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ROADS

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William Dalrymple

A NEW HISTORY  
OF THE  
WORLD

BLOOMSBURY

PETER FRANKOPAN

## The Road to Revolution

The rise of Islam took place in a world that had seen a hundred years of turmoil, dissent and catastrophe. In 541, a century before the Prophet Muhammad began to receive a series of divine revelations, it was news of a different threat that spread panic through the Mediterranean. It moved like lightning, so fast that by the time panic set in, it was already too late. No one was spared. The scale of death was barely imaginable. According to one contemporary who lost most of his family, one city on the Egyptian border was wiped out: seven men and one ten-year-old boy were all who remained of a once bustling population; the doors of houses hung open, with no one to guard the gold, silver and precious objects inside.<sup>1</sup> Cities bore the brunt of the savage attacks, with 10,000 people being killed each day in Constantinople at one point in the mid-540s.<sup>2</sup> It was not just the Roman Empire that suffered. Before long cities in the east were being ravaged too, as disaster spread along the communication and trade networks, devastating cities in Persian Mesopotamia and eventually reaching China.<sup>3</sup> Bubonic plague brought catastrophe, despair and death.

It also brought chronic economic depression: fields denuded of farmers, towns stripped of consumers and a generation scythed down in their youth naturally altered the demography of late antiquity, and caused a severe contraction of the economy.<sup>4</sup> In due course, this was to have an impact on the way emperors in Constantinople sought to conduct foreign policy. During the first part of the reign of Justinian (527–65), the empire had been able to achieve a series of stunning successes that saw the recovery of the provinces of North Africa and significant progress in Italy. Judicious use of force was coupled with deliberate efforts to retain the flexibility needed to deal with problems that could flare up at any time on its extended borders, including in the east. Striking this balance became increasingly difficult later during Justinian's reign as manpower shortages, inconclusive military campaigns

and rising costs drained a treasury that was already depleted before the plague struck.<sup>5</sup>

Stagnation took hold and the public mood towards Justinian soured. Particularly fierce criticism was reserved for the way he seemed willing to buy the friendship of the empire's neighbours by paying out money and promiscuously bestowing favours. Justinian was foolish enough to think it 'a stroke of good fortune to be dishing out the wealth of the Romans and flinging it to the barbarians', wrote Procopius, the scathing, and most prominent, historian of Justinian's reign. The Emperor, Procopius remorselessly went on, 'lost no opportunity to lavish vast sums of money on all the barbarians', to the north, south, east and west; cash was dispatched, the author went on, to peoples who had never even been heard of before.<sup>6</sup>

Justinian's successors abandoned this approach and took a strident and uncompromising line with Rome's neighbours. When ambassadors from the Avars, one of the great tribes of the steppes, arrived in Constantinople shortly after Justinian's death in 565 to ask for their usual payment of tribute, they met with short shrift from the new Emperor, Justin II: 'Never again shall you be loaded at the expense of this empire, and go your way without doing us any service; for from me you shall receive nothing.' When they threatened consequences, the Emperor exploded: 'Do you dead dogs dare to threaten the Roman realm? Learn that I will shave off those locks of yours, and then cut off your heads.'<sup>7</sup>

A similarly aggressive stance was taken towards Persia, especially after it was reported that a powerful constellation of Türk nomads had taken the Huns' place on the Central Asian steppe and was putting pressure on their eastern frontiers. The Türks were playing an increasingly dominant role in trade, much to the annoyance of the Chinese, who portrayed them as difficult and untrustworthy – a sure sign of their rising commercial success.<sup>8</sup> They were led by the magnificent figure of Sizabul, who took to receiving dignitaries in an elaborate tent while reclining on a gold bed supported by four gold peacocks and with a large wagon brimming with silver conspicuously positioned near by.<sup>9</sup>

The Türks had extensive ambitions and dispatched envoys to Constantinople in order to propose a long-range military alliance. A joint attack, ambassadors told Justin II, would destroy Persia.<sup>10</sup> Eager to win glory at the expense of Constantinople's traditional rival and encouraged by the

prospects, the Emperor agreed to the plan and became increasingly grandiloquent, issuing threats to the Shah and demanding the return of towns and territories ceded under previous agreements. After a poorly executed strike by the Romans had failed, a Persian counter-attack made for Dara (the site of which is now in southern Turkey), the cornerstone of the border defences. After a terrible siege lasting six months the Persians succeeded in taking the city in 574, whereupon the Emperor experienced a mental and physical breakdown.<sup>11</sup>

The fiasco convinced the Türks that Constantinople was an unworthy and unreliable ally, something the Türk ambassador stated point-blank in 576, angrily rejecting any chance of another attack on Persia. After putting ten fingers in his mouth, he said angrily: ‘As there are now ten fingers in my mouth, so you Romans have used many tongues.’ Rome had deceived the Türks by promising to do their best against Persia; the results had been pitiful.<sup>12</sup>

All the same, this reopening of hostilities with Persia marked the start of a tumultuous period that had extraordinary consequences. Two decades of fighting followed, with moments of high drama, such as when a Persian army penetrated deep into Asia Minor, before returning home. As it did so, it was ambushed, with the queen taken prisoner, along with the royal golden carriage that was decorated with precious gems and pearls. The sacred fire the Persian ruler took with him on campaign, considered to be ‘greater than all fires’, was captured and thrown into a river, while the Zoroastrian high priest and a ‘multitude of the most senior people’ were drowned – perhaps forcibly. The extinguishing of the sacred fire was an aggressive and provocative act, designed to belittle the religious cornerstone of Persian identity. The news was celebrated with wild enthusiasm by the Romans and their allies.<sup>13</sup>

As hostilities continued, religion became increasingly important. When troops revolted over a proposed reduction in pay, for example, the commanding officer paraded a sacred image of Jesus in front of the troops to impress on them that serving the Emperor meant serving God. When Shah Khusraw I died in 579 some claimed, without any foundation, ‘that the light of the divine Word shone splendidly around him, for he believed in Christ’.<sup>14</sup> Stiffening attitudes led to vociferous denunciations of Zoroastrianism in Constantinople as base, false and depraved: the Persians, wrote Agathias,

have acquired ‘deviant and degenerate habits ever since they came under the spell of the teaching of Zoroaster’.<sup>15</sup>

Infusing militarism with a heavy dose of religiosity had implications for those on the periphery of the empire who had been courted and converted to Christianity as part of a deliberate policy to win their support and loyalty.<sup>16</sup> Particular effort had been made to win over the tribes of southern and western Arabia with the promise of material rewards. The bestowal of royal titles, which introduced new concepts of kinship (and kingship) that could be powerfully exploited locally, also helped convince many to throw their lot in with Constantinople.<sup>17</sup>

The stiffening of religious sensibilities during the confrontation with Persia therefore had consequences – because the Christianity adopted by some of the tribes was not that of the formula agreed at Chalcedon in 451, but a version or versions that held different views about the unity of Christ. Relations with the Ghassānids, Rome’s long-term allies in Arabia, soured as a result of the strident messages emanating from the imperial capital.<sup>18</sup> Partly because of mutual religious suspicions, relations broke down at this sensitive moment – which provided the Persians with a perfect opportunity to exploit. Control was gained over the ports and markets of southern and western Arabia, as a new overland trade route was opened up connecting Persia with Mecca and ʿUkāẓ. According to the Islamic tradition, this dislocation prompted a leading figure in Mecca to approach Constantinople with a request for nomination as the phylarch, or guardian, of the city as Rome’s representative, with a later, royal title of a kingship of Mecca being awarded by the Emperor to a certain ʿUthmān. A parallel process saw the appointment of a nominee to take a similar role in Yathrib – on behalf of Persia.<sup>19</sup>

While these tensions were crystallising in the Arabian peninsula, little progress was being made in the long-drawn-out war in its main theatre in the north. The turning point came not on the battlefield but at the Persian court at the end of the 580s, when Vahrām, a popular general who had stabilised the eastern frontier with the Türks, took matters into his own hands and revolted against the Shah, Khusraw II. The Shah fled to Constantinople where he promised the Emperor Maurice major concessions in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia – including the return of Dara – in exchange for imperial support. After Khusraw had returned home in 591, and dealt with his rival

with surprisingly little ado, he set about honouring his agreement. It was, as one leading scholar has put it, a Versailles moment: too many towns, forts and important locations were handed over to the Romans, exposing the economic and administrative heartlands of Persia; the humiliation was so great that it was bound to provoke a vigorous response.<sup>20</sup>

The pendulum had swung both ways during intense fighting over the previous two decades. It looked to all intents and purposes as if Rome had secured a great diplomatic and political coup. Now that it had the forward bases that had previously been lacking, it finally had the chance to establish a permanent presence in the Near East. As the historian Procopius recognised, the plains of Mesopotamia that fanned out across the massive basin of the Tigris and Euphrates provided few obvious frontier points in the form of rivers, lakes or mountains.<sup>21</sup> This meant any gains made were vulnerable unless a giant swathe of territory could be annexed and held. Khusraw II may have regained the throne, but it came at a high price.

