



How Islam Spread Throughout the World

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Abstract

Historians have widely discredited the narrative that the prevalence of Islam in the world today can be explained as a result of forced conversions. Without denying that there may have been *some* exceptional cases of forced conversion—in blatant violation of clear Islamic directives—this article describes some of the prominent factors in the Islamization of different regions of the world in history, including *da‘wah*, trade, intermarriage, migration, influencers, Islam’s emphasis on justice and unity, and the universality of Islam. The examples used in this article are not exhaustive, but they help us develop an appreciation of the complex nature of the spread of Islam, a process which certainly cannot be oversimplified into a slogan such as “Islam was spread by the sword.”

Introduction

In 1993, the historian Richard Eaton claimed that “Islam was history’s first truly global civilization.”¹ While the present status of the Muslim *ummah* (community) as a functional “civilization” is up for discussion, the scope referenced by Eaton is more accurate today than ever: Islam today is undeniably a global *dīn* (way of life), professed by an estimated 1.8 billion people as of 2015.² For some, the prevalence of one of the world’s youngest religions can only be explained by the “fact” that historically, Islam “spread by the sword”—that is, through systematic forced conversion. As discussed in the [first article](#) in this series, this is a very shallow assertion. However, the previous analysis does raise another important question: if Islam was not spread by the sword, what are the factors that have led to its prevalence across the world today?

¹ Richard M. Eaton, “Islamic history as global history,” in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 12.

² Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world,” *Pew Research Center*, 9 August 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

The current article discusses these factors and their role in Islam’s historical trajectory in different regions of the world. This analysis is organized in the following way. The first section covers five prominent factors that explain *how* non-Muslims were exposed to the message of Islam: *da‘wah*, trade, intermarriage, migration and influencers. The second section covers three prominent factors which primarily explain *why* non-Muslims embraced this message after they were exposed to it: Islam’s emphasis on justice and unity, and the universality of Islam.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list—in fact, every individual convert had his or her own particular experiences that led them to embrace the faith. However, to discuss each case would be redundant, even if it were possible. It is therefore necessary to generalize the discussion on the spread of Islam for the sake of a meaningful analysis, but not in such a way as to lose sight of the reality: there have been virtually countless different means used to deliver the message of Islam, and countless different reasons for accepting it.

I: The Spread of the Message

Da‘wah

Da‘wah, or the act of inviting others to engage with the message of Islam, follows naturally from the Muslim’s obligatory concern for humanity’s success and salvation. “Invite (*ud‘ū*) all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice” (16:125) is a clear Qur’ānic directive to Muslims.³ Allāh also informs Prophet Muhammad ﷺ of his mission in the Qur’ān (33:45-6): “O Prophet! We have sent you as a witness, and a deliverer of good news, and a warner, and a caller (*dā‘ī*) to [the Way of] Allāh by His command, and a beacon of light.” After the Prophet ﷺ, every member of the Muslim *ummah* shares in the responsibility of *da‘wah* to the extent they are able.

³ All quotations from the Qur’ān in this article are taken from Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran: A Thematic English Translation of the Message of the Final Revelation* (Lombard, IL: Book of Signs Foundation, 2016).

An early *dā'ī* was Mu'ādh ibn Jabal, sent by the Prophet ﷺ to give *da'wah* in Yemen and Hadramawt. The importance of this task is indicated in a letter sent by the Prophet to his contacts in Yemen after dispatching Mu'ādh, in which he said, “I have sent you my best man.”⁴ According to the historian Ibn Ishāq, the Prophet ﷺ also instructed Mu'ādh on the manner of *da'wah* before he left, including the following: “Be tolerant, not harsh; spread the word, and do not alienate them.”⁵ Bukhārī and Muslim also recorded a version of this narration.⁶

Mu'ādh was constantly on the move throughout the region, not settling in one place for too long, so as to maximize the reach of his *da'wah*.⁷ It is noteworthy that this same region soon became the point of departure for traveling scholars and merchants who introduced Islam to many parts of the world, such as Madagascar, parts of Southeast Asia (as discussed below), and elsewhere.⁸ As one scholar has noted, “there exists archeological evidence pointing to a Yemeni mosque—what exactly that means is open to debate—in Quangzhou from the eleventh century, and to a tombstone from Mogadishu dated 1358.”⁹

