

## Church History 101

### Lesson 15

### The Rise of Islam

**Key Concepts:** Prior to the rise of Islam in the 630s, Arabia was a land divided between Jews, Christians and polytheistic religions. With the rise of Islam however, these traditions became marginalized and larger political units such as Byzantium and the Sassanid Empires (Persia) were either threatened or destroyed.

**The Story:** Islamic tradition holds that Muhammad was born in Mecca somewhere around the year 570. This was a time of great religious diversity and conflict. Muhammad was part of the dominant Mecca tribe of the Quraysh. Sometime around his fortieth birthday Muslims believe that he began receiving divine revelations. These revelations led him to become a monotheist, warn people about God's judgment and, like the Jewish Prophets, call people to more just way of living. Through a series to events he ultimately seized control of Mecca (from which he had earlier fled) and the allegiance of the Quraysh in 623. Prior to his death in 632 he was able to enter into agreements with other tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, even when they did not accept his position as prophet.

Following Muhammad's death the extent of Moslem domination expanded. Starting in the Arabian Peninsula with the defeat of local tribes it soon pushed into areas controlled by the Byzantine Empire including Egypt and Syria. They also moved east into the Sassanid Empire. The Sassanid Empire was the last great Iranian Empire and was considered to be a rival power to Rome. The major religion of the Empire was Zoroastrianism, but there were a significant number of Christians within its borders. Some areas of what was Assyria were almost completely Christian.

Interestingly enough the Muslim conquest of these areas was assisted by many of the indigenous Jewish and Christian communities. They did so in order to be free of what they saw as foreign governance. In addition it allowed them greater access to trade within the growing Islamic sphere of influence. The place of Christians within the growing Empire can also be seen in that when the Islamic governor of Syria created a navy it was manned by Coptic and Jacobite Christian sailors. This fleet, with Muslim soldiers, defeated the Byzantine fleet in 655, which opened the Mediterranean to Islamic trade.

The Christians were also willing to assist in the Islamic conquest because of two additional factors. First, initially Muslim troops never occupied cities. They stayed in their own camps outside of major urban areas in order to insure that their troops were not tempted by the wealth and decadence of the cities. Second, there were no forced conversions. In fact there was resistance to conversion by the Arab Muslims themselves. They saw conversion as diluting their power and prestige. Thus for a considerable period of time Christian, Jewish and in some places, Zoroastrian communities maintained their own religious identities. Over time however this changed with the percentage of Muslims growing from 10% in the late 600s to closer to 100% by the turn of the first Millennium. The Empire ultimately covered an area from Spain to India, making it one of the largest Empires the world had known.

After the fall of Christian Constantinople in 1453, Christianity was never again a significant religious tradition in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

#### Questions

1. What differences/similarities do you see in the spread of Islam and Christianity?
2. What does the Christian support of Islamic expansion tell you about the lack of Christian cohesion in this period?
3. How might you suppose Jewish and Christian communities have survived in these areas?