And yet barely a decade later the tables turned spectacularly. When Emperor Maurice was murdered by Phokas, one of his generals, in a palace coup in 602, Khusraw II seized the moment to strike and force a renegotiation. He gained confidence after a fierce attack on Dara knocked out a vital point in the Roman defensive system in northern Mesopotamia and again from Phokas' struggle to impose authority at home. When reports came that a new wave of nomad attacks was ravaging the Balkans, the Shah raised his ambitions. The traditional client-management system that was used to govern the subject peoples of northern Arabia was hastily dismantled in anticipation of a major reorganisation of the frontier that would follow Persian expansion.<sup>22</sup>

The Christian population was handled carefully. Bishops had learnt from experience to fear the prospect of war, since hostilities with the Romans were often accompanied by accusations of collaboration. The Shah personally presided over the election of a new patriarch in 605, inviting the senior clergy to meet and choose a new incumbent. This was a deliberate signal to provide reassurance and to show the minority population that their ruler was sympathetic to their affairs. It was an effective move, interpreted by the Christian community as a sign of benevolent protection: Khusraw was effusively thanked by the bishops, who gathered together to praise 'the powerful, generous, kind and bounteous King of Kings'.<sup>23</sup>

With the Roman Empire buckling under one internal revolt after another, Persian forces turned the screw: cities in Mesopotamia fell like dominoes, with Edessa the last capitulating in 609. Attention then turned to Syria. Antioch, the great city on the Orontes, first See of St Peter and the major metropolis of Roman Syria, fell in 610, followed by Emesa in western Syria the following year. With the fall of Damascus in 613, another great regional centre was lost.

Things only got worse. In Constantinople, the unpopular and hubristic Phokas was murdered, his naked and dismembered remains paraded through the city's streets. The new Emperor, Heraclius, however, proved no more effective in halting the Persians, whose advances had by now acquired a devastating momentum. After defeating a Roman counter-attack in Asia Minor, the Shah's armies turned south to Jerusalem. The aim was obvious: to capture the most holy city in Christendom and, in doing so, to assert the cultural and religious triumph of Persia.

When the city fell after a short siege, in May 614, the reaction in the Roman world bordered on hysteria. The Jews were accused not just of collaborating with the Persians but of actively supporting them. According to one source, the Jews were 'like evil beasts', helping the invading army – themselves compared to ferocious animals and hissing snakes. They were accused of playing an active role in massacring the local population who piously rejoiced as they died 'because they were being slain for Christ's sake and shed their blood for His blood'. Stories spread that churches were being pulled down, crosses trampled underfoot and icons spat on. The True Cross on which Jesus was crucified was captured and sent back to the Persian capital as a trophy of war par excellence for Khusraw. This was a truly disastrous turn of events for Rome, and one that the Emperor's propagandists immediately turned their attention to in an attempt to limit the damage.<sup>24</sup>

Faced with such setbacks, Heraclius considered abdicating, before deciding to take desperate measures: ambassadors were sent to Khusraw to seek peace on any terms. Through the envoys, Heraclius begged for forgiveness and blamed his predecessor, Phokas, for Rome's recent acts of aggression. Presenting himself as a submissive inferior, the Roman ruler hailed the Shah as 'supreme Emperor'. Khusraw listened carefully to what the envoys had to say; then he had them executed.<sup>25</sup>

When news filtered back, panic gripped Constantinople, enabling radical reforms to be pushed through with barely a flicker of opposition. The salaries

of the empire's officials were halved, as was the pay of the military. The free distribution of bread, a long-standing political tool to win the goodwill of the capital's inhabitants, was stopped.<sup>26</sup> Precious metals were seized from churches in a frantic effort to boost the exchequer. In order to underline the scale of the battle ahead and atone for the sins that had led God to chastise and punish the Romans, Heraclius modified the design of the coinage. While the bust of the Emperor on the obverse remained the same, on the reverse of new coins, minted in large volumes and in new denominations, was the image of a cross set on steps: the fight against the Persians was nothing less than the fight to defend the Christian faith.<sup>27</sup>

In the short term, these measures achieved little. After securing Palestine, the Persians turned to the Nile delta, taking Alexandria in 619.<sup>28</sup> In less than two years, Egypt – the breadbasket of the Mediterranean and bedrock of the Roman agrarian economy for six centuries – fell. Next came Asia Minor, which was attacked in 622. Although the advance was checked for a time, by 626 the Persian army was camped within sight of the walls of Constantinople. As if that were not bad enough for the Romans, the Shah made an alliance with the Avar nomads who had overrun the Balkans and had marched on the city from the north. All that now separated the remnants of imperial Rome from complete annihilation was the thickness of the walls of the city of the great Constantine – Constantinople, New Rome. The end was nigh; and it seemed utterly inevitable.

Chance though was on Heraclius' side. Initial efforts to take the city failed, and subsequent assaults were beaten away with ease. The enemies' commitment began to sag, failing first among the Avars. Having struggled to pasture their horses, the nomads withdrew when tribal differences threatened to undermine their leader's authority. The Persians pulled back soon afterwards too, in part because of reports of Türk attacks in the Caucasus that required attention: impressive territorial expansion had overstretched resources, leaving newly conquered lands dangerously exposed – and the Türks knew it. Constantinople had been spared by the skin of its teeth.<sup>29</sup>

In an astonishing counter-attack, Heraclius, who had been leading the imperial army in Asia Minor during the siege of his capital, now tore after the retreating enemy. The Emperor first made for the Caucasus, where he met the Türk Khagan and agreed an alliance – showering him with honours and gifts, and offering him his daughter, Eudokia, as a bride to formalise ties of



friendship.<sup>30</sup> The Emperor then threw caution to the wind and moved south, crushing a large Persian army near Nineveh (in what is now northern Iraq) in the autumn of 627, before advancing on Ctesiphon as opposition melted away.

The Persian leadership creaked under the pressure. Khusraw was murdered, while his son and successor, Kavad, appealed to Heraclius for an immediate settlement.<sup>31</sup> The Emperor was satisfied by the promise of territory and kudos and withdrew to Constantinople, leaving his ambassador to agree terms, which included the return of Roman territory that had been seized during the wars – and also the return of the parts of the True Cross that had been taken from Jerusalem in 614.<sup>32</sup> It marked a spectacular and crushing victory for the Romans.

This was not the end of it, however, for a storm was brewing which was to bring Persia to the brink of collapse. The senior general in the field, Shahrbarāz, who had masterminded the recent lightning assault on Egypt, reacted to the reversal of fortune by mounting a bid for the throne. With Persian fortunes at a low ebb and with the frontier in the east vulnerable to opportunistic attacks by Türk raiders, the case for a man of action seemed irresistible. As the coup gathered pace, the general negotiated directly with Heraclius to gain Roman support for his uprising, withdrawing from Egypt and moving on Ctesiphon with the Emperor's support.

With the situation in Persia unravelling, Heraclius celebrated with gusto the astonishing reversal of fortune to cement his popularity. He had played heavily on religion to build support and stiffen resolve during the empire's dark hours. Khusraw's attack had been explained as a direct assault on Christianity, something underlined emphatically in a piece of theatre enacted before the imperial troops, in which a letter was read out that appeared to be written in the Shah's own hand: it not only personally ridiculed Heraclius, but scoffed at the powerlessness of the Christians' God.<sup>33</sup> The Romans had been challenged to fight for what they believed in: this had been a war of religion.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Roman triumphalism produced ugly scenes. After Heraclius had led a ceremonial entry into Jerusalem in March 630 and restored the fragments of the True Cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jews were supposedly baptised by force, as punishment for the role they were thought to have played in the fall of the city sixteen years earlier; those who fled were banned from coming within three miles of Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup> Eastern

Christians whose beliefs were judged to be non-conformist were targeted too by imperial agents, being obliged to abandon long-standing doctrinal positions and coerced into accepting the teachings of streamlined Orthodox Christianity that now claimed to have powerful evidence that it alone truly enjoyed God's blessing.<sup>35</sup>

This was problematic for the church in Persia, which had not seen eye to eye with its western peer for more than a century and whose senior clergy increasingly saw themselves as the transmitters of the true faith – in contrast to the church in the west which had been systemically corrupted by deviant teachings. As the bishops of Persia put it when they met in 612, all major heresies had sprung up in the Roman Empire – unlike in Persia, where 'no heresy has ever arisen'.<sup>36</sup> So when Heraclius 'restored the church to the orthodox' in Edessa and gave instructions to drive out the eastern Christians who had worshipped there in the past, it looked as though his plan was to convert all of Persia – an idea Heraclius seems to have been actively pondering since the dramatic turn of fortune. And it was to be converted into Roman, western Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

The resurgent, dominant religion championed by Constantinople had swept all before it. The extraordinary sequence of events had left a host of old ideas in tatters. When plague broke out in Ctesiphon, claiming Shah Kavād as a victim, it seemed obvious that Zoroastrianism was little more than wishful thinking: Christianity was the true faith, and its followers had been rewarded.<sup>38</sup> In this highly charged atmosphere, a new rumbling could be heard. It came from the south, from deep inside the Arabian peninsula. This region had been all but untouched by the recent fighting between the Romans and Persians, but that did not mean that it was unaffected by the monumental clashes taking place hundreds of miles away. In fact, the south-west of the heel of Arabia had long been a crucible for confrontation between the two empires, where less than a century earlier the kingdom of Ḥimyar and the cities of Mecca and Medina had thrown in their lot with Persia against a Christian coalition of forces from Constantinople and Ḥimyar's deadly Red Sea rival, Ethiopia.<sup>39</sup>

This was a region where beliefs had been changing, adapting and competing with each other for the best part of a century. What had been a polytheist world of multiple deities, idols and beliefs had given way to monotheism and to ideas about a single, all-powerful deity. Sanctuaries

dedicated to multiple gods were becoming so marginalised that one historian has stated that on the eve of the rise of Islam traditional polytheism ‘was dying’. In its place came Jewish and Christian concepts of a single, all-powerful God – as well as of angels, paradise, prayer and alms-giving which can be found in inscriptions that begin to proliferate across the Arabian peninsula in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.<sup>40</sup>

