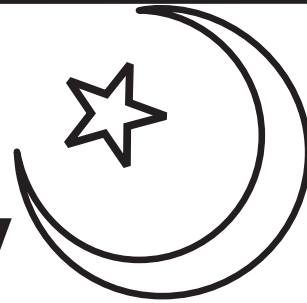

Islam

A Brief History

by Albert James Dager



At the time of [Muhammad](#)'s birth, around A.D. 570, the Middle East was populated by numerous autonomous tribes, both nomadic and urban. Each worshiped their particular pagan deities, and they were constantly at war with one another. The influence of Christianity, throughout the lower peninsula known today as Arabia, was minimal. Nothing at the time suggested that the Arabs would soon impress upon the history of the world their influence through the defeat of the Greeks and Persians within the land then apportioned under the names Nejd and Hijaz. The various tribes of the area were factious, some banding together only for purposes of commerce or to fight a common enemy. But there entered into their midst a man claiming to be the prophet of God, whom he called [Allah](#). His influence, though modest at first, would grow rapidly to unite the Arab tribes under a monotheistic religion called Islam ("Submission").

[Muhammad](#) was born in Mecca. His father, 'Abd Allah bin 'Abdalmottalib, died before Muhammad was born. His mother Amina died while he was still a child. He was first cared for by his grandfather, 'Abdalmottalib, and after his death by his oldest paternal uncle, Abú Tálib bin 'Abdalmottalib.

His family was very poor. All that is definitely known of Muhammad's youth is that, as he grew older, he was a shepherd and he gathered wild berries in the desert.

At the age of twenty-five he was recommended by his uncle to the house and business of a wealthy widow named Khadíja. Making commercial journeys for her, he became familiar with the land of Palestine and Syria. In time he married the widow, though she was much older.

During his travels, Muhammad came in contact with a religious movement which had gained influence in Mecca, Medina and Táif. In Mecca, Arabian heathenism was traditional, and was chiefly manifested in great feasts at certain holy places. The Arabs were polytheistic, having many gods. These gods were the patrons of the tribes, and many families had household gods to whom homage was paid in order to gain their blessings in commerce and life in general.

In [Mecca](#) the [Quraysh](#) tribe worshipped the moon god [Al-ilah](#) and his three daughters, Lat, Uzza and Manat. According to the Islamic [Bukhari Hadith](#), 3:658, and 5:583—Islam's written traditions—a black meteorite, called the [Ka'bah](#), which was covered with cloth, was the focal point of the worship of some 360 idols. Five times a day, the people would pray toward the Ka'bah, and fast for part of a day for an entire month.

Pre-Islamic Arabs made pilgrimages (['Umrah](#)) to Mecca. Not performing 'Umrah was considered one of the major sins.

One of the 360 idols at the Ka'bah was Allah. The name was likely a contraction of the Arabic *Al-iláh*, which was the supreme deity of the Quraysh. The Quraysh differed from other pagans who worshiped a sun god and a moon goddess, as they worshiped a moon god and his wife, the sun goddess. It was by Allah's name that covenants and treaties were sealed, oaths sworn and the most sacred practices invoked. But because Allah was so high, it was assumed that no personal relationship with him could be attained. Thus, he was the least worshiped, the gods deemed the most venerable being those that might grant the greatest blessings upon the worshippers' personal desires.¹

Yet in spite of the preponderance of gods, the religion of the Arabs was not of primary importance. Of greater concern were practical matters that ensured good relations, good commerce and a happy, if profligate, lifestyle. The gods were invoked more as supplemental insurance than as objects of primary dependence.

In this milieu stood individuals who desired a better religion. These were called [Hanífs](#), "penitents" who strove to free themselves from sin. The Hanífs rejected [polytheism](#); only Allah was to be worshiped. Faith in Allah was equated with submission (*Islam*) to his will. The Hanífs believed in a coming judgment and pious devotion to what they considered a sinless life. These were ascetics whose ideas of the religion of Abraham were most desirable.