The role of the *da'wah* efforts of Sufi Muslims in the spread of Islam is widely recognized. An archeological study of the oldest surviving Islamic monuments in present-day western Kazakhstan concluded that these were “built under the influence of the Sufi strand of Islam, which retained its influence in the Kazakh steppes until the early fifteenth century,”¹⁰ indicating that Sufism played an

⁴ Abd al Wahid Dhanun Taha, “The Historical Process of the Spread of Islam,” in *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture, Volume Three: The Spread of Islam throughout the World*, eds. Idris El Hareir and El Hadji Ravane M'Baye (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 134.

⁵ Abū Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik ibn Hishām, *As-Sīra an-Nabawiyya*, Vol. II, ed. Mustafā as-Saqqa et al. (Cairo: Matba'at Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1936), 590.

⁶ They narrate that Abu Burda reported: “The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, sent Mu'adh and himself to Yemen and he said, ‘Make things easy and do not make things difficult. Give glad tidings and do not repel people. Cooperate with each other and do not become divided.’” (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 2873, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* 1733; see Abu Amina Elias, “Hadith on Da'wah: Give glad tidings, make it easy, and remain united,” <[link](#)>).

⁷ Taha, “The Historical Process of the Spread of Islam,” 134.

⁸ S. von Sicard, “Malagasy Islam: Tracing the History and Cultural Influences of Islam in Madagascar,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2011): 102; Vincent J.H. Houben, “Southeast Asia and Islam,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 153.

⁹ Ulrike Freitag, “Reflections on the Longevity of the Hadhrami Diaspora in the Indian Ocean,” in *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?*, eds. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 22.

¹⁰ Rakhym Beknazarov, “Analysing the Spread of Islam in Western Kazakhstan through Architectural Monuments,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 35.

important role in the initial spread of Islam in this region. This reinforces earlier suggestions of the influence of traveling Sufis such as Abū'l-Hasan al-Kalamātī and Abū'l-Hasan al-Usbānīkathī (both fl. 10th century) in the spread of Islam in Central Asia, particularly during the period of Sāmānid rule (819-999).¹¹

Similarly, Sufism played a leading role in the Islamization of Kashmir, a disputed territory in the foothills of the Himalayas with a population that is currently upwards of 95% Muslim.¹² It is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the Islamization of Kashmir, but there are records of a Syrian Muslim military general arriving there, possibly as a prisoner of war, as early as 711.¹³ There are also records of Kashmir's Hindu kings requesting Islamic scholars to be sent to their courts, ordering the Qur'an to be translated into the Kashmiri language, and employing Muslims in their court administration and army.¹⁴

However, the more precisely traceable history of Islam in Kashmir dates to 1323, when the Buddhist ruler of Kashmir, Lha (also known as Rinchen), “subjected himself to the teachings of the religion of Mustafa [i.e., the Prophet ﷺ], and the right principles of the truthful path of Murtaza [i.e., ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib], and embraced the Islamic religion with sincerity and conviction.”¹⁵ Lha (after conversion, Mālik Sadr al-Dīn) was an “inquisitive and alert” young man, “fond of the company of learned men,” and he had been inspired during a meeting with a traveling Sufī scholar known as Bulbul Shah (d. 1327), reportedly because he found that Islam was “simple, free from useless ceremonies, caste and priesthood.”

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¹¹ D.G. Tor, “The Islamization of Central Asia during the Sāmānid era and the reshaping of the Muslim world,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 2 (2009): 288-9.

¹² Rekha Chowdhary, *Jammu and Kashmir: Politics of Identity and Separatism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162; Muslims are reported to make up 97.16% of Indian-held Kashmir's population, according to this source; Pakistan-held Kashmir is estimated to be 99% Muslim.

¹³ Sayyed M. F. Bukhari, *Kashmir Main Islam: Manzar Aur Pasmanzar* [Islam in Kashmir: Historical Context], (Srinagar: Maktaba ‘Ilm-o-Adab, 1998), 18.