It was in this region, as war raged to the north, that a trader named Muḥammad, a member of the Banū Hāshim clan of the Quraysh tribe, retreated to a cave not far from the city of Mecca to contemplate. According to the Islamic tradition, in 610 he began to receive a series of revelations from God. Muḥammad heard a voice that commanded him to recite verses ‘in the name of your Lord!’<sup>41</sup> Panicked and confused, he left the cave, but saw a man ‘feet astride the horizon’, and a voice that boomed at him: ‘O Muḥammad, thou art the prophet of God and I am Jibrīl.’<sup>42</sup> A series of recitations followed over the coming years that were first written down around the middle of the seventh century in a single text – known as the Qur’ān.<sup>43</sup>

God sends apostles, Muḥammad was told by the angel Jibrīl (or Gabriel), to deliver good news or to give warnings.<sup>44</sup> Muḥammad had been chosen as a messenger by the Almighty. There was much darkness in the world, he was told, many things to fear, and the danger of apocalypse at every corner. Recite the divine messages, he was urged, for when you do so you ‘seek refuge in [Allah] from accursed Satan: no power has he over those who believe and put their trust in their Lord.’<sup>45</sup> God is compassionate and merciful, Muḥammad was repeatedly told, but He is also severe in his punishment for those who refuse to obey him.<sup>46</sup>

The sources relating to the early Islamic period are complex and pose serious problems of interpretation.<sup>47</sup> Establishing how contemporary and later political motivations shaped the story of Muḥammad and the messages he received is not easy – and, what is more, is a matter of intense debate among modern scholars. It is difficult, for example, to understand clearly what role belief played in shaping attitudes and events, not least since distinctions were made as early as the middle of the seventh century between believers (*mu’minūn*) and those who joined them and submitted to their authority (*muslimūn*). Later writers focused closely on the role of religion and emphasised not only the power of spiritual revelation but also the solidarity

of the Arabs who effected revolution – with the result that it is as unsatisfactory to talk of the conquests of the period as ‘Muslim’ as it is to refer to them as ‘Arab’. Moreover, identities not only shifted after this period, but during it too – and of course we are reliant on the eyes of the beholders for such labels in the first place.

Nevertheless, although even establishing a secure sequence of events can be problematic, there is a wide acceptance that Muḥammad was not the only figure in the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century to talk about a single God, for there were other ‘copycat prophets’ who rose to prominence in precisely the period of the Perso-Roman wars. The most notable offered messianic and prophetic visions that were strikingly similar to those of Muḥammad – promising revelations from the angel Gabriel, pointing to paths to salvation and in some cases offering holy writings to back their claims up.<sup>48</sup> It was a time when Christian churches and shrines were starting to appear in and around Mecca, as is clear from the archaeological record, which also bears witness to icons and cemeteries of the new converted populations. Competition for hearts, minds and souls was fierce in this region in this period.<sup>49</sup>

There is also growing consensus that Muḥammad was preaching to a society that was experiencing acute economic contraction as a result of the Perso-Roman Wars.<sup>50</sup> The confrontation and the effective militarisation of Rome and Persia had an important impact on trade originating in or passing through the Ḥijāz. With government expenditure funnelled into the army and chronic pressure on the domestic economies to support the war effort, demand for luxury items must have fallen considerably. The fact that the traditional markets, above all the cities in the Levant and in Persia, were caught up in the fighting can only have further depressed the economy of southern Arabia.<sup>51</sup>

Few would have felt the pinch more than the Quraysh of Mecca, whose caravans carrying gold and other valuables to Syria had been the stuff of legend. They also lost their lucrative contract to supply the Roman army with the leather needed for saddles, strapping for boots and shields, belts and more besides.<sup>52</sup> Their livelihood too may have been further threatened by a decline in pilgrims visiting the *haram*, an important shrine dedicated to pagan gods located in Mecca. The site was centred on a series of idols – reportedly including one ‘of Abraham as an old man’ – but the most important of which

was a red agate statue of a man with a golden right hand and with seven divinatory arrows around it.<sup>53</sup> As guardians of Mecca, the Quraysh did well from selling food and water to visitors and performing rituals for pilgrims. With upheaval in Syria and Mesopotamia having repercussions further beyond, and disruption in so many different aspects of daily life, it was not surprising that Muḥammad's warnings of imminent doomsday struck a powerful chord.

Muḥammad's preaching certainly fell on fertile ground. He was offering a bold and coherent explanation for traumatic levels of upheaval with immense passion and conviction. Not only were the epiphanies he had received powerful, so too were the warnings he issued. Those who followed his teaching would find that their land would be fruitful and burst with grain; those who did not would see their crops fail.<sup>54</sup> Spiritual salvation would bring economic rewards. There was much to gain: believers would behold nothing less than Paradise, where gardens were fed by fresh and pure water, by 'rivers of wine delectable to those that drink it, and rivers of clarified honey'. The faithful would be rewarded with every kind of fruit, and would receive the Lord's forgiveness at the same time.<sup>55</sup>

Those who rejected the divine doctrines would face not just doom and disaster but damnation: anyone who waged war on his followers would suffer terribly and receive no mercy. They were to be executed or crucified, lose limbs or be exiled: the enemies of Muḥammad were the enemies of God; truly they would suffer an awful fate.<sup>56</sup> This would include having skin burnt off by fire, to be replaced by fresh skin that would suffer the same fate, so the pain and torture would be never ending.<sup>57</sup> Those who did not believe would 'abide in Hell for ever, and drink scalding water that will tear their bowels to pieces'.<sup>58</sup>

This radical and impassioned message met with ferocious opposition from the conservative elite of Mecca, who were enraged by its criticism of traditional polytheistic practices and beliefs.<sup>59</sup> Muḥammad was forced to flee to Yathrib (later renamed Medina) in 622 to escape persecution; this flight, known as the *hijra*, became the seminal moment in Islamic history, year zero in the Muslim calendar. As recently discovered papyri make clear, it was the point when Muḥammad's preaching gave birth to a new religion and to a new identity.<sup>60</sup>

Central to this new identity was a strong idea about unity. Muḥammad

actively sought to fuse the many tribes of southern Arabia into a single bloc. The Byzantines and Persians had long manipulated local rivalries and played leaders off against each other. Patronage and funding helped create a series of dependent clients and elites who were regulated and rewarded by payments from Rome and Ctesiphon. The intense war left this system in tatters. Protracted hostilities meant that some of the tribes were deprived of ‘the thirty pounds of gold that they normally received by way of commercial gain through trade with the Roman Empire’. Worse, their requests to have their obligations fulfilled were clumsily dealt with. ‘The emperor can barely pay his soldiers their wages,’ one agent stated, ‘much less [you] dogs.’ When another envoy told the tribesmen that the prospects of future trade were now limited, he was killed and sewn up inside a camel. It was not long before the tribes took matters into their own hands. The answer was to ‘lay waste to the Roman land’ in revenge.<sup>61</sup>

It was not for nothing then that the new faith was being preached in the local language. Behold, says one of the verses in the Qur’ān; here are the words from above – in Arabic.<sup>62</sup> The Arabs were being presented with their own religion, one that created a new identity. This was a faith designed for the local populations, whether nomad or urban, whether members of one tribe or another, and regardless of ethnic or linguistic background. The many loan-words from Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew and Persian in the Qur’ān, the text that recorded the revelations handed down to Muḥammad, point to a polyglot milieu where emphasising similarity, rather than difference, was important.<sup>63</sup> Unity was a core tenet, and a major reason for Islam’s imminent success. ‘Let there not be two religions in Arabia’ were to be Muḥammad’s last words, according to the investigation of one respected Islamic scholar writing in the eighth century.<sup>64</sup>

Muḥammad’s prospects did not look promising when he was holed up in Yathrib, with his small group of early followers. Efforts to evangelise and add to the *umma* – the community of believers – were slow, and the situation was precarious as forces closed in from Mecca to attack the renegade preacher. Muḥammad and his followers turned to armed resistance, targeting caravans in a series of increasingly ambitious raids. Momentum built up quickly. Success against superior numbers and against the odds such as at the battle of Badr in 624 provided compelling evidence that Muḥammad and his men enjoyed divine protection; lucrative spoils likewise made onlookers take

notice. An intense round of negotiations with leading members of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca finally resulted in an understanding being reached, since known as the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiya, which provided for a ten-year truce between Mecca and Yathrib, and lifted restrictions previously placed on Muḥammad's supporters. The number of converts now began to swell.

As the number of followers grew, so did their aspirations and ambitions. Crucial in this was the designation of a clear religious centre. The faithful had previously been told to face Jerusalem when they prayed. In 628, however, following further revelation, it was apparently announced that this instruction had been a test and should now be amended: the direction or *qibla* to face when praying was nowhere else but Mecca.<sup>65</sup>

Not only that, but the Ka'ba, the old focal point of the polytheistic, pagan religion in Arabia, was identified as the cornerstone for prayer and pilgrimage within the city. This was revealed as having been set up by Ishmael, the son of Abraham and the putative ancestor of twelve Arab tribes. Visitors to the city were told to process around the sacred site, chanting God's name. By doing so, they would be fulfilling the order given to Ishmael that men should be told to come from Arabia and from faraway lands, on camel and on foot, to make a pilgrimage to the place where a black stone at the heart of the monument had been brought by an angel from heaven.<sup>66</sup> By confirming the Ka'ba as sacred, continuity was affirmed with the past, generating a powerful sense of cultural familiarity. In addition to the spiritual benefits offered by the new faith, there were obvious advantages in establishing Mecca as a religious centre par excellence – politically, economically and culturally. It defused antagonism with the Quraysh to the point that senior members of the tribe pledged their allegiance to Muḥammad – and to Islam.