It appears as if Muhammad came into contact with the Hanífs through a cousin of his wife, Waraka bin Naufal, who was one of them. The religion of the Hanífs found fertile ground in Muhammad, who felt a dependence upon Allah, and a responsibility to spread the faith. As a consequence of his devotion he often withdrew for long periods to [Mount Hirá](#), where he prayed long and exercised his ascetic lifestyle. His religious fervor growing, Muhammad claimed to have visions during these periods. He would often fall into trance-like states, from which he would emerge with some new revelation. It is debated whether Muhammad suffered from hysteria, epilepsy, or was cataleptic. Whatever the source of his spells, he believed he had a mission from Allah to spread the "Truth." With that vision before him he was compelled to leave the ascetics and more openly proclaim Allah as the only god.

It was in the month of [Ramadan](#), during one of his withdrawals to Mount Hirá, that he ostensibly had a

vision of the angel Gabriel who came to him as he slept. Gabriel, he said, held before him a silken scroll and compelled him, though he was illiterate, to recite what was written on it. This was the first passage of what he believed to be the "heavenly book," from which Moses, Jesus and all the biblical prophets had drawn their truths. When Gabriel left him, so the account goes, Muhammad went to his wife [Khadíja](#), and told her of the vision. He was distressed and believed himself to be possessed by demons. Khadíja convinced him that he had, indeed, received a revelation and was called as a messenger of God.

Thus, Muhammad became a prophet. Taking his example from what he knew of the biblical prophets, he was emboldened by the fact that, among the Hanífs, were a number who were looking for a messiah figure to bring about a new religion. He was also aware of the messianic hopes of the Jews in his region.²

Early on, however, he struggled with his role as prophet. When the visions ceased for a period of about two or three years he became despondent, and often thought of suicide. But suddenly, "Gabriel" appeared the second time and gave him another sura. From thence the visitations continued regularly, through which Muhammad received the various suras of the Qur'an, and he was assured of his role as Allah's prophet.

Many of the ideas upon which Islam was founded did not originate with Muhammad. The ultimate source of the movement was, in reality, Jewish. There was a large population of Jews in the Arab territories. From them the Arabs learned about the writings of the Prophets.

Yet Judaism was not the source for Islam's productive force. Nor was the established Christianity learned from contact with the Greek, Syrian and Abyssinian churches. Aberrant strains of Christianity, such as that of the Sabians, were more common in Arabia. The early Muslims in Mecca and Táif called themselves "Sabians."³ The deepest influence upon the Hanífs, and thus upon Muhammad, seems to have come from the numerous sects of asceticism in the area. Asceticism and meditation were chief elements of the Hanífite practices, and they were sometimes called by the same name with the Christian monks, "Ráhib."

For the first three years of his mission, Muhammad did not publicly proclaim his religion. He sought followers through private circles, the first being the members of his own household—his wife Khadíja, his freedman Zaid bin Haritha, his cousin 'Alí, and a close friend, Abúbekr bin Abí Koháfa. Abí Koháfa gained several other converts who became noteworthy in the history of Islam. This small community of believers met regularly for common exercises of prayer.

The relationship of Muhammad's small community found favor among the Hanífs. They had the name of Muslim (one who submits) in common, and most of their principles were the same. It was Muhammad's strength of character and personality that gave vitality to a movement already in existence. It was not necessarily his original intention to found a new religion, but to spread the religion of the relatively small sect of Muslims among the greater population of Arabs. As far as Muhammad was concerned, Islam was the true

religion of old—the same religion of Moses and Jesus—written in the heavenly book. The differences between Islam, Judaism and Christianity did not occur to him until much later.

The nature of Muhammad's mission did not allow him to remain content practicing his religion privately in his small group. He was compelled to publicly proclaim the "Truth." One of his followers, Arkan bin Abí Arkam, offered his house, which stood near to the sanctuary in Mecca. But Muhammad did not obtain any great advances among the Meccans. His message was already familiar to them, the only distinguishing characteristic being his enthusiastic proclamations. The Meccans dismissed him as a visionary, or a poet, or simply as one possessed. They were especially unimpressed that his initial advocates came from the lower classes, including slaves, and from among the youth. The rulers and elders were not disposed to follow him, making it difficult to find disciples among the population of the city.

