

Summary

Muhammad grew up in Mecca and earned his living as a merchant. At the time, Mecca was a financial center and the most powerful area of Arabia. Each year he took his family to Mount Hira for a spiritual retreat. There he prayed and distributed alms and food to the poor – a common practice among Arabs at that time. It was during one such retreat in the year 610 that he was awoken from his sleep by devastating divine presence, which commanded him to recite. This was his first revelation. From this time until his death in 632, he continued to receive revelations. Being illiterate, like many of his fellow Arabs, he recited what became known as the Qu'ran (The Recitation). The original Arabic had a profound effect upon the listener and most Muslims learned it by heart. It was not until 650 that the first official compilation was made.

Before Muhammad starting reciting the Qu'ran, the vast majority of Arabs worshiped a multitude of gods. Arabs found the prospect of losing their ancestral gods and goddesses very painful. It was almost impossible to believe in an all-powerful, benevolent God in such a dangerous society where one's life hung from a thread. The pagan gods represented a source of power and influence in a primitive society. What Muhammad was attempting was extremely dangerous and he was frequently in deadly peril. Arabia was on the verge of disintegration because of constant warfare and disunity.

Muhammad is one of the world's greatest geniuses. He had great spiritual, as well as political, gifts. He created a literary masterpiece and founded a major religion and a world power. By his death, in 632, he had brought unity to most of Arabia, converting almost the entire population to Islam. One hundred years after his death, the Arabs' empire stretched from Gibraltar to the Himalayas.

Background

At the time of Mohammad's birth in about 570, Bedouin Arabs distrusted both Christianity and Judaism because the two great powers of the region, Persia and Byzantium, were ready to use faith as a means of imperial control. The Arabs felt inferior, both religiously and politically. Unless they united, they would eventually lose their independence and fall under the control of one of their powerful neighbors. However, there was little chance of uniting because the tribal groups were constantly at war. The Arabs were originally farmers, but the camel made life in the desert possible. The Arabs of the desert and farmers relied upon each other for survival. Farmers provided the nomads with wheat and dates in return for goods and merchandize from abroad. Life was hard and many people suffered from malnutrition. Competition for resources was fierce, which made it difficult for an individual to survive without the help of others. People banded together into tribes based on kinship. Smaller groups formed alliances, which were in constant realignment. Loyalty to the group was essential and community spirit was carefully cultivated. Tribal life in the desert encouraged generous hospitality, indifference to material goods and a deep fatalism. To protect the tribe, every injury had to be avenged. This system ensured a balance of power, but also created a cycle of violence, which was difficult to stop. Many of the positive traits that were developed during this period were later incorporated into Islam, such as brotherhood, equality and helping the poor and weak.

Arabs did have a spiritual life and made pilgrimages to numerous holy sites. The most important of these was the Ka'aba, located in Mecca. Each year Arabs from all over would make the pilgrimage to Mecca. The land around Mecca was designated as a sacred area where all violence and fighting were forbidden. This provided a relaxed atmosphere where people could exchange

ideas as well as goods. The Quraysh managed to take control of Mecca and became highly successful traders. By the sixth century, they were the greatest power in Arabia. As they began to accumulate more wealth, the old communal ethic began to deteriorate, causing growing concern about social justice among the poorer members of the community. The old ideology had not equipped them for city life, and there was dissatisfaction with the old religion. A younger generation of disenchanted Arabs was searching for a new spiritual and political solution. Although most people clung to the old pagan religion, a small minority turned their attention to the old religion of Abraham.

By the time Muhammad was born, his family had fallen on hard times. His father died before he was born and when he was six years old, his mother died. He lived with his grandfather until his death two years later and then with his uncle. His uncle was very kind to him and Muhammad would accompany him on business trips to Syria. Until he was twenty-five years old, he showed little sign of greatness, although he was a very able young man. He was known for his reliability and his ability to inspire confidence in others. His uncle made sure that he had good military training. In time, Muhammad became a merchant, leading the caravans to Syria and Mesopotamia.