¹⁴ Yoginder Sikand, “Hazrat Bulbul Shah: The First Known Muslim Missionary in Kashmir,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2000): 363.

¹⁵ *Baharistān-i-Shahī* [The Royal Garden] (Calcutta: Firma KLM), 22; this is a Persian chronicle written by an anonymous author, published c. 1614, and translated into English in Kashinath Pundit, *Baharistan-i-Shahi: A Chronicle of Mediaeval Kashmir* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2013).

¹⁶ Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmir under the Sultans* (Srinagar: Ali Mohammad and Sons, 1974), 39.

Mālik died shortly after his conversion, but not before he helped Bulbul Shah establish a *khanqah* (a Sufi school) and a *langar khāna* (community kitchen) that fed the poor of all backgrounds twice a day. Many Kashmiris converted at the hands of Bulbul Shah.¹⁷ One of his students, Ahmad, later became the chief Islamic scholar of Kashmir under Shah Mīr, Mālik's former chief minister and also a Muslim, who came to power in 1339.¹⁸ Thus began the Shah Mīrī (or Swati) dynasty; his descendants ruled Kashmir for the next two centuries. It was during this time that another Sufi scholar, Mīr Sayyid 'Alī al-Hamdānī (d. 1385), came to the region to teach Islam, ushering in the second wave of *da'wah* to Islam in Kashmir. In addition to Kashmir, the widely-traveling Hamdānī is known for his *da'wah* in parts of Syria, Iraq, Khawarzm, Central Asia, India, and possibly even Sarandīp (Sri Lanka).¹⁹

A prominent example of Sufi *da'wah* is that of the Ba 'Alawi *tarīqah* (order) started by Muhammad ibn 'Alī al-Faqīh al-Muqaddam (d. 1255) of Hadramawt in Yemen; hence the Ba 'Alawis are also referred to as Hadramīs. Due in large part to a shift in trade routes due to the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258 (discussed in detail below), starting in the 14th century, members of the Ba 'Alawi *tarīqah* increasingly traveled to the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago via India for trade, migration, and *da'wah*.²⁰ As Ulrike Freitag has noted in her study of Islam in this region, “the emergence of Sufism, and from the twelfth century onwards the Sufi orders, offered religious practices which were attractive to non-Muslims as well. Charismatic Sufis who knew how to read and write, who practiced medicine [...] drew Muslims and non-Muslims alike into their circles.”²¹

Other reasons for why the Sufi *da'wah* of the Ba 'Alawi was so effective in this region—given that some 250 million Muslims live in Southeast Asia today—are outlined elsewhere in this article, though more research on their impact is needed.

¹⁷ Sikand, “Hazrat Bulbul Shah,” 366.

¹⁸ Ibid., 367.

¹⁹ Jamal J. Elias, “A second 'Alī: the making of Sayyid 'Alī Hamadānī in popular imagination,” *Muslim World* 90, no. 3-4 (Fall 2000): 397.

²⁰ Frode Jacobsen, *Hadrami Arabs in Present-day Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 11.

²¹ Freitag, “Reflections on the Longevity of the Hadhrami Diaspora in the Indian Ocean,” 24.

As Syed Farid Alatas has noted, discussion of their *da‘wah* has been “conspicuously absent in the literature on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia.”²²

Some indicators of the effectiveness of *da‘wah* in the spread of Islam are seen in the frantic measures taken by some authorities to try to prevent Muslims from carrying out *da‘wah* work. The enslaved Muslims brought by early Spanish colonizers to the “New World,” for example, often escaped and ran away, finding refuge in Native American settlements.²³ The Spanish authorities feared both the spread of Islam in their colonies and the prospect of joint African–Native American rebellions.²⁴ The depth of their anxiety was reflected in the severity of punishments; one runaway slave who was plausibly Muslim was recaptured and boiled to death in Costa Rica in 1540, and two Muslims were condemned (one to death, one to life in prison) in 1560 for “having practiced and spread Islam in Cuzco, Peru.”²⁵ On five different occasions in the 16th century, Spanish authorities passed legislation in efforts to limit the influx of Muslim slaves into the colonies; they were described as an “inconvenience,” at least partially due to their *da‘wah* activity.²⁶

Following in this tradition, Muslims have given *da‘wah* in different ways virtually everywhere they have gone, and it is therefore not far-fetched to claim that *da‘wah* has been the most important factor in the spread of Islam. Every example of conversion to Islam that is described in this article involves *da‘wah* in some form.

