A THUMBNAIL HISTORY OF ISLAM

THE BIRTH OF ISLAM

The year is 610 AD. Muhammad wanders in the mountains near Mecca seeking a place to worship. An angel appears and calls him to be the messenger of God--Allah. The angel announces that the world would end, that God, the all powerful who created human beings, would judge them, and if in their lives they submitted to God's will, they could rely on his mercy at judgment. Overcome by awe, fear and foreboding, Muhammad returns to Mecca.

In Mecca a small group of believers gathered to hear him preach his revelations. Those revelations were collected and recorded by Muhammad's Companions and became the Koran. They injected religious ideas into social and political actualities. Muhammad challenged the existing institutions of Mecca society which was dominated by traders and wealthy members of the local tribe, the Quraysh, and he attacked their pagan beliefs and animistic practices. Understandably he attracted few converts among the people of Mecca outside of the poor and weak. His preaching rather made many enemies in Mecca's society; he and his followers suffered harassment and an economic boycott that denied them food and eventually forced them to leave.

At the time Medina was undergoing drastic social and economic change. A bitter feud between two local tribes led to prolonged strife, threatening the safety of harvest workers in the fields and the very future of the community. In 620 AD representatives of the two tribes approached Muhammad and invited him to come to Medina to serve as arbitrator of their disputes. They offered to accept the Prophet's guidance and what they called the holy book and in turn pledged to defend him. At the time, when Arab society lacked common law, government and authority higher than the tribal chief, it was common for feuding clans to select a man with a religious vision and reputation for fairness to serve as shaikh to arbitrate their disputes.

Assured that he would be able to continue to preach and that the tribes would defend him, Muhammad moved with his followers to Medina. Their journey of 400 kilometer across the desert became known as the *hijra* (hegira); it is regarded as the most dramatic event in the history of Muslims, as the believers in Islam came to be known. The year was 622 AD; it is year 1 in the Muslim calendar and marked the transition from a pagan society to what would become a community bound by its members' religion, Islam (Arabic for submission).

MEDINA

In Medina, the Prophet and the local leaders carried out their agreement; all disputes were brought before him and his decisions bound all. The tribes stood to defend him against his enemies, in particular the Qurash tribe of Mecca who continued to threaten him. And with this consolidation of power, Muhammad was able to eliminate competing clans and factions—in particular Jews and Christians—and to challenge the tribes of the area to convert to Islam, often forcibly. The Prophet's aim was to create a community–an umma—based on shared religious belief, ceremonies, ethics and law that would unite disparate groups to form a new Muslim-Arab society.

His work turned the revelations and the teaching of the Koran into reality. The Koran spelled out the rituals of Islam—known as the five pillars. They were daily prayer, alms giving, hajj (meaning pilgrimage), the fast of Ramadan, and finally the duty to bear witness to the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. The Koran also defined social norms of the community. It built on the traditional patriarchal family structure but introduced rules to strengthen it, such as forbidding incest, discouraging divorce and fixing paternity. It restricted the scope of blood feuds and urged participants to accept compensation instead of blood. The Koran introduced new freedom and dignity for individual family members; it urged respect for women, allowed them to hold property in their own name and to inherit a quarter of their husband's estate. But it left the prerogatives of males fundamentally intact. The Koran also dealt with other

problems of the community, such as injunctions to deal fairly, to honor contracts, to bear true witness, and take no usurious interest. And it set norms for the treatment of prisoners and enjoined gambling and consumption of alcoholic beverages.

While Muhammad preached the Koran, he also worked on building a political confederation that would extend his reforms to Mecca and to the rest of Arabia. To survive the threat he faced from Mecca, he needed the cooperation of the Arabian tribes who were fiercely independent. For some eight years, war went on between the forces led by Muhammad and Mecca but in the end, in 630 AD, Mecca succumbed and accepted the Prophet. Mecca was opened to pilgrims while Medina remained the Prophet's capital. With the end of Mecca's dominance many Arabian tribes finally accepted Islam. And so for the first time in history, a large scale federation of Arabian tribes was created.

