

# NON-ARABS AND ISLAM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Apr 20, 2019

How Islam, which was primarily meant for Arabs only, ended up as a Muslim empire is well brought out by Marshall G.S. Hodgson:<sup>1</sup> Arabs had succeeded at times in raiding the Sasanian territory in 610. Under the leadership of Medina now they not only had more success against the exhausted empires “in acquiring much booty” but, “there was no longer any question of pagan Arabian tribes refusing to acknowledge Islam.” The raids were then recognized as “expressions of Muslim power.” “Tribes already Christian, however, were not expected to become Muslim. But such teaching merged with the second objective; to organize the Arabs and lead them on campaigns. The moral and financial solidarity implied in the Qur'anic teaching became the foundation of the military expansion.

Eventually,

the campaigns were extended into a full-scale conquest of the settled lands.

There as no attempt at converting the peoples of the imperial territories, who practically all adhered to some form of confessional religion already. Islam was felt to be primarily, if not exclusively meant for Arabs, and only within the Peninsula was there any sense that all ought to be Muslims. Yet even Christian Arab tribes were still allowed to participate actively in the conquests. In the chiefly non-Arab agricultural lands, the object was not conversion but rule. The limited example of Muhammad in subjecting settled Jews and Christians in western Arabia was extended beyond Arabia to all lands within reach. The superiority of Islam as religion, and therefore in providing for social order, would justify Muslim rule. The caliphal state was no longer simply an Arabian commonwealth but was a vehicle of conquest beyond Bedouin Arabia, and depended on that conquest for its financial and psychological existence.<sup>2</sup>

As we have already noted, many writers maintain that it too soon turned into an oppressive, corrupted empire and a machinery for forced conversions. But employment of force was basic to the spread of Islam

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1 *The Venture of Islam*, Volume One, University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 199.

2 *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

from the very start as explained by Hodgson. Hodgson observes that until he migrated to Medina the prophet “may have regarded his mission till then as directed chiefly to his own people, the Quraysh.”

Thus, it seems the bending of religion with martial spirit and military objectives with all the attendant advantages of securing booty, enslavement of men, women and children conquered in wars and usurpation of their land and possessions, among others, were the main factors that led the Arabs to victory at least initially along with the utter exhaustion of the Sasanid empire wrought about by the reckless campaigns against the Roman Empire by King Cusrow Parvez culminating in severe reprisals by the Romans that turned the Sasanid Empire in severe disarray. The Arabs could not have found a more opportune time to invade the Sasanids, especially as even the wind severely turned against them in their last battle, as already noted. Even so, it did not break the Iranian spirit as evidenced by the various revolts that went on against the Arab regime, as already reviewed and as finally the Iranian culture did assert itself in various ways as already reviewed. But its after-effects are still visible today as they ultimately turned Iran into Shi'ism which the Saudis even came to reject as proper Islam, the after-effects of which is still playing on in Yemen between Iran and the Saudis. It seems Shi'ism has its roots also in ancient Zoroastrian religious tradition and it could have been an unconscious not conscious, reaction against the forced imposition of Islam on Iranians, but that is a different subject altogether.

On the sudden death of the prophet some Bedouins apostatized. “To subdue them, Muslim energies were thrown into the wars of the *Riddah*, of the 'Apostasy'” but as Muhammad's system had spread far and wide “such factions could not remain as they were; they had either to be vindicated or left in the lurch. In the snowballing impetus of enthusiasm, many tribes in which only a minority faction had recognized Muhammad—and even some where none at all had done so—were now forced to acknowledge Islam and pay *zakat* to the collectors from Medina. The several new prophets that had arisen were declared false—from this time on it was held that there could be no prophet after Muhammad, then equivalent to asserting the unity of Muslims.” Medina “was to be the acknowledged authority in Islam.” “Within less than two years the power of the Muslim community, so reconstituted, was far more widespread than it had been under Muhammad.” This outcome ruled out any challenge to a continuing wave of prophetic leadership.” as well as any possibility for “an assimilation of Muhammad's mission to the Hebrew Bible, which would have led eventually to its submersion in a wide Jewish tradition. The affirmation of Muhammad's political construction meant instead that the Arabs would be both united and independent. But this unity could prove feasible only through carrying

conquest into the lands about, for which central leadership was required.

Before the campaigns to subdue the Bedouin were completed, some of the Arabs were already launching raids against the Sasanian and Byzantine empires. Muhammad himself had been planning a major expedition toward Syria at the time of his death, which was duly sent ahead. Though it withdrew after making a demonstration, it was followed up late in 633 with several smaller raiding bands into southern Palestine.<sup>3</sup>