Postclassical Era: Islamic Diffusion

*Focus Question: What key factors led to the rapid diffusion of Islam in the postclassical era?*

**Reading #1: Islamic Empire**

Middle East

The courage, military prowess and religious zeal of the warriors of Islam, and the weaknesses of the empires that bordered on Arabia, resulted in stunning conquests in Mesopotamia, north Africa and Persia, which dominated the next two decades of Islamic history. The empire built from these conquests was Arab rather than Islamic. The political leaders had little desire to convert the subject populations, either Arab or otherwise, to the new religion.

The chance to glorify their new religion may have been a motive for the Arab conquests, but they were not driven by a desire to win converts to it. In fact, other than fellow bedouin tribes of Arab descent, the invaders had good reason to avoid mass conversions. Muslims were exempted from some of the more lucrative taxes levied on Christian, Jewish and other non-Muslim groups. Thus, the vision of forcible spread of the Muslim faith, which has long been associated with Islam in the Christian West, misrepresents the forces behind the early Arab expansion.

Increasing numbers of conquered subjects were voluntarily converting to Islam, despite the fact that conversion did little to advance them socially or politically in the Umayyad period. By the Abbasid era, there was a growing acceptance of non-Arab Muslims as equals. Most converts were won over peacefully through the great appeal of Islamic beliefs and the advantages they enjoyed over non-Muslim peoples in the empire. Not only were taxes lower, but they had greater opportunities to get advanced schooling and launch careers as administrators, traders or judges.

North Africa

Between 640 and 700 C.E., the followers of Muhammad swept across north Africa in many successful military campaigns. The message of Islam found fertile ground among the populations of north Africa. Conversion took place rapidly. Islam offered many attractions within Africa. Its fundamental teaching that all Muslims are equal within the community of believers made the acceptance of conquerors and new rulers easier. The Islamic tradition of uniting the powers of the state and religion in the person of the ruler or caliph appealed to some African kings as a way of reinforcing their authority. The concept that all members of the umma, or community of the believers, were equal put the newly converted Africans on equal footing with the Arabs.

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**Reading #2**

West Africa savanna/Sudan

There were several Sudanic kingdoms in the postclassical era. The rulers of these states were considered sacred and were surrounded by rituals that separated them from their subjects. As the Islamic wave spread across north Africa, it sent ripples across the Sahara, not in the form of invading armies but at first in the merchants and travelers who trod the dusty and ancient caravan routes toward the savanna.

With the conversion of the some rulers in the Sudanic states, Islam was used to reinforce indigenous ideas of kingship. This is because the Muslim concept of a ruler united civil and religious authority. The ruling families used Islamic titles, such as caliph, to reinforce their authority.

Merchants were another group who converted to Islam. Common religion and law provided solidarity and trust to the merchants who lived in the cities and whose caravans brought goods to and from the savanna.

Much of the population never converted, and those who did convert often maintained many of the old beliefs as well. For example, women in the Sudan continued to enjoy many freedoms, in sharp contrast to the Sharia law emerging in the Islamic empire.

Swahili Coast

By the 13th century, a string of urbanized east African trading ports had developed along the coast. They were tied to each other by an active coastal commerce and, in a few places, to the interior by a caravan trade, although it was usually Africans who brought the goods to the coast.

The Islamic influence in these towns promoted long-distance commerce. The 13th century was a period of great Islamic expansion, and as that faith spread eastward to India and Indonesia, it provided a religious bond of trust and law that facilitated trade throughout ports of the Indian Ocean. Whereas the rulers and merchants of Swahili city-states tended to be Muslim, the majority of the population on the east African coast, and perhaps even in the towns themselves, retained their previous beliefs and culture. Still, a culture developed that fused Islamic and traditional elements.

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**Reading #3**

Delhi Sultanate

Growing numbers of Muslim warriors, traders and Sufi mystics entered south Asia throughout the postclassical era and settled there. Their interactions with indigenous peoples were generally peaceful, though there was periodic warfare. Beginning in 711, a series of military expeditions resulted in the conquest of a portion of this subcontinent, mostly in northern India. This became a Muslim empire known as the Delhi Sultanate, independent of the Islamic empire.

With the influx of Muslims, the peoples of India encountered for the first time a large-scale influx of bearers of a civilization as sophisticated as their own. They were also confronted by a religious system that was in many ways the very opposite of the ones they had nurtured. Socially, Islam was highly egalitarian, proclaiming all believers equal in the sight of God. Yet the faith of the invading Muslims was religiously more rigid than the Hindus.

Although the Muslims fought their way into India, their interaction with the indigenous peoples soon came to be dominated by accommodation and peaceful exchange. Over the centuries when much of the north was ruled by dynasties centered at Delhi, sizeable Muslim communities developed in different areas of the subcontinent. Few of these converts were won forcibly. The main carriers of the new faith often were merchants, who played a growing role in both coastal and inland trade, but were most especially Sufi mystics.

Most of the indigenous converts, who came to form a majority of the Muslims living in India, were drawn from Buddhist or low-caste groups. Low castes were attracted to the more egalitarian social arrangements promoted by the new faith. Some conversions resulted from the desire of Hindus or Buddhists to escape the head tax the Muslim rulers levied on unbelievers. In addition, Muslim migrants swelled the size of the Islamic community in the subcontinent.

Arab rulers generally treated Hindus and Buddhists as “people of the book,” despite the fact that their faith had no connection to the Bible. As in other areas conquered by the Arabs, most of the local officials and notables retained their positions, which did much to reconcile them to Muslim rule. Nearly all Arabs, who made up only a tiny minority of the population, lived in cities or special garrison towns. Because little effort was expended in converting the people of the conquered areas, they remained overwhelmingly Hindu or Buddhist.

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**Reading #4**

Islands of Southeast Asia

Island Southeast Asia had long been a trading zone connection China to trade networks along the Indian Ocean. From the 8th century onward, the coastal trade of India came increasingly to be controlled by Muslims. As a result, elements of Islamic culture began to filter into island southeast Asia. When the Buddhist empire of Shrivijaya in Southeast Asia fell, incentives increased for the establishment of Muslim trading centers and efforts to preach the faith to the coastal peoples.

As in most areas to which Islam spread, peaceful contacts and voluntary conversion were far more important than conquest and force in spreading the faith in Southeast Asia. Throughout the islands of the region, trading contacts paved the way for conversion. Muslim merchants and sailors introduced local peoples to the ideas and rituals of the new faith and impressed on them how much of the known world had already been converted. Muslim ships also carried Sufis to various parts of Southeast Asia, where they played as vital role in conversion as they had in India.

The first areas to be won to Islam in the late 13th century were port cities in coastal areas. Here trading links were critical. Once one of the key cities in a trading cluster converted, it was in the best interest of others to follow suit to enhance personal ties and provide a common basis in Muslim law to regulate business deals. Conversion to Islam also linked these centers, culturally as well as economically, to the merchant ports of India, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Because Islam was spread in many areas by Sufis from South Asia, it was often infused with mystical strains and incorporated animist, Hindu and Buddhist elements. Women retained a much stronger position, both within the family and in society, than they had in the Middle East and India. For example, trading in local and regional markets continued to be dominated by small-scale female buyers and sellers.