Revelation

In about 595, he married a distant relative who soon realized that he was destined for greatness. She proved to be an invaluable support for him during the early years of his mission. When Muhammad was about forty years old, he started spending more time in solitude, devoting himself to the worship of God. During a spiritual retreat with his family in 610, he had his first revelation, which left him in a state of terror and revulsion, thinking that he was possessed. His wife, Khadija, consulted her cousin, who was learned in the scriptures and had no doubt that Muhammad was the Prophet of his people. The revelations did not always come in a clear verbal form, but sometimes appeared as visions. He would have to struggle to put them into verbal form.

Muhammad had no idea that he would be founding a new religion. He simply believed that he was bringing the old religion of God, which had been revealed repeatedly, to the people of Arabia. He learned to have faith in his visions and believed that they came from God. Not a God who was “out there”, but one who forms the ground of our being. He accepted his role as Prophet to his people and began his dangerous mission – knowing that there would be those who would seek to oppose him and even cause him bodily harm.

In 612, Muhammad started his mission. The time had come for him to bring his message to the people. He wanted the people of Mecca to become aware of God’s goodness, which was evident in the natural world, and to acknowledge their own ingratitude. The Qu’ran requires men and women to create a just society where the weak and disadvantaged are treated with dignity. He did not condemn wealth and possessions, but encouraged people to be generous and give a regular portion of their wealth to the poor. Muhammad himself always lived a simple and frugal life. It is no coincidence that the first converts were poor. Many of the wealthy merchants of Mecca had made money their religion. Individualism was taking over and the old tribal unity was breaking down. The Qu’ran was not teaching anything new, but built upon the old Arab insights and traditions. When people put themselves and their own material success first, they were out of step with the natural order of things. To help people acquire a more responsible attitude, Muhammad demanded that they bow towards God in ritual prayer twice a day.

The Qu’ran emphasizes that God eludes our human thoughts and that we can speak about Him only in signs and symbols. Muslims are encouraged to use their imagination and intellect to see

the world in a symbolic way – to look upon the signs in the natural world and examine them carefully. For the first three years, Muhammad confined his ministry to a small, select group. He knew that his message would arouse antagonism. In 615, he received a revelation commanding him to deliver his message to the entire Hashim clan. This caused bitter divisions within the community. His social teachings did not meet with much resistance, but it took time for the notion of the Last Judgment to be accepted because in the old Arab tradition there was no concept of an afterlife.

In 616, a crisis erupted when Muhammad forbid the worship of other gods. As soon as Muhammad banned the belief in the old deities, the people rose up against him. In traditional societies, continuity with the past is highly valued. His demand caused deep fear because people believed it would undermine the very fabric upon which society was built. This was especially true with the more successful merchants who were content with the status quo. Muhammad was in no position to compromise. The Qu'ran makes it quite clear that any tampering with the text would have dire consequences.

The old tribal system was not adequate for life in the cities and some people were already starting to turn to monotheism as they began to see themselves as individuals within a world that was governed by a common force. The lesser gods could be seen as attributes of the one true God. Only God could provide protection and help for humanity. Lower aspirations, such as the accumulation of wealth, would only lead to disappointment.

The Qu'ran continued to cause divisions within the community. Some of the more vulnerable Muslims were persecuted and Muhammad had them moved to Abyssinia. Conditions continued to deteriorate, and the Muslims who remained in Mecca banded together for safety. Still, the beauty of the Qu'ran caused many people to convert to Islam. The words resonated deeply within people who had lowered the barriers of fear and suspicion. The process of searching for inner meanings within the Qu'ran caused people to search within themselves. For those Meccans who remained opposed to the Word of God, the Qu'ran warned that they would face disaster.

The Qu'ran urges Muslims to endure their suffering with dignity and fortitude. It reminds them that all rightly guided religions come from God and their spiritual pedigree goes back through many Prophets, starting with Adam.