Muhammad is reported to have been a handsome man of medium height with wavy black hair, a full beard, thick lashed dark eyes and a radiant smile. He was meticulous about his grooming, perfuming his beard and brushing his teeth five times a day. Distraught after the death of his first wife, Kadijha, who had been his first convert, Muhammad took a series of new wives. The favorite turned out to be fifteen year old Aisha. Aisha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, one of Muhammad's Companions. Her prominence in Muhammad's circle led to hostility between her and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and to bitter rivalry between Fatima's husband, Ali, who was also the Prophet's nephew and son in law, and Abu Bakr, Aisha's father, over who would be Muhammad's chief lieutenant.

When Muhammad died in 632, he had brought about great historical change. In the Koran he had synthesized religious concepts that traced back to the early Jewish and Christian prophets to form Islam and create a new monotheism. Muhammad's unique religious vision and the formation of a community based on that vision was at the heart of the new religion. While that religion shared much with the old, it claimed to be the

final and complete revelation of God's will. What made Muhammad a unique figure in history—and a prophet—was his ability to convey his vision to others in ways that gave familiar concepts the power to transform people's lives as they had transformed his. The legacy he left was not only the Koran articulating the revelations communicated to his followers over time but also the image of his personality and his way of life (the sunna) seen through the eyes of his Companions and passed on by word of mouth and by written records (hadith).

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ARAB-MUSLIM EMPIRE

Muhammad's death without a designated successor to the Prophet confronted the Islam community with a crisis. The power struggle between Abu Bakr and Ali burst into the open. Fatima argued forcefully that Muhammad had directed that the leadership of Islam should remain with his blood relatives and that Ali had been his choice. The Shiat Ali, or Partisans of Ali, rallied in support of Fatima who continued to oppose Abu Bakr with a stubbornness that continues to characterize the actions of modern Shiites. Faced with the threat of a rebellion that would break up the community, the Prophet's Companions (the ulama) elected Abu Bakr as Caliph (successor), to be shayk (chief) but not Prophet. He promised to obey the sunna, the way and precedents of the Prophet (hence sunni).

Many of the Arab tribes forced into confederation by Muhammad now saw an opportunity to assert their independence. Islam's claim to be the true religion of all Arabs was in jeopardy. Confronted with this challenge, the community embarked on a military campaign. In one great battle, its forces defeated the confederation of tribes and gained control of all of eastern Arabia. Buoyed by the Muslim victory, and the prospect of booty, tribal groups joined forces and launched a campaign of raids and skirmishes into the lands to the North, the Middle East.

The Middle East at the time was ruled by two empires: On the West, the Byzantine Empire stretched from Palestine and Egypt through present day Turkey and

Syria to the Balkans. On the East, the Sassanian empire comprised present day Iraq and Iran. Both empires had been weakened by epidemics of plague, decline in trade and long wars. Their borders were porous and Arab traders and settlers had been moving north, followed now by tribal raiders as well as Muslims seeking to extend their community. When the Byzantines resisted, Abu Bakr sent an Arab-Muslim army into Syria. In a major battle in 633 the Muslim forces defeated the Byzantine army, marking the first time that Arabs had fought as an army, and their victory emboldened them.

Under Abu Bakr's successor, Umar, the second Caliph, the Arab army went on to capture Damascus in 636 and the rest of Syria by 640. The next year, they invaded Egypt which fell in 641. Tripoli was taken in 643. Thus within a decade, the Arabs had captured Syria, Egypt and a slice of North Africa. But Anatolia and the Balkans, the richest provinces of the Byzantine empire, remained a barrier to further Arab expansion. Meanwhile in the East the Arabs defeated the Persian army and in 637 the Sassanian empire collapsed. The Arabs took its capital, conquered Iraq and eventually Iran.

This first wave of conquests was followed several decades later by new campaigns. North Africa (the Magreb) was conquered between 643 and 711; Spain was absorbed between 711 and 759, and portions of present day Afghanistan were incorporated into the Arab empire.

