

32: Islamic Empires 1200-1600

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Introduction

For the objectives in this section, let me suggest three. First, to discover the various ways that Islam spread. We're thinking politically, culturally, and by conversion, realizing that Islam has many facets, and we want to look at all of those. A second objective is to understand how Islam was affected by the cultures into which it went. Then the third objective: to understand how the various kinds of resultant Islam call for different forms of witness. You will have three questions for reflection that grow out of these objectives, and then after you have had a chance to study them, we will look at the response to those questions.

The first question for reflection: *What were the various ways that Islam spread during the period under consideration?* You're going to see that there is no one way that it spread. You're going to be looking at the military, the political, Sufi preachers, traders, and see how it was carried in various ways, and hopefully learn some lessons for ourselves.

The second question to look for is: *How did the cultures into which Islam came affect the type of Islam observed there?* We find many manifestations of Islam around the world, various mixtures usually of Islam with an indigenous religion or culture. This has had many effects. It is one of the reasons why the gospel seems to spread much more easily in certain parts of the world, like Indonesia, than it has in others, for example, the Central Arab states. What are those elements, even within a society, where you have, for example in Indonesia, the Abangan, the more animistic type of Muslims, the Santri, the more formal type, and then the priajaji? Why is it that the gospel seems to spread much better among certain segments, or in this case, primarily one segment, and not in the other? These apparently would have something to do with the nature of the Islam or culture that resulted.

Then thirdly: *How will the various kinds of Islam affect the kind of Christian witness that is relevant to a particular context?* I'd encourage you all to be looking for those answers. Your readings are not going to give you many of those answers. They will give you some of the raw material to start thinking about this. You're going to have to dig

and think and reflect to see how this might affect your witness.

I would suggest, for any areas of the Islamic expansion that you do not find well covered in the materials for this lesson, that you look at Ira Lapidus' *A History of Islamic Societies*¹. Just go through the Table of Contents and jump from section to section to supplement anything you need on the expansion of Islam. I consider that to be the best one-volume history of Islamic societies. Ira and I were classmates together, and he's done a very fine job there.

Review

1. What were the various ways that Islam spread during the period under consideration?

Look first of all at the central lands, primarily the Arab and Persian lands—that sort of heartland where you had the early conquest going on across, let's say, the first 100 years of conquest. Muhammad died in 632; by 732 Islam had spread across North Africa through Spain into southern France! Going the other way, it had gone through the Arab countries, through what today would be Iran, down into what is today Afghanistan and Pakistan. There you had, first of all, military conquest. But although we have certain examples—very few but at least certain examples—of the choice being given between conversion or the sword, this certainly was not the normal pattern.

The normal pattern was the expansion of the military and political rule of Islam. Once there was political control, a Muslim ambience was created; that is, a Muslim tax structure, where those who were not Muslim paid a higher tax, and Muslim law courts. In various ways society was structured so that Christians and Jews, for the most part, were protected, except during the rule, for example, of Mutawakkil and certain men like that who actively persecuted Jews and Christians. Generally they were protected, but they were second-class. With this Islamic ambience, then, much more gradually, you had a majority of the people converting to Islam.

¹ Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

What's interesting here (although we're not in the modern, or contemporary, period) is that Muslims today in Europe, the United States and Canada have tried to reverse this process. Instead of the political, then the Islamic ambiance, and then conversion, they are trying to lead individuals to convert until there will be large enough numbers so that an Islamic ambiance can be created, and then they hope to have political control.

On the other hand, you have many places, beyond those rather central lands, where Islam generally was spread more by the trader and the Sufi. It helped trade considerably, because what it did was to give connections that were broader than local or tribal. A Muslim could set up a little community in the major ports along the two coasts of Africa or on through Southeast Asia, going up into what is today Indonesia and Malaysia. They would know there would always be fellow Muslims there, so there would be brothers or sisters in that new community. There would be Islamic law, which was pretty much the same, at least in essentials, wherever it was. So there would be a common law, a common brotherhood or sisterhood of faith, and it made trade much easier.