Trade

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself was a merchant at one stage of his life, and trade has historically been instrumental in the spread of his message. The lands that

²² Syed Farid Alatas, “The Tariqat Al-‘Alawiyya and the Emergence of the Shi‘i School in Indonesia and Malaysia,” paper presented at the conference ‘The Northwestern Indian Ocean as Cultural Corridor,’ Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, Stockholm, 17–19 January 1997, p. 8.

²³ Samory Rashid, “The Islamic Origins of Spanish Florida’s Ft. Musa,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2001): 211.

²⁴ Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (15th Anniversary Edition) (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 212.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

came under Muslim rule after the early conquests included some of the most important trade routes (e.g., large parts of the Silk Road), commercial centers (e.g., Damascus), and ports (e.g., Aden) of the pre-modern world. The Muslims also inherited the ever-lucrative spice trade flowing across the Indian Ocean. As Muslim merchants traveled, they inevitably—and, it may be assumed, often very deliberately—exposed non-Muslims to their beliefs, values, and way of life.

The early emergence of Muslim communities on the Malabar Coast in southwestern India is a fitting example of the role of trade in the spread of Islam. The pre-Islamic Arabs and Persians frequently visited the ports of the Malabar Coast to trade with merchants coming from further east. These connections were so strong that there is a mosque, called Cheraman Jāmi‘ Masjid, that is widely believed to have been originally built by Muslim traders in 630—during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.²⁷

The narrative of the origins of this mosque is unverifiable, but it does indicate the possibility of a very early Muslim presence on the Malabar Coast. The Muslim traders who settled in Malabar and intermixed with the local population came to form the Māppila Muslim community that is prevalent in the region today.²⁸ By the 10th century, according to the ‘Abbāsīd historian al-Mas‘ūdī, a settlement called Saymur (south of present-day Mumbai) was home to about 10,000 Muslims.²⁹ Many of these are likely to have been indigenous converts, the “great majority” of them embracing Islam to escape their status as downtrodden, low-caste Hindus.³⁰

Looking further east, it is arguably no coincidence that China’s oldest and largest mosque—the Great Mosque of Xi’an, thought to have been built in 742 CE—stands in the city (then known as Chang’an) that marked the easternmost point of the Silk Road.³¹ In addition to Chang’an, early Persian and Arab Muslim

²⁷ Mehrdad Shokoohy, “Architecture of the Sultanate of Ma’bar in Madura, and Other Muslim Monuments in South India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1, no. 1 (1991): 36.

²⁸ A. D. W. Forbes, “Malabar,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs.

²⁹ Abū’l-Hasan al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab* [Meadows of Gold], 2 Vols. (Cairo, 1948), Vol. I, 170.

³⁰ Stephen F. Dale, “Trade, Conversion and the Growth of the Islamic Community of Kerala, South India,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 71 (1990): 162.

³¹ Zvi Ben Dor Benite, “Follow the white camel: Islam in China to 1800,” in David Morgan and Anthony Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 413.

merchants also traveled by sea to Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Kaifeng; the ‘Abbāsīd ruler al-Mansūr (d. 775) boasted that there were no obstacles for trade between his new capital, Baghdad, and these commercial centers.³² An estimated 120,000 “non-Chinese,” including Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, were killed in Guangzhou in 877 during a rebellion, providing us with a sense of how many Muslims (most of them merchants) traveled to and settled in Guangzhou alone.³³ Trade took Muslims as far as “al-Shīla” (Korea), where many of them had settled by the late 800s.³⁴

In the case of Southeast Asia, there is evidence dating as far back as the 7th century that Arab traders were active in the region, especially in Sumatra (Indonesia).³⁵ A shipwreck found off the coast of Java and dated to the year 960 included a stone mold to make medallions that read “*al-mulk lillāhi al-wāhid al-qahhār*” (“All Sovereignty is Allāh’s, the One and Only, the Dominator”).³⁶ By the 10th century, communities of Muslim traders had started to settle in Southeast Asia, the most prominent of them in Champa (Vietnam), from which the present-day Cham Muslims of Cambodia and Vietnam originate.³⁷ By the 11th century they were active in present-day Brunei and the Philippines.³⁸