A number of factors accounted for the remarkably swift conquests by the Arab-Muslim armies. Both empires, as noted, had been weakened and when the armies came, they met little opposition. Islam did not force the conquered people to convert; Muslims believed that there should be no coercion in matters of faith and imposed no oppressive priesthood or sectarian demands. Also the invading forces were backed up by large-scale migration from Arabia into the more fertile Middle East. There was widespread assimilation of Arabs into the local population while the Empire accepted Muslims as equals whether Arab or not.

While the Arab armies were conquering the Middle East, turmoil reigned among

the ruling groups within the Empire itself. Following the murder in 656 of Uthman, the third Caliph (and the last of the three so-called rightly guided ones), Muhammad's nephew and son in law Ali, claimed the right to be the fourth Caliph. But Ali was not accepted by the Arab establishment in Syria which was led by its governor, Mu'awiyya, the new head of the Umayyad dynasty based in the capital Damascus,. The followers of Mu'awiyya and Ali confronted one another over the succession. Concerned that the Prophet's relatives and his Companions would go to war against each other, defying Muhammad's mission to unify Muslims, the two sides entered into arbitration. The arbitration went against Ali. Though he was prepared to accept the outcome, his more radical supporters refused and withdrew from the umma. Civil war broke out. Ali's supporters were defeated, Ali himself was assassinated, and Mu'awiyya became the fourth caliph.

Islam had reached a watershed. The split within the Muslim community over who was entitled to rule the Caliphat had become permanent and immutable. Muslims who accepted the succession of Mu'awiyya and the caliphs that followed him were called Sunnis (after sunna, the Prophet's way). Those who maintained that only descendants of the Prophet could be rightful Caliphs were the Partisans of Ali, the Shi'a.

Today Sunnis account for about 90 percent of the world's Muslim population of some one and half billion people, Shi'a about ten percent; Muslims together represent about 20% of world population. Both denominations share the same understanding of the message of God through the five pillars of Islam. The split between them revolves around the manner of selection of the leader.

Shi'a believe that leadership should go not to the most powerful but to the most committed. They maintain that Ali, as the descendant of Muhammad, should have been the first caliph of Islam after the Prophet, not merely the fourth. Had Ali been the first Caliph, his son Hussein would have become Caliph instead of Yazid, the son of Mu'awijjah, who was later elected Caliph by the umma and who ultimately ordered

Hussein's death at Karbala. Karbala was the scene of a bloody confrontation between the forces of Yazid and the badly outnumbered descendants of Ali who were brutally slaughtered. Karbala is thus crucial to the Shi'a faith. It symbolizes the elements of the Shi'a world view: their readiness for martyrdom on matters of principle, their passion for the powerless, and their disregard for death. The outbreaks of violence during the annual Shi'a pilgrimage to Karbala, covered by news media during the Iraq war, illustrate the unremitting hostility that marks relations between Sunni and Shi'a. It resides at the core of every issue in the Muslim world, and wherever Sunni and Shi'a live in proximity conflict is inevitable and often violent.

Shi'a believe that each new leader of the Islam community should be chosen by the previous Imam and thus should, like Ali, be a descendant of the Prophet. Shi'a place leadership of the community in the Imam who, although not a prophet, is the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, religio-political leader. He is the final authoritative interpreter of God's will with almost unlimited power.

Shi'a see their history as a struggle by an oppressed people to restore God's rule on earth, inspired by the martyrdom of Ali and Hussein. The religious zeal of the people and their reverence for the clerics, such as the mullahs, makes the Imam a powerful figure, as exemplified by the Ayatolla Khomeini. Without him the Iranian revolution would not have succeeded; today's Islamist movements in some degree are the legacy of this history. Shi'a in turn are split into sects the most populous of which is the so-called Twelvers, dominant in Iran, who believe that the twelfth iman who disappeared but is not dead will return as the madhi, the messiah; another is the Alewite sect which dominated Syria.

Sunni do not accept the Shi'a's concentration of power. For them, the Caliph does not succeed to the Prophet's religious authority. He holds only political authority and it arises out of the consensus of the community as expressed by the ulema, the council of traditional religious scholars.