Also, the spread was carried on by the Sufis, and the Sufis are already syncretistic, so it was quite easy for them to move into new places and really adapt to the local religion. In Africa, for example, you would have African traditional religion, and a Sufi could very readily incorporate a great deal of that into Islam. What you had, as a result, was what we could call "folk Islam."

We can only briefly talk about folk Islam here, but let's look at some of the differences, and then how, even in performing formal Islam in a mixture, they would interpret it in various ways.

First of all, places of worship. Places of worship for the formal Muslim would be the mosque, but then as there were many shrines that developed in the area; those also would be places of worship. The written authority would be the Qur'an in formal Islam. But then in an animistic culture, the Qur'an itself would be used as a source of power or magic. Some people might wear a Qur'an as an amulet. Or the practitioners: in formal Islam they were known much more for their knowledge, the conceptual. These were people who knew Arabic, had mastered the Qur'an, had mastered Islamic law. When you moved into the folk realm, then these were people who were known because of their power.

How did this affect the Islam? In formal Islam, you would make the confession of faith: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the apostle of God." In folk Islam, you might use the confession as magical words you could recite to scare evil spirits or jinn away. In formal Islam, there would be a ritual prayer that would be designed to guide you in worship to God. You would do the ablutions, which were all borrowed from Judaism. However, once you moved into an Islamic context, instead of the washing symbolizing the washing away of sin or evil thoughts, or all that would distract from worship of God, you might think of the water up your nose as getting rid of any spirits that might have gotten up in that dark, damp place in the meantime. When you look and pronounce peace to the person on your right and peace to the person on your left, this would be seen in formal Islam as an expression of the oneness, the umma, the community of faith. Once it moved into these various animistic areas, instead it could be paying attention to the angels, or the devils, who are sitting on your shoulder.

Quite obviously, this leads us to the third question:

3. How will the various kinds of Islam affect the kind of Christian witness that is relevant to a particular context?

We think of so much of our Christian witness in theological terms. This is certainly important, but it is not where the folk Muslim's major concern is, be that person in Africa or in Indonesia.

The person whose faith has been mixed in a more animistic or tribal fashion would be looking, perhaps, more for a savior from fear than a savior from sin, because they are afraid of spirits and evil forces. They might have fear of the future, so they would find the value, the relevance, of Christ in that he is the Lord of the future. Then we don't have to worry about that which we don't know.

In their more animistic form of Islam, the community would be very important; there would be shame if they were in any way cut off from the community. So our witness would be much more on how we can help a person feel that he or she belongs to the household of faith. Or powerlessness; then we would emphasize the authority and power of the Holy Spirit. Or they might be afraid of sickness. So we could not only pray for God to heal the sick, but also ask that he would give grace to see them through the difficult circumstance.

Where so often our focus is on the cognitive, the theological, their concern is much more for experience and the existential world out there. Instead of fear, ours is a message of the authority of Christ. Instead of divination, which might be part of their experience, there would be wisdom and trust in God through Christ. Instead of looking for the zodiac to decide what are the auspicious days for a marriage or for planting, we could look to the Lord of heaven who is above all. Even as the four Gospels show four different aspects of Christ, Christ could be seen as the guide, the healer, the exorciser, the blessing, the authority, the one who meets their needs in their world view. Many parts

of Scripture will then come alive. We will see in Colossians and Ephesians, for example, how Christ is above all these principalities and powers.

There will also be a much greater need to develop discernment. Realizing that the devil replicates all of these signs and wonders of God, we need to seek to discern what is of God and what is of the devil. What has a physical base, what has an emotional base, what has a spiritual base? All of these areas of discernment become far more important when we move into Islamic areas. Much of the Islam we encounter around the world is that which has imbibed these various animistic, or tribal ideas and practices.