A key turning point in the Islamization of Southeast Asia was the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258. Given the damage done to infrastructure and the breakdown of authority in Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the Tigris-Euphrates river system could no longer serve as the primary trade route for the spice trade from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, including rising European markets. The Red Sea route rose to prominence, including the ports of Alexandria, Cairo, Jeddah, Aden (from where

³² Hyunhee Park, *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵ Geoff Wade, “An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, 900-1300 CE,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009): 231.

³⁶ Michael Flecker, “A ninth century AD Arab or Indian shipwreck in Indonesia: First evidence for direct trade with China,” *World Archaeology* 32, no. 3 (2001): 335-54.

³⁷ S. Setudeh-Nejad, “The Cham Muslims of Southeast Asia: A Historical Note,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2002): 452.

³⁸ Geoff Wade, “Early Muslim expansion in South-East Asia, eighth to fifteenth centuries,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. David Morgan and Anthony Reid (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 402.

Hadramī *dā'īs* often embarked, headed east), Cambay (Gujarat and Mumbai), Calicut, and Pisai (Malacca and Aceh).³⁹ Freitag has noted that “the presence of high status and economically successful [Muslim] merchants seems in itself to have provided an example which seemed well worth emulating. Conversion to the faith of the economic elite held advantages such as the promise of becoming part of an international commercial network.”⁴⁰

By the 14th century, the spread of Islam across Southeast Asia was well underway, peaking with the prosperity of the Sultanate of Malacca (1403-1511); notably, the rulers of Cambay and Aceh were also Muslim by the early 15th century.⁴¹ According to the Portuguese apothecary Tomé Pires, who visited Malacca in 1507, it was the most important city in the world, and whoever controlled it “shall have his hands on the throat of Venice”—a reference to Europe’s reliance on the spice trade that flowed through the city.⁴²

The spread of Islam in Eastern Europe offers another example of the central role of trade in this process. In the late 1930s, an Arabic silver coin dating from the time of the Umayyad ruler Marwān II (r. 744-50) was found in the village of Potoci in Herzegovina.⁴³ In nearby Hungary, Muslims had served as minters and money-changers for the court, had been heavily involved in the customs system, and had controlled the production and sale of salt, all before the Golden Bull of 1222 declared that no Muslim or Jew could serve in the administration.⁴⁴ Much earlier, King Ladislas I (r. 1077-95) had referred to certain merchants in Hungary, called “Ishmaelites” who had nominally converted to Christianity but continued to profess and practice Islam.⁴⁵ And in 2013, excavations at a cemetery in Orosháza revealed that the bodies had been buried with their heads facing south (i.e., in the

³⁹ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 48.

⁴⁰ Freitag, “Reflections on the Longevity of the Hadhrami Diaspora in the Indian Ocean,” 24.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Armando Cortesão, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires, 1512-1515* (Laurier Books Ltd., 1990), lxxv.

⁴³ M. Hadzijahic and N. Šukric, *Islam I Muslimani u Bosni I Hercegovini* [Islam and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina] (Sarajevo: Starješinstvo Islamske Zajednice, 1977), 21.

⁴⁴ Smail Balic, “Islam in Eastern and South-East Europe,” in Idris El Hareir and El Hadji Ravane M’Baye (eds.), *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture, Volume Three: The Spread of Islam Throughout the World* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 788.

