

The Spread of Islam

The spread of Islam through conquest, trade, missionaries, and pilgrimage was very different in nature. These kinds of exchanges affected native populations slowly and led to more conversion to Islam. Islam traveled through these regions in many ways. Sometimes it was carried in great caravans or sea vessels traversing vast trade networks on land and sea, and other times it was transferred through military conquest and the work of missionaries. As Islamic ideas and cultures came into contact with new societies, they were expressed in unique ways and ultimately took on diverse forms.



Conquest

Islam initially spread through the military conquests of Arab Muslims, which happened over a very short period of time soon after the beginning of Islam. Islam was able to unite various tribes on the Arabian Peninsula with a common language (Arabic) and religion. Strengthened by their newfound unity, they set out on a *jihad*, or “holy war”, against non-believers. The Arabs were experienced desert fighters who fought with enthusiasm to gain entry into Heaven.

Within a year after the death of Muhammad, most of the **Arabian Peninsula** (Syria, Mesopotamia, and Palestine) and Egypt was united under the banner of Islam. By this time, the Byzantines and Persians were both weakened from centuries of fighting with each other, and Persia was conquered in 651 C.E. Over the next century, Arab Muslims succeeded in creating a vast empire that extended from the **Indus Valley** in the east into Europe as far west as **Spain**. However, only a small fraction of the people who came under Arab Muslim control immediately adopted Islam. It wasn't until centuries later, at the end of the eleventh century that Muslims made up the majority of subjects of the Islamic empires.

Trade

Muhammad was a merchant at one stage of his life, so trade has historically been instrumental in the spread of his message. The lands that came under Muslim rule after the early conquests included some of history's most important **trade routes** (e.g., the Silk Road), **commercial centers** (e.g., Damascus), and **ports** (e.g., Constantinople). As Muslim merchants traveled, they inevitably exposed non-Muslims to their beliefs, values, and way of life.

The Muslims also inherited the lucrative **spice trade** flowing across the Indian Ocean. After the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, the Persian Gulf could no longer serve as the primary route for the spice trade from the Indian

Ocean to the Mediterranean. The Red Sea route rose to prominence, where the conversion to the faith of the economic elite held advantages for lower class converts, such as becoming part of an international commercial network. The early emergence of Muslim communities in southwestern **India** is a fitting example of the role of trade in the spread of Islam. The Muslim traders who settled in Malabar intermixed with the local population, forming the Māppila Muslim community. Many of these are likely to have been indigenous converts embracing Islam to escape their status as downtrodden, low-caste Hindus. Looking further east, **China's** Great Mosque of Xi'an was built at the easternmost point of the Silk Road. Early Persian and Arab Muslim merchants also traveled as far as "al-Shila" (Korea), where many of them had settled by the late 800s.

In **East, Central, and West Africa**, merchants took the lead in introducing the faith to this region due to their shared history of pre-Islamic trade relations. The East Africans developed and maintained close ties with Muslim outposts in the Indian Ocean, especially the ports of Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and India. During the early 9th century, when large deposits of gold and emeralds were discovered in the desert south of Aswan, Egypt's Arab Bedouin tribes, many of whom had firmly embraced Islam by this point, migrated into this region and present-day Sudan. These developments, virtually all initiated by Muslim merchants, paved the way for powerful Afro-Muslim empires such as that of Mansa Musa, which in turn facilitated the further spread of Islam in the region.

Pilgrimage

The Arabian Peninsula was a hub of ancient caravan routes. Located in the interior of the peninsula was the city of **Mecca**, which served both as a commercial center and as the location of a religious shrine for polytheistic worship common to nomadic tribes of the peninsula. Pilgrims continually visited Mecca and its revered shrine, the **Ka'aba**, a cubic structure that housed a meteorite. The merchants of Mecca enjoyed a substantial profit from these pilgrims. During the initial years of **Muhammad's** prophethood, the pilgrimage season offered the occasion to preach Islam to the foreign people who came to Mecca for pilgrimage. In 629, Muhammad and his followers journeyed from Medina to Mecca to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, now incorporated as an Islamic shrine, in a religious exercise called the *hajj*. The Five Pillars of Islam requires that followers of Islam are required to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'aba in the holy city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The faithful are released from this requirement if they are too ill or too poor to make the journey.

Throughout history, the pilgrimage journey to Mecca offered pilgrims the opportunity to conduct trade with local merchants. The security provided to the hajj caravans further made it a lucrative field for trading, since many pilgrims brought goods produced in their respective lands. Eventually, inns and mosques were built along the caravan routes to accommodate travelers on their way to Mecca. As Islamic ideas traveled along various trade and pilgrimage routes, they mingled with local cultures and transformed into new versions and interpretations of the religion.

Missionaries

Da'wah, or the act of inviting others to engage with the message of Islam, follows the Muslim's obligatory concern for humanity's success and salvation. Every member of the Muslim *ummah*, the community of believers, shares in the responsibility of *da'wah* to the extent they are able. Following in this tradition, Muslims have given *da'wah* in different ways virtually everywhere they have gone, and it has been noted as the most important factor in the spread of Islam.

An early missionary named **Muādh ibn Jabal** was sent by the prophet Mohammad to give *da'wah* in Yemen. Muādh was constantly on the move throughout the region, not settling in one place for too long to maximize the reach of his work. This region would eventually become the point of departure for traveling scholars and merchants who introduced Islam to many parts of the world, such as Madagascar, parts of Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. The efforts of Sufi Muslims in the spread of Islam is widely recognized. Bulbul Shah, who established a *khanqah* (a Sufi school) and a *langar khāna* (community kitchen) that fed the poor of all backgrounds twice a day in Kashmir, is among the most recognized. Many Kashmiris converted at the hands of **Bulbul Shah**; their descendants make up 95% of the population of Kashmir today.