Muḥammad's genius as a leader did not end here. With barriers and opposition melting away in Arabia, expeditionary forces were dispatched to exploit opportunities opening up elsewhere that were too good to miss. The timing could not have been better either: between 628 and 632, Persia's dramatic collapse worsened as anarchy took hold. During this short period, there were no fewer than six kings who claimed royal authority; one well-informed Arab historian writing later put the number at eight – in addition to two queens.<sup>67</sup>

Success attracted new supporters, whose numbers grew as cities, towns and villages on Persia's southern frontier were swallowed up. These were

locations that were unused to defending themselves, and folded under the first sign of pressure. Typical was the town of al-Ḥīra (located in what is now south-central Iraq), which capitulated immediately, agreeing to pay off attackers in return for guarantees of peace.<sup>68</sup> Utterly demoralised, senior Persian commanders likewise counselled giving money to the advancing Arab column, ‘on condition that they would depart’.<sup>69</sup>

Securing greater resources was important, for it was not just the spiritual rewards on offer that won people over to Islamic teaching. Since the appearance of Muḥammad, one general is purported to have told his Sasanian counterpart, ‘we are no longer seeking worldly gains’; the expeditions were now about spreading the word of God.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, evangelical zeal was vital to the success of early Islam. But so too was the innovative way that booty and finances were shared out. Willing to sanction material gain in return for loyalty and obedience, Muḥammad declared that goods seized from non-believers were to be kept by the faithful.<sup>71</sup> This closely aligned economic and religious interests.<sup>72</sup>

Those who converted to Islam early were rewarded with a proportionately greater share of the prizes, in what was effectively a pyramid system. This was formalised in the early 630s with the creation of a *dīwān*, a formal office to oversee the distribution of booty. A share of 20 per cent was to be presented to the leader of the faithful, the Caliph, but the bulk was to be shared by his supporters and those who participated in successful attacks.<sup>73</sup> Early adopters benefited most from new conquests while new believers were keen to enjoy the fruits of success. The result was a highly efficient motor to drive expansion.

As the newly formed armies continued to establish political and religious authority over the nomadic tribesmen known collectively as the ‘desert people’, or Bedouin, they made enormous inroads, bringing huge swathes of territory under their control at great speed. Although the chronology of events is difficult to re-establish with certainty, recent scholarship has convincingly shown that the expansion into Persia took place several years earlier than previously thought – at the moment Sasanian society was imploding between 628 and 632, rather than after it had done so.<sup>74</sup> This redating is significant, for it helps contextualise the rapid gains made in Palestine, where all the cities submitted in the mid-630s – including Jerusalem, which had only recently been recovered by the Romans.<sup>75</sup>



Both Rome and Persia responded to the threat too late. In the case of the latter, a crushing Muslim victory at Qādisiyyah in 636 was a huge boost for the surging Arab armies and for Islamic self-confidence. The fact that a swathe of Persian nobles fell in the course of the battle heavily compromised future resistance, and served to put an already teetering state on the canvas.<sup>76</sup> The Roman response was no more effective. An army under the command of the Emperor's brother Theodore was heavily defeated in 636 at the River Yarmuk, south of the Sea of Galilee, after he had seriously underestimated the size, capability and determination of the Arab force.<sup>77</sup>

The heart of the world now gaped open. One city after another surrendered, as the attacking forces bore down on Ctesiphon itself. After a lengthy siege, the capital eventually fell, its treasury being captured by the Arabs. Persia had been broken by the spectacular rearguard action of the Romans, but it had been swallowed up by Muḥammad's followers. Momentum was gathering fast for a disparate group of believers who had accepted their prophet's teachings, alongside opportunists and chancers who had joined them in the hope of rewards to come. With interests aligned and success following success, the only question now was how far Islam would spread.

## The Road to Concord

Strategic genius and tactical acumen on the battlefield enabled Muḥammad and his followers to achieve a series of stunning successes. The support of the Quraysh tribe and the dominant political elite in Mecca had been crucial too, providing a platform for persuading the tribes of southern Arabia to hear and accept the message of the new faith. The opportunities that opened up with the collapse of Persia likewise came at the right moment. But two other important reasons also help explain the triumph of Islam in the early part of the seventh century: the support provided by Christians, and above all that given by Jews.

In a world where religion seems to be the cause of conflict and bloodshed, it is easy to overlook the ways in which the great faiths learnt and borrowed from each other. To the modern eye, Christianity and Islam seem to be diametrically opposed, but in the early years of their coexistence relations were not so much pacific as warmly encouraging. And if anything, the relationship between Islam and Judaism was even more striking for its mutual compatibility. The support of the Jews in the Middle East was vital for the propagation and spread of the word of Muḥammad.

Although the material for the early Islamic history is complicated, an unmistakable and striking theme can be consistently teased from the literature of this period – whether Arabic, Armenian, Syriac, Greek or Hebrew – as well as from the archaeological evidence: Muḥammad and his followers went to great lengths to assuage the fears of Jews and Christians as Muslim control expanded.

When Muḥammad was cornered in Yathrib in southern Arabia in the 620s, soliciting the help of the Jews had been one of his key strategies. This was a town – and a region – that was steeped in Judaism and Jewish history. Barely a century earlier, one fanatical Jewish ruler of Ḥimyar had overseen the systematic persecution of the Christian minority, which crystallised a broad pattern of alliances that still held firm: Persia had come in to support the Ḥ

imyarites against the alliance of Rome and Ethiopia. Muḥammad was eager to conciliate with the Jews of southern Arabia – starting with the elders of Yathrib.

Leading Jews in the town, later renamed Medina, pledged their support to Muḥammad in return for guarantees of mutual defence. These were laid out in a formal document that stated that their own faith and their possessions would be respected now and in the future by Muslims. It also set out a mutual understanding between Judaism and Islam: followers of both religions pledged to defend each other in the event that either was attacked by any third party; no harm would come to Jews, and no help would be given to their enemies. Muslims and Jews would co-operate with one another, extending ‘sincere advice and counsel’.<sup>1</sup> It helped then that Muḥammad’s revelations seemed not only conciliatory but familiar: there was much in common with the Old Testament, for example, not least the veneration for the prophets and for Abraham in particular, and there was obvious common ground for those who repudiated Jesus’ status as the Messiah. It was not just that Islam was not a threat to Judaism; there were elements that seemed to go hand in glove with it.<sup>2</sup>

Word soon began to spread among Jewish communities that Muḥammad and his followers were allies. An extraordinary text written in North Africa in the late 630s records how news of the Arab advances was being welcomed by Jews in Palestine because it meant a loosening of the Roman – and Christian – grip on power in the region. There was heated speculation that what was going on might be a fulfilment of ancient prophecies: ‘they were saying that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and that he was proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ that was to come’.<sup>3</sup> This, some Jews concluded, was the coming of the Messiah – perfectly timed to show that Jesus Christ was a fraud and that the last days of man had arrived.<sup>4</sup> Not all were persuaded, however. As one learned rabbi put it, Muḥammad was a false prophet, ‘for the prophets do not come armed with a sword’.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that there are other texts that say that the Arabs were welcomed by Jews as liberators from Roman rule provides important corroborating evidence about positive local reactions to the rising profile of Islam. One text about this period written a century later reports how an angel came to Rabbi Shim’on b. Yoḥai after he became disturbed by the suffering inflicted in the

wake of Heraclius' recovery of Jerusalem and the forced baptism and persecution of the Jews that followed. 'How do we know [the Muslims] are our salvation,' he purportedly asked. 'Do not be afraid,' the angel reassured him, for God is 'bringing about the kingdom of [the Arabs] only for the purpose of delivering you from that wicked [Rome]. In accordance with His will, He shall raise up over them a prophet. And he will conquer the land for them, and they shall come and restore it with grandeur.' Muhammad was seen as the means of fulfilling Jewish messianic hopes. These were lands that belonged to the descendants of Abraham – which meant solidarity between Arab and Jew.<sup>6</sup>

There were other, tactical reasons to co-operate with the advancing armies. At Hebron, for instance, Jews offered to cut a deal with the Arab commanders: 'grant us security so that we would have a similar status among you', and allow us 'the right to build a synagogue in front of the entrance to the cave of Machpelah' where Abraham was buried; in return, Jewish leaders stated, 'we will show you where to make a gateway' in order to get past the city's formidable defences.<sup>7</sup>

Support from the local population was a crucial factor in the successes of the Arabs in Palestine and Syria in the early 630s, as we have seen. Recent research on the Greek, Syriac and Arabic sources has shown that, in the earliest accounts, the arrival of the attacking armies was welcomed by the Jews. This was not surprising: if we peel back the colourful later additions and venomous interpretation (such as claims that the Muslims were guilty of 'satanic hypocrisy'), we read that the military commander who led the army to Jerusalem entered the Holy City in the humble dress of a pilgrim, keen to worship alongside those whose religious views were apparently seen as being if not compatible, then at least not entirely dissimilar.<sup>8</sup>

There were other groups in the Middle East who were not disillusioned by the rise of Islam. The region as a whole was filled with religious non-conformists. There was a plethora of Christian sects that took issue with decisions made at church councils or objected to doctrines that they deemed heretical. This was particularly true in Palestine and Sinai, where there were many Christian communities violently opposed to the conclusions reached at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 about the precise meaning of the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and who had been the subject of formal persecution as a result.<sup>9</sup> These Christian groups found themselves no better off following

Heraclius' spectacular recovery against the Persians thanks to the assertive orthodox religious posturing that accompanied the Emperor's reconquests.