⁴⁵ Katarína Štulrajterová, “Convivenza, Convenienza and Conversion: Islam in Medieval Hungary (1000-1400 CE),” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 182-3.

direction of the Ka‘bah, as per Islamic practice). The village also showed an unusual “lack of pig bones” and the presence of measuring devices, strongly suggesting that its inhabitants were Muslim merchants.⁴⁶

Another case of trade serving as the avenue for the spread of Islam is that of East, Central, and West Africa. Due to their proximity, Arabia and East Africa had a long pre-Islamic history of close political and trade relations. Soon after the advent of Islam, merchants took the lead in introducing the faith to this region. The East Africans developed and maintained close ties with Muslim outposts in the Indian Ocean, especially the ports of Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and India; this brought with it so much cultural exchange that Ibn Battūtah, traveling in the 1300s, noticed that the same food he had enjoyed in Mogadishu (Somalia), Mombasa (Kenya) and Kilwa (Tanzania) was offered to him in Sarandīp (Sri Lanka).⁴⁷ The merchants’ “delivery” of Islam was bolstered by a steady stream of refugees coming from Arabia in the 7th-10th centuries, many of them fleeing civil wars or natural disasters. One of them, ‘Alī ibn al-Hasan Shirāzī, later established the Kilwa Sultanate, which at its peak covered the entire Swahili Coast.⁴⁸ Despite all of this trade and settlement, it was not until the 13th century that the Islamization of East Africa started to accelerate.⁴⁹

The *baqt* in Sudan played a key role in the spread of Islam in East-Central Africa. In 652, having completed the conquest of Egypt, Muslim forces moved south and met Nubian forces at Dongola (Sudan). Rather than press for a fight, the two sides agreed to a *baqt*, or peace agreement, which was remarkably honored for six centuries.⁵⁰ The *baqt* enabled Muslim scholars and traders to travel freely in the region, thereby introducing Islam to the Nubians. During the early 9th century, large deposits of gold and emeralds were discovered in the desert south of Aswan.

⁴⁶ Nora Berend, “A Note on the End of Islam in Medieval Hungary: Old Mistakes and Some New Results,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014): 206.

⁴⁷ Waines, *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta*, 85-90.

⁴⁸ H. Neville Chittick, “The East Coast, Madagascar and the Indian Ocean,” in Roland Oliver (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 3: From c. 1050 to c. 1600* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 201-4.

⁴⁹ Hamad S. Ndee, “Islam and Islamic Culture: Earliest Foreign Influences on Physical Activity in Pre-Colonial East Africa,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 5 (2010): 804.

⁵⁰ Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa: A 5,000-Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavor* (London, UK: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 70-79.

⁵¹ This prompted Egypt's Arab Bedouin tribes, many of whom had firmly embraced Islam by this point, to migrate into this region, and, over time, to penetrate deep into present-day Sudan and settle down. It is clear that the spread of Islam in this region took centuries, and Islam could be said to have supplanted Christianity in the area of Nubia only by the 14th century at the earliest.⁵²

In the Central-West African region, too, Islam was introduced by Muslim merchants from North Africa. It is no coincidence that some of the first towns to develop a significant Muslim population in this region were Awdaghust (Mauritania) and Tadmekka (Mali), two of the southern termini of the famous Trans-Saharan trade route.⁵³ The geographer Ibn Hawqal (d. c. 988) recorded that Kumbi Saleh, the capital of the Ghana Empire, had a neighborhood of Muslim merchants. Around the years 1009 and 1040, respectively, the kings of Takrur (Senegal) and Gao (Mali) had embraced Islam. By 1085, Islam was spreading quickly in Kanem (Chad-Nigeria).⁵⁴ These developments, virtually all initiated by Muslim merchants, paved the way for powerful Afro-Muslim empires such as that of Mansa Musa, which in turn facilitated the further spread of Islam in the region, as described above. And, as was the case in many places, Islamization here was a very long process, and was still observably underway when the German explorer Heinrich Barth traveled through the region in the 1850s.⁵⁵

Migration

Migration, both forced (e.g., as slaves or refugees) and voluntary (e.g., economic migration), has played an important role in the spread of Islam, especially since the 15th century. However, there are earlier examples; in fact, the earliest presence of

⁵¹ Michael Brett, "Egypt", in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 557.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Eric Ross, "A Historical Geography of the Trans-Saharan Trade," in Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon (eds.), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ For an account of Barth's travels, see Steve Kemper, *A Labyrinth of Kingdoms: 10,000 Miles through Islamic Africa* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

Muslims outside of Arabia was that of a group of Muslims who sought refuge in Abyssinia during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and at his instruction.⁵⁶

It should be noted that though Muslims who have been forced to migrate have given *da‘wah*—an example of this was given in the section on *da‘wah* above, and another example is that effective *da‘wah* of Ja‘far ibn Abī Tālib to the Abyssinian ruler, the Negus—the argument here is that their mere presence in the regions to which they were relocated can be seen as a form of the spread of Islam. In other words, as Sylviane Diouf and others have argued, wherever these Muslims went they commonly brought with them their embodied knowledge of Islam.