The indifference of the Meccans embittered Muhammad, leading him to become more polemic in his proclamations. Suddenly the suras that came from "Gabriel" became more hostile toward those who reject the "Truth." He began to threaten the infidels with the judgment of God for their contempt of Allah and of his messenger. This infuriated the Meccans who, though formerly holding their religion because of convenience rather than pure devotion, were offended by the attack against the traditions of their fathers. As well, the prosperity of their community was upheld by their religious traditions.

It was at this time that two conversions took place, which would give the Muslims a new vitality. Muhammad's uncle, Hamza bin 'Abdalmottalib, in response to his family pride being wounded by the treatment of his nephew, converted to Islam. Of greater importance was the conversion in the same year of 'Omar bin al-Khattáb. Al-Khattáb was not rich or noble, but his public offering of prayer (which heretofore had always been in private gatherings) emboldened other Moslems to make their faith known more publicly.

This had the adverse effect of causing the greatest conflict between Muhammad and the townspeople. His pronouncements became more offensive than ever to their religion. Allah, it was proclaimed, was less displeased by idols than by idolaters; and he was less concerned with worship than he was with rejection of his messenger, Muhammad.

The dispute between the Quraysh (the dominant tribe) and Muhammad spilled over to the Hashimids, his relatives, who, though not believing on him, stood by him for the sake of family.

Failing to make gains with the Meccans, Muhammad assaulted their beliefs and brought upon himself and his family the status of outlaws. Ultimately, he gave the Meccans up, realizing that, in his native town, Islam was to make no progress through reasoning.

Upon the death of his wife he moved to the town of Táif. On his arrival he asked the heads of the town for protection to preach his message. He was denied, and a mob drove him out of town. He did not attempt to

reenter Mecca until, after awhile, he gained the protection of one of Mecca's leading citizens, Mot'im bin 'Adi. Two months after the death of Khadija he married Sauda bint Zam'a, the widow of an Abyssinian emigrant.

Muhammad had given up trying to convert the Meccans, but he would enter into discourse with Arabs who visited the city. A small company of citizens from Medina delighted him by their show of willingness to accept his teachings. Hanifitism was already well-known to the citizens of Medina, and there was an expectation of a new religion and an Arab messiah.

At the pilgrimage feast the next year, twelve citizens of Medina pledged to have no god but Allah, and to live by his tenets. They returned to Medina as disciples of Muhammad, with the promise to let their prophet hear of their efforts the next year.

Islam gained great favor in Medina and spread very quickly. Some time later, around March 622, some seventy-five pilgrims from Medina who had converted to Islam came to the Meccan festival where they requested Muhammad come with them, promising to guard him as they would their wives and children. Many Muslims left Mecca for Medina with Muhammad following later.

With what has come to be known as "the Flight" to Medina a resurgence of Muhammad's purpose flourished. He became not only the religious leader of the city's newfound Islam, but began a campaign to unite the Arab commonwealth. In the process of realizing his political aspirations, Muhammad also saw Islam weakened by the adherence of those who took to it for practical rather than devout reasons. Still, Muhammad was recognized by the citizens as the supreme authority in civil matters brought to him as to a judge. Thus began his spiritual ascendancy which would soon engulf the entire Arab world.

It was not long before he was able to demand what had begun as a voluntary tribute to him. In the first year of the Flight, Medina established a constitution wherein it was stated, "Every dispute which ye have one with another ye shall bring before God and Muhammad." In an incredibly short time, Muhammad had become the most powerful man in all Medina. And his former pacifist attempts to spread Islam when he was weak in number of supporters began to give way to more aggressive means to gain "converts."

Muhammad drew upon Islam's religious tenets to gain financial strength. Next to the monotheistic confession and to prayer came almsgiving, initially intended to help the poor. In time almsgiving became a form of tithing which soon became the basis of the Muslim fiscal system and the material foundation of the Muslim state. Nothing but the name of alms remained; the taxes had to be paid to "God."