As such, some saw the successes as a means to an end, but also as being religiously sympathetic. John of Dasein, the metropolitan of Nisibis, was told by one astute Arab commander wanting to establish himself in the city that if the former provided his backing, he in turn would not just help the cleric depose the leading figure in the Christian church in the east, but install him in his place.<sup>10</sup> A letter sent in the 640s by a prominent cleric reports that the new rulers not only did not fight against Christians, 'but even commend our religion, show honour to the priests and monasteries and saints of our Lord', and make gifts endowing religious institutions.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the messages of Muḥammad and his followers earned the solidarity of local Christian populations. For one thing, Islam's stark warnings about polytheism and the worship of idols had an obvious resonance with Christians, whose own teachings mirrored these views precisely. A sense of camaraderie was also reinforced by a familiar cast of characters such as Moses, Noah, Job and Zachariah who appear in the Qur'ān alongside explicit statements that the God who gave Moses the scriptures, and who sent other apostles after him, was now sending another prophet to spread the word.<sup>12</sup>

Awareness of common ground with Christians and Jews was reinforced by the use of familiar reference points and by accentuating similarities in matters of custom and religious doctrine. God had not chosen to reveal messages only to Muḥammad: 'He has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel for the guidance of mankind,' reads one verse in the Qur'ān.<sup>13</sup> Remember the words of the angels told to Mary, mother of Jesus, says another verse. Echoing the Hail Mary, Islam's holy book teaches the words 'God has chosen you [Mary]. He has made you pure and exalted you above womankind. Mary, be obedient to your Lord; bow down and worship with the worshippers.'<sup>14</sup>

For Christians who were mired in arguments about the nature of Jesus and of the Trinity, perhaps most striking was the fact that Muḥammad's revelations contained a core message that was both powerful and simple: there is one God; and Muḥammad is his messenger.<sup>15</sup> It was easy to understand and chimed with the basis of the Christian faith that God was all-powerful, and that from time to time apostles were sent to pass on messages from above.

Christians and Jews who argued with each other about religion were crazy, records another verse in the Qur'ān; 'have you no sense?'<sup>16</sup> Division was the work of Satan, Muḥammad's text warned; never allow disagreements to take hold – instead, cling together to God, and never be divided.<sup>17</sup> Muḥammad's message was one of conciliation. Believers who follow the Jewish faith or are Christians who live good lives 'have nothing to fear or regret', says the Qur'ān on more than one occasion.<sup>18</sup> Those who believed in one God were to be honoured and respected.

There were also customs and rulings that later became associated with Islam, and which predated Muḥammad but were now adopted, apparently by the Prophet himself. For example, amputation as a punishment for theft and the passing of a death sentence for those who renounced their faith were common practices that were taken on by Muslims. Elements like alms-giving, fasting, pilgrimage and prayer became central components of Islam, compounding the sense of continuity and familiarity.<sup>19</sup> The similarities with Christianity and Judaism later became a sensitive topic, which was partly dealt with by the dogma that Muḥammad was illiterate. This insulated him from claims that he was familiar with the teachings of the Torah and the Bible – despite near-contemporaries commenting that he was 'learned', and knew both the Old and New Testament.<sup>20</sup> Some have gone further still, seeking to claim that the Qur'ān has as its base a Christian lectionary written in an Aramaic derivative that was subsequently adapted and remoulded. This – like many claims that challenge or dismiss the Islamic tradition – has gained notoriety, though it has limited support among modern historians.<sup>21</sup>

That Christians and Jews were core constituencies for support during the first phase of Islamic expansion explains why one of the few verses in the Qur'ān that relates to contemporary events during Muḥammad's lifetime spoke in positive terms about the Romans. The Romans have been defeated, says the Qur'ān, referring to any one of a number of chronic setbacks during the wars with Persia before the late 620s. 'But in a few years they shall themselves gain victory: such being the will of God before and after.'<sup>22</sup> This could be guaranteed: God does not fail in his promises.<sup>23</sup> The message was inclusive and familiar and seemed to draw the sting out of fractious arguments that had set Christians on edge. From their perspective, Islam looked inclusive and conciliatory, and offered hope of calming tensions.

In fact, the sources are full of examples of Christians admiring what they

saw among the Muslims and their armies. One text from the eighth century notes how one Christian ascetic was sent to observe the enemy and came back impressed by the experience. ‘I come to you from a people staying up through the night praying,’ he supposedly told his peers, ‘and remaining abstinent during the day, commanding the right and forbidding the wrong, monks by night, lions by day.’ This seemed entirely commendable – and served to blur the lines between Christianity and Islam. The fact that other accounts from this period talk of Christian monks adopting Muḥammad’s teachings provides another sign of differences of doctrine not being entirely clear-cut.<sup>24</sup> The asceticism espoused by the early Muslims was also recognisable and laudable, providing a culturally familiar reference point to the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>25</sup>

Efforts to conciliate with the Christians were supplemented by a policy of protecting and respecting the People of the Book – that is to say, both Jews and Christians. The Qur’ān makes plain that early Muslims saw themselves not as rivals of these two faiths but as heirs to the same legacy: Muḥammad’s revelations had previously been ‘revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, to Isaac and Jacob and the tribes’; God had entrusted the same messages to Moses and Jesus too. ‘We discriminate against none of them,’ says the Qur’ān. In other words, the prophets of Judaism and Christianity were the same as those of Islam.<sup>26</sup>

It is no coincidence, then, that the Qur’ān makes more than sixty references to the word *umma*, used not as an ethnic label but to mean a community of believers. On several occasions, the text notes mournfully that mankind was once a single *umma*, before differences drove people apart.<sup>27</sup> The implicit message was that it was God’s will that differences should be put to one side. Similarities between the great monotheistic faiths are played up in the Qur’ān and in the *ḥadīth* – the collections of comments, sayings and deeds of the Prophet – while differences are consistently played down. The emphasis on treating Jews and Christians alike with respect and tolerance is unmistakable.

The sources for this period are notoriously difficult to interpret because they are complicated and contradictory, but also because many were written long after the events. However, recent advances in palaeography, the discovery of wisps of texts that were previously unknown and increasingly sophisticated ways of understanding written material are transforming long-held views of this epic period in history. Thus, while the Islamic tradition has

long held that Muḥammad died in 632, recent scholarship suggests that the Prophet may have been alive later. Multiple sources from the seventh and eighth centuries attest to a charismatic preacher figure – recently suggested as being Muḥammad himself – directing the Arab forces and spurring them onwards at the gates of Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup>

The extraordinary progress of Muḥammad's followers in Palestine was matched by a helpless and inept response by the authorities. Some members of the Christian clergy fought a desperate rearguard action, painting the Arabs in the worst possible light in a doomed attempt to convince the local population not to be fooled into giving their support to a message that sounded both simple and familiar. The 'Saracens' are vengeful and hate God, warned the patriarch of Jerusalem, shortly after the conquest of the city. They plunder cities, ravage the countryside fields, set fire to churches and destroy monasteries. The evil they commit against Christ and against the church is appalling, as are the 'foul blasphemies they pronounce about God'.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, it appears that the Arab conquests were neither as brutal nor as shocking as the commentators make out. Across Syria and Palestine, for example, there is little evidence of violent conquest in the archaeological record.<sup>30</sup> Damascus, for instance, the most important city in northern Syria, surrendered quickly after terms were agreed between the local bishop and the attacking Arab commander. Even allowing for some poetic licence, the compromise was both reasonable and realistic: in exchange for allowing churches to remain open and untouched and for the Christian population to remain unmolested, the inhabitants agreed to recognise the overlordship of new masters. In practice what this meant was paying tax not to Constantinople and to the imperial authorities, but to representatives of 'the prophet, the caliphs and the believers'.<sup>31</sup>

It was a process that was replicated time and again as the Arabs began to fan out in every direction, racing down the trade and communication routes. Armies swarmed into south-western Iran, before attention turned to hunting down Yazdagird III, the last Sasanian king who had fled east. Expeditionary forces that set out against Egypt caused chaos by operating in tandem, resulting in limited and ineffective military resistance – made worse by local populations fighting against each other or being willing to negotiate terms in the face of fear and uncertainty. Alexandria, a jewel of the eastern



Mediterranean, was demilitarised and forced to promise a vast tribute in exchange for assurances that churches would be left intact and the Christian population left to their own devices. News of this agreement was met with weeping and wailing in Alexandria, and even by calls that the man who had brokered it, the Patriarch Cyrus, should be stoned for his betrayal. ‘I have made this treaty,’ he declared in his defence, ‘in order to save you and your children.’ And with this, records one author writing a century or so later, ‘the Muslims took control of all of Egypt, south and north, and in doing so, trebled their income from taxes’.<sup>32</sup> God was punishing Christians for their sins, wrote another author at the time.<sup>33</sup>

In an almost perfect model of expansion, the threat of military force led to negotiated settlements as one province after another submitted to the new authorities. To start with, overlordship in conquered territories was light and even unobtrusive. By and large, the existing majority populations were allowed to get on with their business unmolested by new masters who established garrisons and living quarters away from existing urban centres.<sup>34</sup> In some cases, new cities were founded for the Muslims, such as Fusiāṭ in Egypt, Kūfa on the Euphrates, Ramla in Palestine and Ayla in modern Jordan, where the sites of mosques and governors’ palaces could be chosen and built from scratch.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that new churches were built at the same time, in North Africa, Egypt and Palestine, suggests that a *modus vivendi* quickly established itself where religious tolerance was normative.<sup>36</sup> This seems to have been echoed in lands taken from the Sasanians, where at least to start with Zoroastrians were either ignored or left alone.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Jews and Christians, it is not impossible that this was even formalised. A complex and contentious text known as the Pact of ʿUmar purports to set out the rights that the so-called People of the Book would enjoy from their new overlords, and conversely to set out the basis for interaction with Islam: no crosses were to be marked on mosques; the Qurʾān was not to be taught to non-Muslim children, but no one was to be prevented from conversion to Islam; Muslims were to be respected at all times, and were to be given directions if they asked for help. Cohabitation of the faiths was an important hallmark of early Islamic expansion – and an important part of its success.<sup>38</sup>

In response, some hedged their bets, as pottery kilns from Jerash in northern Jordan show. Lamps were produced in the seventh century with a

Christian inscription in Latin on one side and an Islamic invocation in Arabic on the other.<sup>39</sup> This was in part a pragmatic response to recent experiences, given that the Persian occupation of this region had lasted for only twenty-five years. There was no guarantee that the Arab masters were necessarily going to last either, as a seventh-century Greek text makes absolutely clear: ‘the body will renew itself’, the author assured his readers; there was hope that the Muslim conquests might be a flash in the pan.<sup>40</sup>

The new regime’s lightness of touch also showed itself in matters of administration. Roman coinage was used for several decades after the conquests alongside newly minted coins struck with familiar imagery and in long-established denominations; the existing legal systems were broadly left intact as well. Existing norms on a raft of social practices were adopted by the conquerors, including a number concerned with inheritance, dowries, oaths and marriage, as well as with fasting. In many cases governors and bureaucrats were left in position in former Sasanian and Roman territories.<sup>41</sup> Part of the reason for this was simple mathematics. The conquerors, whether Arabs or non-Arabs, true believers (*mu’minūn*) or those who had joined them and submitted to their authority (*muslimūn*), were in a chronic minority, which meant that working with the local community was not so much a choice as a necessity.

