

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## Islam

Consider my enemies, for they are many;  
And they hate me with cruel hatred.

Psalm 25:19

In 600 years Christianity had spread across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East but in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century most of that territory was lost again to the followers of a new, militant religion that followed the teaching of the prophet Muhammad.

## Arabia

Before the 7<sup>th</sup> Century there was little or no unity among the tribes that inhabited the Arabian Peninsula. Each was a law unto itself and each worshipped its own gods.

Mecca, in western Arabia, was an important city on the major trade routes linking Europe and Persia with Africa and India. It was also famous for its ancient shrine, the Kaba. The Kaba was a cube shaped building which had built into it a Black Stone alleged to have fallen from heaven. The care of the Kaba and the sacred stone was entrusted to the Quraish tribe to which Muhammad belonged. It is said that as many as 360 different gods were worshipped there.

Jewish and Christian communities had also settled in the Arabian Peninsula and had passed on a superficial knowledge of their beliefs, some of which had become incorporated into Arab folklore.

## Muhammad

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 or 571 a few months after the death of his father Abdullah. His mother died when he was six leaving him to be brought up by his father's brother, for whom he worked as a shepherd.

In later life he became a successful merchant working for a wealthy widow named Khadijah who he married when he was 25, even though she was fifteen years his senior. They had six children but only their youngest daughter, Fatima, survived into adult life.

Muhammad's commercial journeys brought him into contact with Jews and Christians and he, like many other Arabs of the time, dissatisfied with pagan idolatry, became a worshipper of the one Creator God. He was, it seems, a quiet, sincere and thoughtful man; happily married, prosperous, kind to the poor and deeply religious, seeking the truth about God.

In the year 610, at the age of 40, he was meditating in a cave on the slopes of Mount Hirah when he experienced the first of a number of encounters in which he believed he heard the archangel Gabriel giving him messages to preach to mankind. Khadijah convinced her husband to accept his experiences as coming from God on the basis that God would surely not allow such a good man as Muhammad to be deceived. She became his first convert, other members of his family followed suit and so Muhammad became the centre of a new religious movement, criticising pagan idolatry and calling upon people to worship Allah alone. The new religion was called Islam; its followers Muslims.

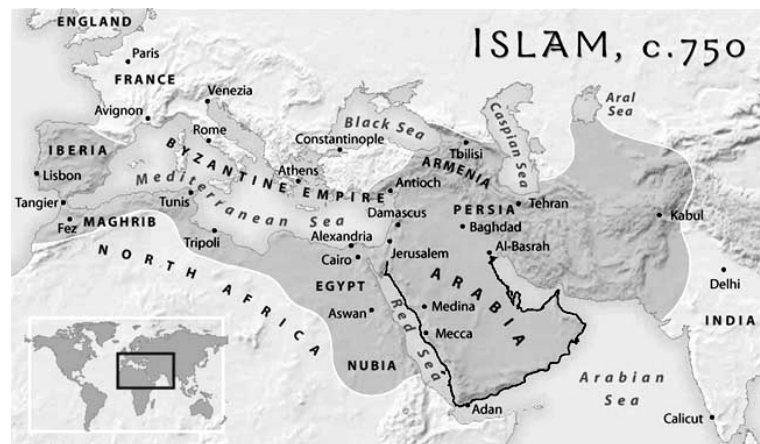
Muhammad soon encountered opposition from the inhabitants of Mecca and in the year 622 he was forced to flee, with his followers, to Yathrib — now called Medina — 250 miles to the north. That year, the year of hejira (emigration) became the first year of the Islamic calendar. It marked a turning point for Islam.

In Medina Muhammad's preaching met with almost total success. He became the political and religious leader of the city. It became the first independent Muslim community and attracted other converts from surrounding areas. After only eight years, in 630, Muhammad returned to Mecca with an army of 10 000 and won over most of the population by sparing their lives in a general amnesty. He destroyed all images of Mecca's pagan gods and made the Kaba into the most holy place of Islamic worship, claiming that it had been built by Abraham at the time when he cast out Ishmael.

By the time of Muhammad's death in 632, through the preaching of Islam and by military conquest, he had unified the Arab tribes, politically and spiritually, under his own leadership.

## The Spread of Islam

From the outset, Islam was spread by the sword. Muhammad's successors, the caliphs, embarked on a military campaign outside Arabia and within one hundred years they had created a huge Islamic Empire. It extended from India to Spain and was larger than the Roman Empire had ever been. The Muslim armies were courageous, tough and burned with zeal for their faith: a faith which made them unafraid of death. Sweeping out of the Arabian Peninsula they swallowed up half of the Byzantine Empire, all of the Persian Empire, descended on India and the Far East and poured through North Africa into Spain and then France. The phenomenal advance continued until 732 when the Muslims met defeat at the hands of Frankish general, Charles Martel, in the battle of Tours. Martel forced them back out of France into Spain where they stayed for the next 700 years.



As Islam spread, the culture of the old empires was destroyed. In 637 Caliph Omar captured Jerusalem and had a mosque built on the site of the temple. It was Omar who declared that no books other than the Qur'an were needed and did away with many of the greatest literary treasures of the ancient world including many early copies of the Scriptures. Thousands of churches were destroyed or converted into mosques and what had once been a thriving church in North Africa was virtually wiped out.