Additionally, whereas the old polity of Medina tolerated foreign elements, under Muhammad's authority it was necessary to either adopt Islam or be expelled. When the Jews, who had unintentionally aided Muhammad's rise to power, saw the direction in which he was taking the city, they could not conform. Muhammad then considered them his enemies. He altered the direction of prayer, which had formerly been

toward Jerusalem, and required all to pray toward Mecca, his hometown. For the fast on the 10th of Tisri he substituted the month of Ramadan. He also dismissed the Sabbath for Friday as the principle day of worship.

Muhammad's break with Judaism began the Arabizing process which followed the pattern of Islam from that of being an individual religion to being a political religion. His chief accomplishment was to bring about a nationalization of Islam for the purpose of welding together the Arab tribes into one community.

Thus were developed the five-point precepts of Islam, called the Five Pillars of Faith—(1) Confession of the oneness of God; (2) obligatory stated prayer; (3) almsgiving; (4) the fast of Ramadan; (5) observance of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The obligatory, stated prayer is a rote repetition of prayers to Allah. To most Muslims the idea of individual communication with God is unknown. Among different sects, the observance of the pilgrimage to Mecca is approached differently. Among the Sunni Moslems, if one cannot perform the pilgrimage, another may go in his place; among the Shiite Moslems one may celebrate the pilgrimage by going to another holy site within more convenient distance.

Now Islam became central to the building of the new social structure. It ruthlessly broke up the old order and cemented the elements into a new, more stable system.

It is said that the very hearts of men were changed in the presence of Allah, and brother would have slain brother had Muhammad commanded it. The religious bonds of Islam became the defining elements of family. Every Muslim was every Muslim's brother. Outside of Islam there was no safety and the law could not protect. Allah alone was the protector of only those who acknowledged his sole sovereignty.

Fear began to invade the consciousness of the people. In order to procure safety it was necessary to adopt Islam, if not by faith, at least by word. This created a class of people called "hypocrites"—Muslims who were either only half-attached to Muhammad, or were, in their hearts, unfavorably disposed toward him. They were kept from overtly defying Muhammad partly by their inability to muster consensus and partly by the terrorism practiced by the conscientious Muslims against dissenters. In truth, a large segment of Medina's populous was of the hypocrites' persuasion, but they were powerless to do anything about it. Their adoption of Islam was for the sake of safety.

Muhammad assumed good relations with a few of the smaller tribes that inhabited the vicinity of Medina, and forged an alliance. But towards all the rest of Arabia his very principles placed him at war. Since Islam had been transformed from a religion into a political power, he chose to assert its claims to supremacy by means of war. The conflict of principles had to be settled by the sword, and the sole sovereignty of Allah had to be established by bloodshed without regard to one's station in life, whether woman, child or feeble. Allah's blood thirst against the infidel had to be sated.

Muhammad's first foray was against the Meccans, in the month Rajab, in the Autumn of 623. Among the

Arabs, the month of Rajab was a time to rest from war. Plundering and raids were held to be unlawful, and these rules were adhered to out of a common sense of honor. Muhammad saw an opportunity to catch his prey unawares.

Relying upon the sacredness of the month, a caravan was returning from Táif laden with leather, wine and raisins. Muhammad sent out a band disguised as pilgrims to surprise the caravan at Nakhla, between Táif and Mecca. One Meccan was killed, and Muhammad's treachery was roundly condemned by the Meccans. Even in Medina there arose such a disapproval of his treachery that he had to abandon any such sacrilege in the future. But that did not stop him from continuing his campaign of terrorization.