Doing so also happened because in the grand scheme of things there were larger battles to be fought following the successes in Persia, Palestine, Syria and Egypt. One was the continued struggle with the shattered remains of the Roman Empire. Constantinople itself was put under sustained pressure as the Arab leadership sought to finish the Romans off once and for all. More important even than that, however, was the battle for the soul of Islam.

In a parallel with early Christianity’s internal wrangles, establishing precisely what Muḥammad had been told, how it should be recorded and spread – and to whom – became a source of major concern after his death. The struggles were ferocious: of the first four men appointed to follow the Prophet as his representative, successor or ‘caliph’, three were assassinated. There were furious arguments about how to interpret Muḥammad’s teachings, and desperate efforts to twist or appropriate his legacy. It was to try to standardise precisely what Muḥammad’s message had been that the order was given, most probably in the last quarter of the seventh century, for it to be written down in a single text – the Qur’ān.<sup>42</sup>

The antagonism between rival factions served to harden attitudes to non-Muslims. With each group claiming to be more faithful guardians of the words of the Prophet, and therefore the will of God, it was perhaps not surprising that attention would soon turn to the *kāfir*, those who were not believers.

Muslim leaders had been tolerant and even gracious to Christians, rebuilding the church of Edessa after it was damaged by an earthquake in 679.<sup>43</sup> But in the late seventh century things began to change. Attention turned to proselytising, evangelising and converting the local populations to Islam – alongside an increasingly hostile attitude towards them.

One manifestation of this came during what modern commentators sometimes dub the ‘coin wars’, as propaganda blows were traded on pieces of currency. After the Caliph began to issue coins with the legend ‘There is no God but God alone; Muḥammad is the messenger of God’ in the early 690s, Constantinople retaliated. Coins were struck which no longer had the image of the Emperor on the front (the obverse), but put it on the reverse instead. In its place on the obverse was a dramatic new image: Jesus Christ. The intention was to reinforce Christian identity and to demonstrate that the empire enjoyed divine protection.<sup>44</sup>

In an extraordinary development, the Islamic world now matched the Christians like with like. Remarkably, the initial response to the issuing of coins with Jesus and the Emperor on them was to respond with an image on coins minted for a few short years of a man in the parallel role to that played by Jesus – as the protector of the lands of the faithful. Although this image is usually presumed to be that of the Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, it is entirely possible that this is none other than Muḥammad himself. He appears in a flowing tunic, with a lustrous beard and holding a sword in a scabbard. If this is the Prophet, then it is the earliest-known image of him, and remarkably one that those who knew him during his lifetime were aware of and saw for themselves. Al-Balādhurī, writing over a century later, reports that some of Muḥammad’s surviving companions in Medina who had known him well saw these coins. Another much later writer who had access to early Islamic material says much the same, noting that the Prophet’s own friends were uncomfortable about the use of an image in this way. The coins did not stay in circulation long, for by the end of the 690s the currency circulating in the Islamic world was completely redesigned: all images were removed and were replaced by verses from the Qurʾān on both sides of the coin.<sup>45</sup>

Converting Christians was not the most important goal in the late seventh century, however, for the key battleground was between rival Muslim factions. Fierce debate broke out between those claiming to be the rightful heir to Muḥammad, during which the trump card became knowing the most about the Prophet's early life. So acute did competition become that there were serious and concerted efforts to relocate the centre of the religion away from Mecca and establish it in Jerusalem after one powerful faction emerged in the Middle East and turned against traditionalists in southern Arabia. The mosque of the Dome of the Rock, the first major Islamic sacred building, was constructed at the start of the 690s, partly with the intention of diverting attention away from Mecca.<sup>46</sup> As one modern commentator puts it, buildings and material culture were being used 'as a weapon for ideological conflict' during a volatile period of civil war, a time when the Caliph was taking up arms against the direct descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad himself.<sup>47</sup>

The strife within the Muslim world explains inscriptions that were set in mosaic on both the outer and inner faces of the Dome of the Rock mosque which were aimed at mollifying Christians. Worship God, the compassionate and merciful, and honour and bless His prophet Muḥammad, they read. But they also proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah. 'So believe in God and his envoys . . . bless your envoy and your servant Jesus son of Mary and peace be on him on the day of birth and on the day of death and on the day he is raised from the dead.'<sup>48</sup> Even in the 690s, in other words, there was a blurring of religious boundaries. So close, in fact, did Islam seem that some Christian scholars thought its teachings were not so much those of a new faith as a divergent interpretation of Christianity. According to John of Damascus, one of the leading commentators of the time, Islam was a Christian heresy rather than a different religion. Muḥammad, he wrote, had come up with his ideas based on his reading of the Old and New Testaments – and on a conversation with an errant Christian monk.<sup>49</sup>

In spite, or perhaps because of, the relentless jostling for position and authority at the centre of the Muslim world, the peripheries continued to see astonishing expansion. Commanders who were happier in the field than fighting political and theological battles led armies ever deeper into Central Asia, the Caucasus and North Africa. In the case of the latter, the advance seemed relentless. After crossing the Straits of Gibraltar, the armies flooded through Spain and into France, where they met resistance in 732 somewhere

between Poitiers and Tours, barely 200 miles from Paris. In a battle that subsequently acquired a near-mythical status as the moment the Islamic surge was halted, Charles Martel led a force that inflicted a crucial defeat. The fate of Christian Europe hung by a thread, later historians argued, and had it not been for the heroism and skill of the defenders, the continent would surely have become Muslim.<sup>50</sup> The truth is that, while the defeat was certainly a setback, it did not mean that new attacks would not be unleashed in the future – if, that is, there were prizes worth winning. And as far as western Europe was concerned in this period, these prizes were few and far between: wealth and rewards lay elsewhere.

The Muslim conquests completed Europe's shunt into the shadows that had begun with the invasions of the Goths, Huns and others two centuries earlier. What remained of the Roman Empire – now little more than Constantinople and its hinterland – shrivelled and teetered on the brink of complete collapse. Trade in the Christian Mediterranean, already dwindling on the eve of the wars with Persia, foundered. Once bustling cities like Athens and Corinth contracted sharply, their populations reduced and their centres all but abandoned. Shipwrecks from the seventh century onwards, a good indicator of the volume of commercial exchange going on, disappear almost entirely. Trade that was not local simply came to an end.<sup>51</sup>

The contrast with the Muslim world could not have been sharper. The economic heartlands of the Roman Empire and Persia had not just been conquered but united. Egypt and Mesopotamia had been linked to form the core of a new economic and political behemoth that stretched from the Himalayas through to the Atlantic. In spite of the ideological rows, the rivalries and the occasional paroxysms of instability in the Islamic world – such as the overthrow of the existing caliphate in 750 by the Abbāsid dynasty – the new empire coursed with ideas, goods and money. Indeed, this was precisely what lay behind the Abbāsid revolution: it was the cities of Central Asia that paved the way for regime change. These were the hotbeds where intellectual arguments were refined and where rebellions were financed. This was where critical decisions were taken in the battle for the soul of Islam.<sup>52</sup>

The Muslims had taken over a world that was well ordered and studded with hundreds of cities of consumers – taxable citizens, in other words. As each fell into the hands of the caliphate, more resources and assets came

under the control of the centre. Trade routes, oases, cities and natural resources were targeted and subsumed. Ports that connected trade between the Persian Gulf and China were annexed, as were the trans-Saharan trade routes that had built up, allowing Fez (in modern Morocco) to become ‘immensely prosperous’ and home to trade that in the words of one contemporary observer produced ‘huge profits’. The subjugation of new regions and peoples brought astonishing sums of money into the Muslim empire: one Arab historian estimated that the conquest of Sindh (in what is now Pakistan) yielded 60 million dirhams, to say nothing of the future riches to be drawn from taxes, levies and other duties.<sup>53</sup> In today’s terms, this was worth billions of dollars.

