

Since When is Anyone a Muslim?

ISLAM began as a world religious movement in the first decade of the seventh century of the Common Era, in the city of Makkah in Arabia. It was taught by Muhammad, son of ‘Abdullāh, of the tribe of Quraysh, who at the ripe age of forty, began to have visions in which God, through the instrumentality of Angel Gabriel, sent down a revelation. The revelation was from God, not of God. It was a disclosure of His will, or commandments, in sublime Arabic form. It came piecemeal, sometimes in a problematic situation which called for a solution, dispensation or guidance for the given circumstance, sometimes without, the situation being the wider religious context of the unbelievers, or of the Christians and Jews of whom there were many in Arabia and the adjoining countries. At first, Muhammad himself did not believe, and thought the matter to be an illusion, a devil’s temptation or possession. As the visions persisted, he became convinced that God was truly calling him to rise and teach the new faith.

The first convert was Muhammad’s wife, whose faithfulness to her husband made her a Muslim before Muhammad’s conviction of his own prophethood. Other relatives and friends followed and a nucleus community was formed. The Arabs, whose traditional faith denied the unity and transcendence of God as well as the Day of Judgment and who based life on some chivalry values, hedonism and materialism

were not responsive. At first, they subjected the new teaching to scorn; but when Muhammad and his companions stood firm, they countered with subversion, public vituperation and persecution. The fledging community bore its travail with patience and determination and continued to grow. Soon, the Arab hierarchy in Makkah decided that there was no escape from total war against the new Muslims if their and Makkah's position in the religious, social, political and economic spheres were to be saved. They offered Muhammad wealth, kingship of Makkah and cure of his "madness" by the greatest physicians of the world. But he refused. Then they sought to break up the tribal solidarity of Muhammad's clan of Hāshim on which the Muslims depended for inter-tribal security, by appealing to the Prophet's uncle and personal protector, the non-Muslim Abū Ṭālib, Hāshim's elder statesman, to relinquish his tribal solidarity with Muhammad. The old uncle pleaded with his nephew to cease to raise trouble which the clan could no longer bear. But the Prophet answered: "If the sun was put in my right hand and the moon in the left in exchange for God's religion, I would never yield – not even if I were to perish in preaching it!" When that too failed, the Makkans put in operation a plot to assassinate Muhammad.

Sensing danger, Muhammad had contracted with Muslim converts from Madinah to furnish protection in case of need. When danger came close, he outwitted his enemies and slipped out of Makkah to join the Muslim followers of Madinah, now reinforced with the Muslims of Makkah who had emigrated to Madinah, one after the other, at the advice of the Prophet. In Madinah, the danger did not disappear, but took a more ominous turn. Now it became a real war between Makkah and Madinah and all the tribes of the countryside which the two powers could rally to their sides.

Upon arrival in Madinah, Muhammad integrated the Muslims of all tribes into one solid body, and integrated this body with the Jews of Madinah into an Islamic polity. He gave it its constitution and assumed its leadership. The revelations continued to come providing guidance in the social, political, economic and judicial affairs with which Muhammad had to deal. The war with Makkah began with skirmishes, which were followed by two main rounds of battle, one of which was

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gained by each party, but neither of which was conclusive enough to enable the victor to put a final end to the hostility. A truce followed, before and during which Islam won the adherence of thousands. When allies of Makkah violated the truce, the Muslims mobilized and marched on Makkah, conquering it without a fight. In a magnanimous gesture, Muhammad forgave the Makkans; and they converted to Islam *en masse*. The Prophet entered the Ka‘bah, the House which Abraham and his son Ismail built for worship of the One God and which had by then become filled with idols. He destroyed the idols and images, cleansed and reconsecrated the House to God.