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The Umayyad dynasty founded by Mu'awiyya ruled the Empire for ninety years, from 661 until 750. Mu'awiyya moved the capital from Medina to Damascus and under him the government evolved from a sheikdom into an imperial bureaucracy. Arabic became the official language and monumental buildings and mosques were erected as a public testament to the permanence of the Prophet's revelations. But tensions developed within the Empire, fed by personal ambitions, local grievances, tribal conflicts and religious disputes. Civil war broke out, fueled by popular dissatisfaction with the growing power of the state and resentment over the imposition of unjust taxes. In 750 an army formed by descendants of Muhammad's uncle 'Abbas defeated the Umayyads.

Again a new ruling dynasty, the Abbasids, was formed. They turned the Caliphat into an absolute monarchy, slaughtering the Shi'a leaders and others considered a danger to their rule. They moved from Damascus to a new capital at Baghdad which became the largest city in the world outside of China. The Caliphs ruled like old-fashioned oriental potentates surrounded by pomp and splendor. Their Empire reached its peak under Caliph Harun-al-Rashid when it experienced a great cultural renaissance. Muslim scholars were said to have made more scientific discoveries during this period than in the whole of previously recorded history; one example: the invention of the concept zero, making mathematics possible. But under the Abbasids, the Empire no longer belonged to the Arabs. It evolved into a cosmopolitan Middle Eastern society that simply shared Islam and, as it grew in size and diversity, it started to fracture. Egypt and Iran under new leadership broke away. Peripheral provinces, led by large landowners and military lords, asserted their independence. Shi'a led resistance to the central government. These factors and an economic decline brought about the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphat by 950, some three hundred years after the birth of the Arab conquest.

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM

With the end of the Caliphat, political and religious leadership was no longer centralized in a single leader. As the Abbasids left the scene, new dynasties arose in Egypt, North Africa, Iraq and Iran. But the basic elements of Muslim communities—their cultural and religious ideas—survived and continued to spread beyond the Arabic speaking world throughout the Middle East and beyond, from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean, to North and East Africa, and to Southeast Asia. Islam was transmitted through trade and commerce, by missionaries and to a lesser extent by military action—though rarely by the sword. Again it met with little resistance from populations attracted by new opportunities for protection and patronage. Illustrative was the reception of Islam in Indonesia and Java, now the world's largest Muslim majority nation. There Islam was not introduced by outside forces but was established by the local elite as the official religion and integrated into culture and politics as a bulwark against Portuguese and Dutch colonization.

With the geographic dispersion of Islam—and the end of government control by the Caliphat---came a religious revolution, a vast spiritual renewal, as Karen Armstrong describes it. Religious discourse came to be infused with spirituality and mysticism. Muslims seeking a path to the purification of their heart for the sake of their vision of God found it in sufism, a reinterpretation of their faith. Sufism remains today a major sect within the sunni world.

Meanwhile in the Middle East demographics were changing with the intrusion of Turks, nomadic tribesmen from Inner Asia. By the eleventh century, groups of Turks had moved across the borders into the Middle East, ranging from Iran to Anatolia and the Balkans. They formed the Seljuk empires and adopted Islam. Turkish armies conquered Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, displacing Arab leadership.

In Europe perceptions grew of a threat to Christianity posed by growing Muslim power. In 1096 Pope Urban II urged armed pilgrimage to capture the holy places from

the infidels. As an inducement to Crusaders, he promised what appeared to be absolution from past sins and salvation. Between 1099 and 1109, European warriors attacked Jerusalem, the third holiest city in the Islamic world after Mecca and Medina, massacred its inhabitants, and established a Latin Kingdom in Palestine, Lebanon and Anatolia. Latin clergy took control of the administration of the holy land. In Jerusalem the early caliphs had built the Dome of the Rock to symbolize Islam's link to Judaism and Christianity. It became venerable to Muslims when Muhammad was believed to have ascended to heaven from there. But the Muslims were indifferent to the Crusaders' invasion of the holy land and were slow to respond; only after Saladin had become Sultan and unified Egypt and Syria did Muslims under his leadership take on the Crusaders, finally defeating them in battle in 1187.