## The Church Under Islamic Rule

The caliphs ruled first from Damascus and then, from 750 on, from Baghdad. They divided their territories into emirates, ruled on the caliph's behalf by an emir. Non-Muslim Arabs were forced to embrace Islam but others were allowed to continue to practice their own religion. Jews and Christians in particular enjoyed a favoured status because they worshipped the one true God. However, there were serious disadvantages for Christians under Muslim rule. They became second-class citizens living in segregated communities. They had to wear distinctive clothing, had to pay a heavy poll tax and were not permitted to evangelise Muslims. Conversion from Islam to Christianity was punishable by death. From time to time there were persecutions in localised areas and, not surprisingly, the churches declined in numbers.

## Islamic Teaching

Islam demands two things from its adherents: iman (faith) and din (the observance of religious or practical duties). There are six articles of faith which Muslims must believe and five practical duties they are obliged to perform.

## Six Articles Of Faith

The six articles of faith which Muslims must believe concern:

1. **Allah:** There is no god but Allah. He is omnipotent and omniscient and is one, having no equal and no partners.
2. **Angels:** Angels are created beings and servants of Allah. Two Recording Angels attend every man: the one on his right records his good deeds and the one on the left his sins. Contrasted with angels are jinn, some good and some evil. Many Muslims will take precautions to protect themselves against evil jinn. The devil (Iblis) is sometimes described as a jinn and sometimes as an angel.
3. **Books:** Allah has revealed his commands to men through his prophets and through 104 sacred books of which only four now remain: the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Gospels and the Qur'an. It is claimed that the Jews and Christians have distorted their own Scriptures. Only the Qur'an — God's final revelation to mankind — is reliable. It contains 114 messages (or suras) dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel and collected, after his death, into a single authoritative edition by the third caliph. Translations into other languages are not regarded as God's Word: they are referred to as interpretations of the Qur'an.
4. **Prophets:** Muhammad is "the seal" of a long line of prophets. Of these, nine are considered major prophets — Noah, Abraham, David, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each was sent by God to illustrate His different attributes. Muslims do not worship any of the prophets but consider them examples and models for mankind.
5. **Judgement:** The Day of Judgement will be preceded by clear signs that will include natural catastrophes, the coming of Antichrist, tumults and seditions and Christ's second coming as a Muslim. There will be a resurrection and, forty years later, a weighing of deeds. Those whose good deeds outweigh their evil deeds will attain salvation: some immediately and others after a period in Hell. The remainder, including all infidels, will abide in Hell for ever.
6. **Allah's Sovereign Decrees:** Muslims must submit to Muhammad's will. Their doctrine of absolute predestination amounts to fatalism.

## Five Duties

The religious duties required of Muslims are referred to as the five pillars of Islam. All are based on specific commands in the Qur'an or hadith. There are other duties which, while considered necessary are not obligatory.

1. **Confession:** All Muslims must testify to their belief in Allah as one God and Muhammad as his prophet.
2. **Prayer:** There are five obligatory times of prayer to be observed every day. Certain regulations and rituals must be followed if the prayers offered are to be valid.
3. **Fasting:** Fasting from dawn till dusk must be observed during the ninth month, Ramadan.<sup>1</sup> There are other voluntary fasts.
4. **Alms giving:** Every Muslim of full age must give alms in proportion to his property.
5. **Pilgrimage:** Every Muslim must undertake a pilgrimage to the Kaba in Mecca at least once in his lifetime. Intricate rules have to be observed in connection with the pilgrimage.

Some Muslims add jihad as a sixth pillar. Jihad, which literally means 'an effort of striving', is the waging of religious war, sometimes understood as spiritual warfare.

---

<sup>1</sup> Because the Muslim calendar is based on lunar months the season at which Ramadan occurs varies.

## **Division In The Camp**

The unity of the Islamic Empire was impressive, but it did not last. The first major division arose after the murder of the third caliph in 656 when two parties were formed.

The Shias believed that successive leaders (imams) should be chosen from among the living descendants of Muhammad to be guides to the faithful. They considered their imams to be infallible and sinless.

The Sunnis believed that the nation's elders should freely elect a caliph and that the Qur'an and traditions were more important for the guidance of the faithful than any living leader.

Both parties still exist. The Shias have always been in the minority but their influence was concentrated in Persia (modern-day Iran) which became and still is the Shia stronghold.

Through history various Muslim ruled countries have asserted their independence from the caliphs of Baghdad and various traditions and schools of Muslim thought have developed. The Sufis, for example, are the mystics of Islam who give expression to their deep longing to know God and his love personally in various ascetic practices and rituals.

## **Shariah — Islamic Law**

Islamic teaching is derived from both the Qur'an and the hadith — collections of traditions recording the words and deeds of Muhammad. Where the Qur'an and hadith are silent rules are derived by consensus of the religious leaders (ijma) and by analogous reasoning (qiyas). The combination of these four sources has been used to create a detailed body of regulations known as the Shariah, that is, Islamic law. In Sunni Islam there are four schools each with its own version of the law. The Shiah version is different again.

Shariah regulates not only every aspect of a Muslim's personal life but also the governing of an Islamic state. It assumes that power lies in the hands of the conquering Muslims and there are many rules relating to non-Muslims — particularly Jews and Christians — who are still treated as second-class citizens and still have to pay a special tax. Shariah has survived unchanged for eleven centuries.<sup>2</sup>

## **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. How do you think the rapid spread of Islam can be explained?
2. Are there any lessons to be gleaned from the events we have been thinking about by today's church?
3. What do you think are the important things to keep in mind when witnessing to a Muslim?

## **For Further Study**

If you want to learn more about Islam, a useful starting point is Patrick Sookhdeo's. "A Christian's Pocket Guide to Islam" published by Christian Focus Publications.

---

<sup>2</sup> There is no country today that rules according to the full Shariah but many have elements of it within their legislation and the attitudes behind it are often prevalent in Muslim communities.