One campaign after another was now launched to bring Islam to the remaining tribes of Arabia. Some felt now free from the might of pagan Makkah, and free to give conscientious consideration to the call of Islam. These joined the ranks of Islam voluntarily. Others felt strong enough to continue the fight without Makkah, and had to be brought into line by force. Converts to Islam, however, did not come only from pagan Arabian religion. Arab Christians and Jews converted in significant numbers. Those who rejected Islam and stood firm by their old faith, whether Judaism or Christianity, were not molested. On the contrary, under divine sanction revealed in the Qur’an, the Prophet had recognized Christianity, Judaism and the religion of the Sabaeans as revealed and valid, fraternized with their followers, and integrated them within the Islamic state even while they preserved their religion, their culture, their customs and their non-Muslim identities. The Islamic State was their protector. They lived under its aegis as religiously, culturally and legally autonomous units, complete communities with their own schools, temples, law courts and leaderships. The whole of Arabia, however, stood at the death of the Prophet in 632 CE – ten years after the hijrah (emigration) of the Prophet to Madinah – united and poised to carry the message of Islam to the world. Muhammad had previously sent messengers to the leaders of the then-known world inviting them to join Islam; or, if they wished, to keep their religion but join the new world-order of Islam which was built on the principle of free movement of man, ideas and wealth anywhere. Some answered with friendship and sympathy; others, by beheading the messengers.

The next one hundred years saw the most spectacular conquests history has ever witnessed. The Muslims stood in France and Spain after a sweep across North Africa; in Central Asia and the Indus River basin in the East, after a lightning sweep across the Persian Empire. The two greatest empires of the time, Persia and Byzantium had crumbled and failed. More spectacular yet was the tremendous appeal of the new world view of Islam to Christians torn apart for centuries by Byzantine theological controversies, and Persians broken with suffering under the yoke of caste and a very unjust socio-religious system. Within a generation men and women converted to Islam by the millions.

The great appeal of Islam consisted in the reasonableness of its theological claim. The world was created by God, the One and only Transcendent Being, Who implanted therein His pattern, thus making it an orderly cosmos. He also created man rational, free and responsible, that by exercising his faculties, he may achieve the good in this world, in all the world, and for all men in equality and brotherhood. That all men are equal means that there shall be no heretication, no coercion in religion, as well as no imperialist colonization of one people by another. God does not want man to mortify himself, nor to lead the ascetic or monastic life. Rather he should lead an abundant life, full of joy and happiness, but realizing the moral laws of purity, faithfulness to God, equity and fairness, love and brotherhood. Man is destined to serve God in His earth, to build it up and fructify it; for it is good and capable of actualizing man's idealistic vision. To do so and persevere is to guarantee success and happiness in this world as well as on the Day of Judgment. There is neither vicarious sin, nor vicarious guilt, nor vicarious suffering, nor vicarious punishment, nor vicarious merit and salvation. Blest or unblest, every soul gets exactly what it has deserved, according to its personal deeds.

Moreover, what left the worldwide audience of the Islamic call utterly armless and won their hearts to Islam without resistance was the fact that the Muslims really practiced what they taught. There was no splitting of personality, no double conscience, no hypocrisy, no racialist inequality however camouflaged. The Muslim readily intermarried with the citizens of other lands even before their conversion to Islam, a measure which raised the vanquished to the status of in-laws of the

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conqueror. Muslim rationalism and pragmatism knew few bounds, as Muslims pursued knowledge and wisdom at the feet of non-Muslim masters without shame or self-conceit. They paid double attention to prove their faith true, that is, that Islam indeed gives its adherents two happinesses, here and in the hereafter. (Qur'an 2:201)

This avid pursuit of the two happinesses resulted in worldly wisdom and success for the Muslims as well as moral felicity. It caused Muslim science, engineering, arts and letters to prosper and flourish; their empire to succeed; and their moral record to remain, on the whole impeccable. This instilled in the hearts of non-Muslims a deep sense of respect and admiration for Islam's followers, and a yearning to emulate or join them. When a decision to join was voiced by any non-Muslim, of however lowly an origin or status, to enter Islam, he was instantly raised to the highest level, declared a brother to all the believers, intermarried with them, and received with open arms in genuine brotherhood. For these reasons, the state income from the *jizyah*, the poll tax all able, lay, adult, male non-Muslims paid to the Islamic state in lieu of the zakah tax and military service imposed on all Muslims, dwindled in the first fifty years after the conquests from numerous millions of dinars to a trifle – because of these massive conversions to Islam!