In Ramadan (December 623), the return of a great Syrian caravan was expected in Mecca. Muhammad lay in wait for it at Bedr, a favorite watering place and camping ground north of Medina. Getting word of the ambush, the Quraysh took arms, 900 strong, to set upon the Muslims. On Friday, the 17th of Ramadan, the encounter took place. The Muslims gained the upper hand, chiefly because of their determination. The Quraysh were stunned in experiencing the fervor with which the Muslims fought. Whereas the Quraysh were fighting for their material wealth, the Muslims were engaged in a holy war (*jihad*) for the cause of Islam. They wanted the material wealth for their cause. They were reckless of consequences because they had been convinced by Muhammad that, should they die in their war against the infidel, they would be welcomed by Allah into the Garden of Paradise.

Bedr is among the most celebrated battles for Muslims; it greatly strengthened Muhammad's position, eliminating open opposition in Medina. The citizens became so fearful of him because of atrocious murders carried out in obedience to his orders that they converted to Islam rather than risk death themselves.

His army grew through plunder by jihad. Before long, virtually no one could stand against him. He required that his followers pledge themselves unto death.

Muhammad's campaign of terror consisted of assassinations, murders, enslavement, and decimation of entire populations. Women and children were sold into slavery. His pogroms were effected not only against the pagan Arabs he sought to unite through the fear of the sword, but particularly against Jews and Christians whom he began to regard as enemies of Allah.

In his conquests he allowed the people to retain their festivals, but their idols were abolished, and all ceremonies were performed in respect of Allah.

The impression produced by Muhammad's conquest of Mecca was so great that it came to be called "the Conquest," as if it contained all others within itself. Impressed with the strength Muhammad had gained, the sheiks of the Arab lands flocked to Medina, either of their own accord, or by order of Muhammad, to accept Islam for their tribes.

Muhammad was wise in not attempting to meddle too much in tribal affairs, but strengthened the ruling classes in order to solidify his influence over the tribes. The people were compelled to follow their leaders into

Islam. By March 632, all Arabia lay at Muhammad's feet, save the strongholds of Greece and Persia. In his last years he began to extend his jihad against the Greeks, but he died before realizing any great success.

Over the centuries Islam gained many successes, but also suffered many setbacks. Ultimately there arose various sects who held in common the basic tenets of Islam—the Five Pillars of Faith—but took different views of how Islam would play out in individual lives as well as national policy.

After Muhammad died some of the caliphs, successors to Muhammad, began to write their understanding of his teachings and practices, as well as certain traditions which Muslims are expected to believe. These are the four Hadiths, regarded by most Muslims (the Sunni, especially) as nearly as important as the Qur'an. Two other, lesser important, sources for Muslim beliefs and practices are Reasoning and Consensus of Community. Apart from the Qur'an, however, the four Hadiths are the true theological foundation of Islam.

While the Qur'an contains sufficient evidence for the violent nature of Muhammad's Islam (which is the only Islam that exists today), the Hadiths offer some important insights into the nature of the religion.

The Bukhari Hadith, written by Sahih Al-Bukhari, tells us that Muhammad is not to be worshiped:

Then Abu Bakr recited the Tashah-hud ("none has the right to be worshiped but Allah, and Muhammad is Allah's Apostle"). (*Bukhari* 2:333).

Yet Muslims are expected to treat Muhammad with nearly the same adoration as that given to Allah:

By Allah, whenever Allah's Apostle spitted, the spittle would fall in the hand of one of the [Prophet's companions] who would rub it on his face and skin; if he ordered them they would carry out his orders immediately; if he performed ablution, they would struggle to take the remaining water; and when they spoke to him, they would lower their voices and would not look at his face constantly out of respect. (*Bukhari*, 3:891.)

The Hadiths reveal the following about Muhammad:

- He was at one time bewitched;
- He committed murder, even of a woman;
- He condoned the beating of wives;
- He taught that women were deficient in their minds;
- He practiced slavery;
- He traded in slaves;
- He condoned the beating of slaves;
- He promoted sex even by force with female slaves;
- He was racist toward African slaves;
- He limited his followers to four wives, but had 22 himself;

One of his wives, Safiya bint Huyai, was taken after he had slain her husband;

Another of his wives, Zainab bint Jahsh, was married to Muhammad's adopted son; he compelled them to divorce according to the word of Allah;

There are many other revelations of Muhammad's beliefs and practices which should give any decent person pause about whether or not to place their faith in him as God's "Prophet." Space does not allow an exhaustive treatment of these Hadith verses. They are all easily proved by anyone willing to take a little time to examine Islam beyond the propaganda of the Muslim proponents. Any honest Muslim who knows his religion would admit to all of these as Truth, revealed in their sacred writings.