As forces headed east, the process of extracting tribute was as lucrative and successful as it had been in Palestine, Egypt and elsewhere. The cities of Central Asia were picked off one by one, the loose links between them sealing their downfall: without an organisational structure to co-ordinate defences, each waited for its fate in turn.<sup>54</sup> The inhabitants of Samarkand were pressured into paying a huge sum of money for the Muslim commander to withdraw, though in time it had to surrender anyway. At least the city’s governor was spared the fate of Dewashtich, ruler of Panjikent (in modern Tajikistan) who styled himself King of Sogdia; he was deceived, trapped and crucified in front of his own people. The governor of Balkh (in what is now northern Afghanistan) suffered a similar fate.<sup>55</sup>

The advances into Central Asia were greatly facilitated by the chaos that had started to embroil the steppe region at the same time that Persia crumbled. A devastating winter in 627–8 resulted in famine and the death of very large numbers of livestock, and precipitated a major shift in power. In the process of pushing east, the Muslim forces confronted the nomad tribes who had also benefited from the collapse of Persia. In the 730s, a crushing defeat was inflicted on the Türk nomads, whose ramifications were made more severe when Sulu, the dominant figure on the steppes, was murdered following a bad-tempered game of backgammon.<sup>56</sup>

As the tribal buffer disintegrated, the Muslims swept eastwards slowly but surely, taking cities, oasis towns and communication nodes, reaching the western reaches of China by the start of the eighth century.<sup>57</sup> In 751, the Arab conquerors were brought face to face with the Chinese, defeating them decisively in a confrontation by the Talas River in Central Asia. This brought

the Muslims up to a natural boundary, beyond which there was little point expanding further – at least in the short term. In China, meanwhile, the defeat brought repercussions and upheaval, triggering a major revolt against the ruling Tang dynasty led by the Sogdian general An Lushan, which led to an extended period of unrest and instability that created a vacuum for others to exploit.<sup>58</sup>

Quick to do so were the Uighurs, a tribal people who had supported the Tang and benefited considerably as their former overlords withdrew to the safety of China proper to lick their wounds. To better control their growing territories, the Uighurs built permanent settlements, the most important of which, Balāsāghūn or Quz Ordu (in modern Kyrgyzstan), became the seat of the ruler, or *khagan*. It was a curious blend of city and camp, with the leader having a tent with a golden dome and throne within it. The city had twelve entry gates and was protected by walls and towers. To judge from later accounts, this was just one of many Uighur towns that sprang up from the eighth century onwards.<sup>59</sup>

The Uighurs quickly became the pre-eminent force on Islam's eastern frontier. In doing so, they first incorporated and then replaced the Sogdians as the leading figures in long-distance trade, especially of silk. Strings of impressive palace complexes attest to the riches generated during this period.<sup>60</sup> Khukh Ordung, for example, was a fortified city that was home to tent camps as well as permanent buildings that included a pavilion that the *khagan* used to receive important visitors and for religious ceremonies.<sup>61</sup> Faced with the rivalry of the Muslims, the Uighurs tried to retain their own identity – deciding to convert to Manichaeism, perhaps as middle ground between the Islamic world to the west and China to the east.

The Muslims' conquests had brought a vast web of trade and communication routes under their control, with the oases of Afghanistan and the Ferghana valley linked to North Africa and the Atlantic Ocean under their authority. The wealth concentrated within the centre of Asia was astonishing. Excavations in Panjikent and at Balalyk-tepe and other sites in modern Uzbekistan bear witness to patronage of the arts of the highest order – and point clearly to the money that lay behind it. Scenes from court life, as well as from Persian epic literature, were beautifully portrayed on the walls of private residences. One set of images from a palace in Samarkand shows the cosmopolitan world that the Muslims were stepping into: the local ruler is

depicted receiving gifts from foreign dignitaries, who come from China, Persia, India and perhaps even Korea. Towns, provinces and palaces like these fell into the hands of the Muslim armies that were swarming along the trade routes.<sup>62</sup>

With this new wealth flooding into central coffers, heavy investments began to be made in places like Syria, where in the eighth century market squares and shops were built on a grand scale in the cities of Jerash, Scythopolis and Palmyra.<sup>63</sup> Most striking of all, however, was the construction of an enormous new city. It was to become the richest and most populous in the world, and remained so for centuries – even if some estimates made in the tenth century are over-exuberant. Basing his calculations on the number of bathhouses, the number of attendants required to maintain them and the likely distribution of baths to private houses, one author estimated the population of the city to be just under 100 million.<sup>64</sup> It was known as Madīnat al-Salām, or the city of peace. We know it as Baghdad.

It was the perfect symbol of the Islamic world's affluence, the heart of royal power, patronage and prestige. It marked a new centre of gravity for the successors of Muḥammad, the political and economic axis linking the Muslim lands in every direction. It provided a setting for pageantry and ostentation on a staggering scale, such as on the occasion of the marriage of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the son of the Caliph, in 781. Apart from presenting his bride with an array of pearls of unprecedented size, tunics decorated with rubies and a banquet 'the likes of which had never been prepared for any woman before', the groom distributed largesse to people from all over the country. Gold bowls filled with silver and silver bowls filled with gold were taken round and shared out, as were expensive perfumes in glass vessels. Women in attendance were given purses containing gold and silver coins 'and a large silver tray with scents, and a richly coloured and heavily encrusted robe of honour was bestowed on each of them. Nothing comparable had ever been seen before' – at least not in Islamic times.<sup>65</sup>

This was all made possible by the extraordinarily large tax revenue brought in from a vast, productive and monetised empire. When Hārūn al-Rashīd died in 809, his treasury included 4,000 turbans, 1,000 precious porcelain vessels, many kinds of perfume, vast quantities of jewels, silver and gold, 150,000 lances and the same number of shields, and thousands of pairs of boots –



many of them lined with sable, mink and other kinds of fur.<sup>66</sup> ‘The least of the territories ruled by the least of my subjects provides a revenue larger than your whole dominion,’ the Caliph supposedly wrote to the Emperor in Constantinople in the middle of the ninth century.<sup>67</sup> The wealth fuelled a period of incredible prosperity and an intellectual revolution.

Private enterprise surged as levels of disposable income rose dramatically. Basra on the Persian Gulf acquired a reputation as a market where anything could be found, including silks and linen, pearls and gems as well as henna and rosewater. The market at Mosul, a city with magnificent houses and fine public baths, was an excellent place to find arrows, stirrups or saddles, according to one tenth-century commentator. On the other hand, he noted, if you wanted the finest pistachios, sesame oil, pomegranates or dates, the best place to find them was in Nīshāpūr.<sup>68</sup>

There was a hunger for the tastiest ingredients, the finest craftsmanship and the best produce. As tastes became more sophisticated, so did appetites for information. Even if the traditional story that Chinese prisoners captured at the battle of Talas in 751 introduced paper-making skills to the Islamic world is overly romantic, it is certainly the case that from the later part of the eighth century the availability of paper made the recording, sharing and dissemination of knowledge wider, easier and quicker. The resultant explosion of literature covered all areas of science, mathematics, geography and travel.<sup>69</sup>

Writers recorded that the best quinces were from Jerusalem, and the finest pastries from Egypt; Syrian figs were bursting with taste, while the umari plums of Shiraz were to die for. As more discriminating tastes could now be afforded, sternly critical reviews were no less important. Fruit from Damascus should be avoided, the same author warned, since it was tasteless (and the city’s population were over-argumentative to boot). At least the city was not as bad as Jerusalem, a ‘golden basin filled with scorpions’, where the baths were filthy, provisions overpriced and the cost of living enough to discourage even a short visit.<sup>70</sup> Traders and travellers brought tales back with them about places they were visiting – about what the markets there had to offer and what the peoples beyond the lands of Islam were like. The Chinese of all ages ‘wear silk in both winter and summer’, noted one author who collated reports from abroad, with some having the finest material imaginable. This elegance did not extend to all habits: ‘The Chinese are

unhygienic, and they do not wash their backsides with water after defecating but merely wipe themselves with Chinese paper.’<sup>71</sup>

At least they enjoyed musical entertainment – unlike the Indian people, who regarded such spectacles as ‘shameful’. Rulers across India eschewed alcohol too. They did not do so for religious reasons, but because of their entirely reasonable view that if drunk, ‘how can someone run a kingdom properly?’ Though India ‘is the land of medicine and of philosophers’, the author concludes, China ‘is a healthier country, with fewer diseases and better air.’ It was rare to see ‘the blind, one-eyed and the deformed’, whereas ‘in India, there are plenty of them’.<sup>72</sup>

Luxury items flooded in from abroad. Porcelain and stoneware from China were imported in considerable volume, and shaped local pottery trends, design and techniques – with the distinctive white glaze of Tang bowls becoming extremely popular. Advances in kiln technology helped production keep up with demand, as did developments in size: it is estimated that the largest Chinese kilns became capable of firing 12,000–15,000 pieces a time. The increasing levels of exchange across what one leading scholar calls ‘the world’s largest maritime trading system’ can be demonstrated by the fact that a single ship, wrecked off the coast of Indonesia in the ninth century, was carrying some 70,000 ceramic items when it went down, as well as ornamental boxes, silverwear, gold and lead ingots.<sup>73</sup> This was just one example of the profusion of ceramics, silk, tropical hardwoods and exotic animals that the sources reveal were being imported to the Abbāsīd world in this period.<sup>74</sup> Such was the quantity of merchandise flowing into the ports of the Persian Gulf that professional divers were employed to salvage jetsam around the harbours, discarded or fallen from cargo ships.<sup>75</sup>

There were huge fortunes to be made from supplying desirable goods. The port of Sīrāf, which handled much of the maritime traffic from the east, boasted palatial residences with eye-watering price tags to match. ‘I have not seen in the realm of Islam more remarkable buildings, or more handsome, wrote one author in the tenth century.’<sup>76</sup> An array of sources attest to large-trade scale going in and out of the Gulf, as well as along the land routes that criss-crossed Central Asia.<sup>77</sup> Rising demand served to inspire and boost local production of ceramics and porcelain, whose buyers were presumably those who were unable to afford the very best (and most expensive) pieces from China. It was no surprise, therefore, that potters in Mesopotamia and the

Persian Gulf imitated the white glaze of the imports, experimenting with alkaline, tin and eventually quartz, to develop the look of the translucent (and better-quality) porcelain made in China. In Basra and Samarra, techniques were developed using cobalt to create distinctive 'blue and white wares' that centuries later would not only become popular in the Far East, but would be the hallmark of early modern Chinese pottery.<sup>78</sup>

In the eight and ninth centuries, however, there could be no doubt where the main markets were. One Chinese visitor to the Arab Empire in this period marvelled at the wealth: 'everything produced from the earth is there. Carts carry countless goods to markets, where everything is available and cheap: brocade, embroidered silks, pearls and other gems are displayed all over markets and street shops.'<sup>79</sup>

Alongside increasingly sophisticated tastes came increasingly refined ideas about suitable pursuits and pastimes. Texts like *The Book of the Crown*, written in the tenth century, set out the correct etiquette for interaction between the ruler and those at the court, while recommending that nobles should hunt, practise archery, play chess and involve themselves in 'other similar activities'.<sup>80</sup> These were all borrowed directly from Sasanian ideals, but the extent of their influence can be seen in the contemporary fashions in interior decoration, with hunting scenes in particular enjoying great popularity in the private palaces of the elite.<sup>81</sup>

Wealthy patrons also set about funding one of the most astonishing periods of scholarship in history. Brilliant figures – many of them not Muslim – were drawn to the court at Baghdad and to centres of academic excellence across Central Asia like Bukhara, Merv, Gundishapur and Ghazni, as well as further afield in Islamic Spain and in Egypt, to work on a range of subjects including mathematics, philosophy, physics and geography.