The spring and summer of the Islamic Empire lasted five hundred years, during which the Muslims led the world in everything – astronomy to spices. They discovered new lands and established new disciplines. In the meantime, their energies were spent, and they began to decline on many fronts. Internal division weakened them before their foes; individualism, and preoccupation with personal salvation weakened the internal cohesion of state and society. Finally, misunderstanding of spiritual welfare as the gnosis of the mystics dulled the Muslim's rational powers, removed him from empirical and pragmatic enquiry, and delivered him to the esoteric whimsy of the *shaykh*, *pir* or mystic elder.

At the same time, the greatest holocaust of history was unleashed by the Mongols of Central Asia against the world. Unfortunately, the Islamic Empire was the first obstacle standing in the way of the rampaging hordes. They fell on it with fire and fury, razing city after city

and ravaging province after province. At the same time, European crusaders fell on the Empire from the West. While the Empire managed finally to repulse the crusaders, islamize the Mongols and acculturate all invaders who chose not to return whence they came, the majority of Muslims became conservative out of fear for the extinction of their faith, and withdrawn from history out of preoccupation with “eternity.” As the reconquest of Spain by Europe became imminent from the beginning of the fourteenth century, islamized elements of the eastern invaders, still stirring with energy and power, took to the field to rebuild the stricken empire. Within a generation, the empire was on its feet, marching again in the direction of Europe as Europe was marching through Spain. The Muslims conquered Asia Minor and Constantinople fell in 1458 CE Europe stopped in Spain; but the Muslims pushed forward until, a century later, they laid siege to Vienna, having appropriated all the territories in between as well as the whole of the Caucasus, southern Russia and Poland.

The mystic disease was kept at bay during two or three centuries, but it was not uprooted. The new empire fell easy prey to it, and the same drama of internal and external weakness was repeated. Europe not only recovered, but grew strong enough to repulse the Muslims from its territories (except for the Muslim communities of Albania, Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries). Europe’s forces occupied the whole Muslim World except Central Arabia and Yemen, and divided it among themselves. The Muslim World groaned under colonial rule for a century at places, and for three centuries at others.

The wind of reform and reconstruction stirred within the heart of Arabia, as it did in earlier centuries. Out of the desert came calls to repudiate mysticism and return to the life-and-civilization-giving views of pristine Islam. The Muslim World responded with a whole series of movements designed to cleanse and raise Islamic society. These movements soon became political, as colonialist Europe mobilized to stop them. Quickly, the battle lines were drawn: On one side stood Europe, fighting to spread the religion of Christ with the imperial sword, and to protect its exploitation of Muslim lands and labor as well as the colonialist settlers which had been planted among the Muslims. On the other side stood the Muslim World, defending the traditional

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native faith of the fathers against foreign aggression, protecting the land and people against alien invasion, occupation and colonial settlement.

Today the competition has barely shifted from military confrontation to economic, neo-colonial, and other more subtle means of subversion and exploitation. The Muslim World is modernizing and industrializing at a furious pace, leaping over centuries. The Western Christian World is overdeveloped and needs both the material and human resources of the other. What was a handful of Muslims in the Christian West fifty years ago, is now a considerable stream of immigrants taking up positions in factories as well as in universities. Today there is an Islamic presence in Europe and America that has become native and is certain to grow.

The next door neighbor in any metropolitan center in Europe and North America might well be a Muslim. He may be caucasian or colored; he may speak any one of a dozen Islamic languages besides English. And he may be so Westernized and acculturated that one may not easily become aware of his presence without communicating with him.