Jumping forward to the present, the disparity between Muslim states is affected by the degree of fundamentalism embraced. True, fundamental Islam, by definition, is that which most closely emulates the character of Islam under Muhammad's direct rule. True Islam is militant, terroristic and hateful toward all non-Muslims—perceived to be the enemies of Allah. The more moderate Muslim states, while still oppressing (and in some cases, outlawing) Christianity and Judaism, as well as other religions, are not disposed to terrorism. In truth, they see terrorism as a threat to their own stability, since fundamentalist Muslims view moderate Muslims as unfaithful to the jihad against all infidels commanded by Muhammad. This is the explanation for the armed conflicts between Muslim states, or between some Muslim states and fundamentalist groups in their midst.

In the United States we have been conditioned by the government and the media to believe that true Islam is a religion of peace. The opposite is true. True Islam is a religion of war and terrorization. That is the legacy of Muhammad. True Islam makes no distinctions between military and civilian; all are enemies of Allah if they are not Muslim at least in name.

Of course, the same can be said about Christianity as it was represented by the Holy Roman Empire under Constantine and later Charlemagne, as well as several popes. But these are an aberration of the true Faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and personified in Jesus Christ, who teaches His disciples to love even their enemies. Muhammad's brand of Islam was spread through violence and terror; true faith in Jesus Christ is founded upon the love of God toward man. Love is commanded of all who would truly follow Jesus Christ. If there is any basis for love among men it is found in the teachings of Jesus. Even those who reject Him but insist upon "loving" everyone cannot trace their ideology to any philosophy outside of that handed down through Jesus Christ.

The peaceful Muslim states today are not fundamentalist. That is, they are not disposed toward war with non-Muslim states for the sake of jihad. They retain their Muslim character out of convenience and/or fear of reprisals should they abandon them. Even moderate reforms for women have been met with

violence, and have caused some countries to rescind those reforms. Some of the moderate Muslim states are not adverse to allowing terrorist groups to train in their countries. Some are covertly supportive of such groups, protecting them and even financing them. This is what will make any attempt to eliminate Muslim terrorism virtually impossible. This brief overview of Islam by no means can explain all the nuances of the religion. Suffice it to say that, regardless of what we are told, Islam is an anti-Christ religion. The best elements of it are willing to live in peace with all; the worst elements—those that most closely resemble the Islam of Muhammad—are determined to eradicate all others.

Yet we cannot give up hope for individual Muslims who may have God's call upon their lives. We are still called to proclaim the Gospel wherever there are ears to hear. Our love for Muslims should cause us to study about what they believe in order to be able to minister God's grace and truth to them. Many are not familiar with all the facts. We must give any Muslim with whom we come in contact the benefit of the doubt, and treat him with kindness, assuming that he doesn't realize the anti-Christ position of his faith.

Muhammad corrupted the Islam he found so appealing to start. Were today's Muslims to return to the original Islam and reject Muhammad, the Qur'an, and all other teachings that emanated through Muhammad's pirated Islam, they would be closer to the truth. Yet they would still lack one thing unless we can impart the truth, and they can receive it: that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, and all that pertains to His sacrifice for sin and the blessings that follow. Perhaps a good start would be to quote to them Isaiah 1:18:

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

God's grace is extended to all men through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He offers peace and reconciliation. Those Muslims who come to Him in faith will be at peace with us. But we cannot ignore the truth that the vast majority of mankind, including the Muslims, will reject the Gospel. And the warfare in their hearts will never end. As one terrorist has stated emphatically, "Jihad is until the Judgment."

How true; how sad. ❖

NOTES

1. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Ninth Edition, Vol. XVI (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884., *sv.*, "Mohammedanism."
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

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