A New Direction

When Muhammad's benefactor died in 619, it became necessary for him to find a new protector. During the pilgrimage to Mecca in 620, he met six Arab pagans from Medina who were receptive to his emigrating there. If Muhammad were indeed a Prophet, they reasoned that he would be able to solve their insoluble problems. Medina was in a crisis similar to Mecca as more and more people crammed into the small oasis. In 622, about seventy Muslims left Mecca for Medina. This was an unprecedented move: to leave one's clan for the protection of a tribe not related by blood. The new community in Medina was based on religion – Islam was bringing people together in a new way.

For the first five years, the Muslim community in Medina faced danger of extinction. During this period, the Qu'ran began developing the concept of just war. The Muslims of Medina had been forced to leave Mecca and now they had to find some way of earning a living. With few opportunities for work, the Emigrants started raiding the Meccan caravans as they made their way back from Syria. The merchants of Mecca were outraged, and led a full-scale attack against a Muslim raiding party in 624. Although greatly outnumbered, the Muslims beat the Meccan

army. This greatly boosted the Muslim's morale after years of abuse and harassment, but Muhammad was still looking for a peaceful resolution to the fighting. The Qu'ran teaches that fighting is only just in self-defense and as a means of reestablishing peaceful relations as soon as possible. In 627, the Quraysh attacked Medina, but were defeated. This would mark an end to the fighting.

In 627-628, Muhammad began expanding his confederacy by making allies with the surrounding tribes. In March of 628, he decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and invited his Companions to accompany him. One thousand unarmed pilgrims made their way to Mecca with shaven heads and flowing white robes. As guardians of Mecca, this put the Quraysh in an extremely difficult position. The Quraysh sent 200 troops to prevent Muhammad from entering the city. People were horrified when they heard that a group of pilgrims was being prevented from entering the city. Muhammad eventually reached an agreement with the Quraysh. He would be allowed to make the pilgrimage the following year. By gaining access to the most holy site in Arabia, he would now be able to persuade more of the Bedouin tribes to join him.

Arab Unity

By now, Muhammad has become the head of a large group of tribes. Although he does not break with tribalism completely, he reforms the old system in many important ways. Revenge is still considered a social and religious duty, but he urges Muslims to be satisfied with compensation rather than taking another life. Society was to be organized on egalitarian principles: there was to be no elite or hierarchy of priests. Almsgiving would close the gulf between rich and poor, and the freeing of slaves was considered a virtuous deed. The old system was concerned with the common good, cooperation and caring for the poor. Muhammad extended these principles to all Muslims. The cultivation of kindness and compassion has always been central to Islam.

Muhammad's chief ally was the chronic disunity among the tribes. Many tribal chiefs who realized that they would not be able to stand up to Muhammad would come to him with an offer of peace. In March 629, Muhammad led a group of 2,600 pilgrims to Mecca according to terms of the truce signed the previous year. The Quraysh were impressed with the discipline of the Muslims. More and more Bedouin joined Muhammad along with many of the young people of Mecca. The act of converting to Islam wiped out any old debts; this was essential in bringing peace to Arabia.

In November of 629, the Quraysh broke their truce with Muhammad. In January of 630, he set out for Mecca with a troop of 10,000 men. The Quraysh could not resist such a large force of well-disciplined men and barricaded themselves in their houses as a sign of submission. Muhammad had come to Mecca to abolish the old pagan religion, not to persecute the Quraysh. His peaceful policy had paid off.

The Spread of Islam

In 632, Muhammad died. The Muslim community was in shock at the loss of their leader. Abu Bakr reminded them that Muhammad was a man, and that only God should be worshipped. Abu Bakr became the first Caliph, but died after two years. Umar, Uthman and Ali succeeded him. The first four caliphs were known as the Rightly Guided caliphs because they governed according to Muhammad's principles. Muhammad believed that a ruler was someone who lightened the load of his people, listened to their problems and lived among them as an equal. If people lived according to the Qu'ran, they would thrive as individuals and as a society. Islam spread rapidly over the next hundred years, reaching as far as Spain in the West and Afghanistan in the East. It

thrived for the next one thousand years, meeting the needs of diverse groups of people in a variety of circumstances. Not until the present day has its success been seriously challenged. The domination of the West after the Industrial Revolution and its influence around the world has made it difficult for Muslim countries to adapt.