<th>STATE-BUILDING</th>
<th>polygyny</th>
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