As the Crusades receded into history, the Islamic lands suffered a new onslaught. From 1220 to 1229 they were invaded by Mongol armies under their chieftain Genghis Khan. These armies brought to bear destructive power such as the world had not seen before. Any ruler who failed to submit would see his cities laid waste and their populations massacred. The Mongol invasion was the greatest political upheaval in the Middle East since the Arab invasions in the seventh century but the Mongols came without a religious mission and by the fourteenth century their empire had converted to Islam. Having achieved victory, the Mongols rebuilt their cities with magnificent buildings and promoted science, art, history and literature. But a declining economy and internal dissension weakened their empire and it was conquered by a Turk named Timur, also Tamburlaine, who ruled from 1336 to 1405. He presided over a magnificent court in Samarkand but practiced a version of Islam--cruel and violent—that was foreign to the practice of the ulema and the sufi. His empire disintegrated on his death.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

In the Fourteenth Century there emerged out of the conglomeration of warrior states formed by the Turks in Anatolia one that became known as the Ottomans, after its

founder Othman. His followers swept across Anatolia, expanded into the Balkans, and in the battle of Kosovo in 1389 extended their domain to the border of Serbia. Alarmed by the Ottoman conquests, the European states led by the papacy and Venice again launched Crusades. In two battles the Ottoman forces defeated the Crusaders. Spurred on by their victory, the Ottomans under Emperor Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453, defeating the Byzantine Empire and realizing the Muslim ambition to inherit the domains of the Roman Empire. Constantinople became Istanbul, the center of a great Turkish-Islamic Empire.

By the Sixteenth Century, the Ottoman Empire, at its height, stretched from the Iraq border in the East to Ukraine in the North, North Africa to the South, and across the Balkans to the Danube in the West. Ottomans controlled Syria, Egypt and the Arabian peninsula including the holy places. On their eastern border they fought the Safavids, the Shiite dynasty that controlled Iran. They fought the Habsburgs and Spain for control of the Mediterranean and the Portuguese over the Indian Ocean trade routes. Their expansion came to an end at the gates of Vienna in 1683 when the Ottoman siege was broken. Though their dreams of conquest were not realized, they had brought Islam to a large swath of Europe and Asia. While it displaced Christianity only in Anatolia, elsewhere in the conquered territories Islam played—and to an extent still plays today--a not insignificant role in the religious and cultural life of communities.

The Ottoman reign was noted for its splendor, reaching its apex under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66) who surrounded himself with brilliant administrators, scholars, artists and poets and built famous mosques. Suleiman was known as the law giver, shari'a became the law of the land and special shari'a courts were established. But from the Eighteenth Century on, aggressive European states confronted the Empire, causing a decline in its military and political position. No longer able to defend itself against the growing power of those states, the Empire came to depend for its protection on the balance of power between the two expanding states, Great Britain and Russia,

which found it a useful buffer. Then early in the Twentieth Century, the Balkan nations gained independence and by the end of World War I all that was left of the Empire was Anatolia, now Turkey with a majority Turkish-Muslim population. In 1923, Turkey's legislature declared it a republic, abolished the Caliphat, but retained Islam as the state religion. When the constitution was amended in 1928, Turkey became a secular republic, and the Ottoman Empire was history.

ISLAM AND MODERNITY

The modern history of Islam, according to Bernard Lewis and historians of the region, began in 1798 when the French Revolution, in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte and his expedition, arrived in Egypt and for the first time subjected one of the heartlands of Islam to the rule of a Western Power and the direct impact of Western attitudes and ideas. But it was not until the demise of the Ottoman Empire allowed new nation states to rise in the lands of Islam that Islam confronted modernity. Beginning with Turkey at the end of World War I, and in the wake of the retreat of the colonial powers, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Morocco, and others, including Indonesia, formed governments that shared a common characteristic in that they were autocratic and secular. To be autocratic and secular was considered essential to meeting the Western challenge in technology, commerce, politics and military power in the pursuit of modernity. The political classes and the intelligentsia embraced Western cultural values and accomplishments enthusiastically, and secular nationalist concepts of Muslim society submerged Islam.