Large numbers of texts were gathered and translated from Greek, Persian and Syriac into Arabic, ranging from manuals on horse-medicine and veterinary sciences to works of ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>82</sup> These were devoured by scholars who used them as the basis for future research. Education and learning became a cultural ideal. There were families like the Barmakids, originally a Buddhist family from Balkh, who gained influence and power in ninth-century Baghdad and energetically championed the translation of a wide range of texts from Sanskrit into Arabic, even setting up a paper mill to help produce copies for wider dissemination.<sup>83</sup>

Or there was the Bukhtīshū family, Christians from Gundeshāpūr in Persia, which produced generations of intellectuals who wrote treatises on medicine and even on lovesickness – at the same time as practising as physicians, with some even serving the Caliph personally.<sup>84</sup> Medical texts written in this period formed the bedrock of Islamic medicine for centuries. ‘How is the pulse of someone who suffers from anxiety?’ was Question 16 of a question-and-answer text written in medieval Egypt; the answer (‘slight, weak and irregular’), noted the author, could be found in an encyclopaedia written in the tenth century.<sup>85</sup>

Pharmacopoeia – texts on mixing and creating medicines – listed experiments undertaken with substances like lemongrass, myrtle seeds, cumin and wine vinegar, celery seeds and spikenard.<sup>86</sup> Others worked on optics, with Ibn al-Haytham, a scholar who lived in Egypt, writing a groundbreaking treatise that reached conclusions not only about how vision and the brain are linked but also about differences between perception and knowledge.<sup>87</sup>

Or there was Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, who established that the world revolves around the sun and rotates on an axis. Or polymaths like Abū ‘Alī Ḥusayn ibn Sīnā, known in the west as Avicenna, who wrote on logic, theology, mathematics, medicine and philosophy, doing so in each case with an awe-inspiring intelligence, lucidity and honesty. ‘I read the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle,’ he wrote, ‘but could not comprehend its contents . . . even when I had gone back and read it forty times, and had got to the point where I had memorised it.’ This is a book, he added in a note that will be of comfort to students of this complex text, ‘which there is no way of understanding’. Happening on a bookseller’s stall at a market one day, however, he bought a copy of an analysis of Aristotle’s work by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, yet another great thinker of the age. Suddenly, it all made sense. ‘I rejoiced at this,’ wrote Ibn Sīnā, ‘and the next day gave much in alms to the poor in gratitude to God, who is exalted.’<sup>88</sup>

Then there were materials brought from India, including texts on science, mathematics and astrology written in Sanskrit that were pored over by brilliant men like Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī, who noted with delight the simplicity of the numerical system that allowed for the mathematical concept of zero. It provided the basis for leaps and bounds in algebra, applied mathematics, trigonometry and astronomy – the latter, in

part, driven by the practical need to know in which direction Mecca lay so that prayers could be offered correctly.

Scholars took pride not only in gathering materials from all corners of the world and studying them, but also in translating them. ‘The works of the Indians are rendered [into Arabic], the wisdom of the Greeks is translated, and the literature of the Persians has been transferred [to us too],’ wrote one author; ‘as a result, some works have increased in beauty.’ What a shame, he opined, that Arabic was such an elegant language that it was nearly impossible to translate it.<sup>89</sup>

This was a golden age, a time when brilliant men like al-Kindī pushed the frontiers of philosophy and of science. Brilliant women stepped forward too, like the tenth-century poet best known as Rabīʿa Balkhī, in what is now Afghanistan, and after whom the maternity hospital in Kabul is today named; or Mahsatī Ganjavī who likewise wrote eloquently in perfectly formed – and rather racy – Persian.<sup>90</sup>

While the Muslim world took delight in innovation, progress and new ideas, much of Christian Europe withered in the gloom, crippled by a lack of resources and a dearth of curiosity. St Augustine had been positively hostile to the concept of investigation and research. ‘Men want to know for the sake of knowing,’ he wrote scornfully, ‘though the knowledge is of no value to them.’ Curiosity, in his words, was nothing more than a disease.<sup>91</sup>

This disdain for science and scholarship baffled Muslim commentators, who had great respect for Ptolemy and Euclid, for Homer and Aristotle. Some had little doubt what was to blame. Once, wrote the historian al-Masʿūdī, the ancient Greeks and the Romans had allowed the sciences to flourish; then they adopted Christianity. When they did so, they ‘effaced the signs of [learning], eliminated its traces and destroyed its paths’.<sup>92</sup> Science was defeated by faith. It is almost the precise opposite of the world as we see it today: the fundamentalists were not the Muslims, but the Christians; those whose minds were open, curious and generous were based in the east – and certainly not in Europe. As one author put it, when it came to writing about non-Islamic lands, ‘we did not enter them [in our book] because we see no use whatsoever in describing them’. They were intellectual backwaters.<sup>93</sup>

The picture of enlightenment and cultural sophistication was also reflected in the way that minority religions and cultures were treated. In Muslim Spain,

Visigothic influences were incorporated into an architectural style that could be read by the subject population as a continuation with the immediate past – and therefore neither aggressive nor triumphalist.<sup>94</sup> We can also read the letters sent by Timothy, the Baghdad-based head of the church of the east in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, which describe a world where senior Christian clerics enjoyed responsive and positive personal relations with the Caliph, and where Christianity was able to maintain a base from which to dispatch evangelical missions into India, China and Tibet and on to the steppes – evidently meeting with considerable success.<sup>95</sup> It was a pattern mirrored in North Africa, where Christian and Jewish communities survived and perhaps even flourished long after the Muslim conquests.<sup>96</sup>

But it is also easy to get carried away. For one thing, despite the apparent unity conferred by the cloak of religion, there was still bitter division within the Islamic world. Three major political centres had evolved by the start of the 900s: one was centred on Córdoba and Spain; one on Egypt and the Upper Nile; and the third on Mesopotamia and (most of) the Arabian peninsula, and they fought with each other over matters of theology as well as for influence and authority. Serious schism within Islam had emerged within a generation of Muḥammad's death, with rival cases being set out to justify the correct succession from the Prophet. These quickly solidified into two competing arguments, championed by Sunnī and Shī'a interpretations, with the latter arguing passionately that only the descendant of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, should rule as caliph, and the former arguing for a broader understanding.

So despite the fact that there was a notional overarching religious unity that linked the Hindu Kush with the Pyrenees through Mesopotamia and North Africa, finding consensus was another matter. Similarly, relaxed attitudes to beliefs were neither uniform nor consistent. Although there were periods of acceptance of other faiths, there were also phases of persecution and brutal proselytisation. While the first hundred years after Muḥammad's death saw limited efforts to convert local populations, soon more concerted attempts were made to encourage those living under Muslim overlordship to embrace Islam. These were not limited to religious teaching and evangelism: in the case of Bukhara in the eighth century, for example, the governor announced that all those who showed up to Friday prayer would receive the princely sum of two dirhams – an incentive that attracted the poor and persuaded them to accept the new faith, albeit on basic terms: they could not

read the Qur'ān in Arabic and had to be told what do to while prayers were being said.<sup>97</sup>

The chain of events that began with the intense rivalry between the Roman Empire and Persia had extraordinary consequences. As the two great powers of late antiquity flexed their muscles and prepared for a final showdown, few could have predicted that it would be a faction from the far reaches of the Arabian peninsula that would rise up to supplant both. Those who had been inspired by Muḥammad truly inherited the earth, establishing perhaps the greatest empire that the world has seen, one that would introduce irrigation techniques and new crops from the Tigris and Euphrates to the Iberian peninsula, and spark nothing less than an agrarian revolution spanning thousands of miles.<sup>98</sup>

The Islamic conquests created a new world order, an economic giant, bolstered by self-confidence, broad-mindedness and a passionate zeal for progress. Immensely wealthy and with few natural political or even religious rivals, it was a place where order prevailed, where merchants could become rich, where intellectuals were respected and where disparate views could be discussed and debated. An unpromising start in a cave near Mecca had given birth to a cosmopolitan utopia of sorts.

It did not go unnoticed. Ambitious men born on the periphery of the Muslim *umma*, or even far beyond, were drawn like bees to honey. Prospects in the marshes of Italy, in central Europe and Scandinavia did not look too promising for young men looking to make a name (and some money) for themselves. In the nineteenth century, it was to the west and to the United States that such individuals looked for fame and fortune; a millennium earlier, they looked to the east. Better still, there was one commodity which was in plentiful supply and had a ready market for those willing to play hard and fast.

## Chapter 4 – The Road to Revolution

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