This movement met resistance from the ulema and from urban and rural classes and that resistance led to Islamic reformism. Reformism was the political and moral response to the transformation of traditional Muslim societies and to the threat of European domination. It espoused a purified version of Islamic belief and practice based on a strict reading of the Koran. In its most extreme form it was practiced by the Wahabe sect and the Salafi movement of the Sunni in opposition to sufism.

But as it turned out Westernization carried the seeds of its own destruction. The societies that had embraced modernity suffered political corruption and economic failure, unemployment and pervasive poverty. Insult was added to injury when their modern armies met military defeat at the hands of Western powers.

This dismal history of despair and disillusion brought on by modernity raised the question whether the cause of the misery lay in a collective failure to look to Islam for solutions, to preserve Islamic culture and values, and—more grandiose—to recapture the greatness of the historic faith. So began the Islamic resurgence and with it a religious revival which brought renewed commitment to Islamic values and practices; one small but not insignificant example was the increasing popularity of veiling among many Muslim women who found it to be a source of security and comfort. But in some sectors religious revival metastasized into Islamic fundamentalism, i.e. political Islam. Its earliest manifestation was the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, whose aim was ultimately to bring about an Islamist state governed by shari'a.

In a world preoccupied with the Cold War, Islamic fundamentalism remained below the radar until 1979 when the Iranian revolution burst upon the world scene. This is how the Islamic scholar Ira Lapidus describes its effect:

> For the first time in the modern era religious leaders . . . defeated a modernized regime. . . .The event shook the relations between states and religious movements, and opened doubts as to the future not only of Iran but of all Islamic societies.

Islam had become a political force driving toward universal establishment of Islamist states with shari'a at their core. A word about shari'a. News headlines tend to feature extreme, and possibly aberrational application of shari'a, such as the stoning of adulterous women and the amputation of thieves' hands. While these acts reflect application of legal rules of shari'a derived from the Koran, it is also true that other schools have in the course of history developed a jurisprudence that gives judges, if they

chose, wide discretion to temper their severity.

Finally, Afghanistan opened a new chapter of post revolution history. Resistance to the Soviet invasion gave birth to the mujahidin who took their inspiration from the Koran's command to do jihad, i.e. to spread Islam. Though the Koran allows jihad to be performed in peaceful ways, the mujahidin under its aegis conducted a brutal war driving the enemy out of the country. Their legacy gave birth to the jihadi, the cadre of future terrorists.

The developments I have described—the rise and fall of modernity—have taken place on the broad stage of today's Islamic world. It is a multifarious stage, not susceptible to generalization. It consists, roughly, of the Northern half of Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South East Asia. It comprises some 50 states with Muslim majority populations. Of those states six describe themselves in their constitution as Islamic states, meaning that they have incorporated shari'a and the Koran into their legislation; 18 states have simply designated Islam as the state religion; 18 define themselves as secular, and the rest are silent as to religion. Thus today's Muslim world is far from monolithic.

ISLAM AND THE FUTURE

This paper deals with the past but past is prologue. You may fairly ask what does history foretell about the role of Islam in tomorrow's world. Some—Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington—predict a clash of civilizations between the West and an Islam convinced of the superiority of its culture but obsessed by the inferiority of its power. Few share this apocalyptic view. While hostility toward the West may be widespread among Muslims, Islam remains for them the primordial sentiment that defines for the individual believer his personal existence and relationship to a human community. At its best, Islam has kept the notions of social justice, equality, tolerance and compassion at the forefront of the Muslim conscience, even if Muslims did not always live up to these ideals. Islam's future as a religion is no more defined by the violent excesses of its

fringe than the crusades defined christianity. In the words of the Koran:

> O unbelievers, I will not worship that which ye worship; nor will ye worship that which I worship . . . Ye have your religion, and I my religion.

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