Forced migration brought the first Muslims to the “New World” by way of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, laying the foundations for an early Muslim presence in the Americas. It has proven difficult to reliably estimate how many slaves of African origin were Muslim, but they must have numbered at least in the hundreds of thousands.⁵⁷ The United States makes for a useful case study, and it may have held a higher proportion of Muslim slaves than any other region in the Americas. 24% of the African slaves brought to the Thirteen Colonies or, later, the United States were from Senegambia, which makes it likely that they were Muslims.⁵⁸ The city of St. Augustine, Florida is the oldest continuously-occupied European city in the mainland United States, and was originally built largely by African Muslim slave laborers.⁵⁹

Gradually, the descendants of these forced migrants became distanced from Islam, but they held on to enough awareness of their heritage so as to establish pseudo-Islamic communities in the early 20th century, such as the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and the Nation of Islam (NOI), and to eventually return to mainstream Islam *en masse* starting in the late 1970s. Today, Muslims of African descent make up around 25% of the U.S. Muslim population.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Lings, *Muhammad*, 81.

⁵⁷ Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Samory Rashid, “The Islamic Origins of Spanish Florida’s Ft. Musa,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2001): 209.

⁶⁰ Dalia Mogahed and Youssef Chouhoud, *American Muslim Poll 2017: Muslims at The Crossroads* (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 2017); retrieved from <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2017-key-findings/>.

A less known case of forced migration of Muslims occurred by way of the Indian Ocean slave trade organized by the Dutch East India Company (DEIC). The first known Muslims in present-day South Africa, the Amboyan Mardynckers from Southeast Asia, had arrived in 1658 not as slaves but as political prisoners or mercenaries for the DEIC.⁶¹ However, the DEIC soon began to transport slaves to Cape Town, obtaining them from the Muslim-majority regions of East Africa, South Asia (especially the Arakan-Bengal coast), and the Southeast Asian islands by raiding the coasts.⁶² By 1731, 42% of the population of Cape Town were slaves;⁶³ it is noteworthy that a significant portion of these may have been Rohingya Muslims.

Educated Muslims from Southeast Asia—especially Shaykh Yūsuf al-Maqassarī (d. 1699) and Tuan Guru (d. 1807), both of them exiled political prisoners⁶⁴—established the roots of Islam in South Africa. Shaykh Yūsuf’s farm at Zandvliet became a sanctuary for fugitive slaves from Cape Town. Tuan Guru established Cape Town’s first *madrasah* (Islamic seminary) in 1793, and the city’s first mosque was opened in 1798.⁶⁵ By 1850, about 40% of Cape Town’s population was Muslim, and by 1891 their number had risen to over 11,000, in part due to the arrival of indentured laborers from South Asia starting in the 1860s.⁶⁶

Examples of voluntary (or economic) migration are more numerous, especially because this has been the driving force behind the spread of Islam to virtually every country in the world—even those as remote as Fiji⁶⁷—since the 19th century. One example is that of the famous Afghan (and Baluchi) cameleers who “helped to pioneer Australia,” particular the vast Outback, where they did everything from

⁶¹ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 760.

⁶² Markus Vink, ““The World’s Oldest Trade”: Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 139.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁴ Gerrie Lubbe, “Tuan Guru: Prince, Prisoner, Pioneer,” *Religion in South Africa* 7, no. 1 (1986): 25.

⁶⁵ Roman Loimeier, “Africa south of the Sahara to the First World War,” in Francis Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 5: The Islamic World in the Age of Western Dominance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Jan Ali, “Islam and Muslims in Fiji,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2004): 141.

exploring and conducting rescue missions to laying railway and telegraph lines.⁶⁸ In the process, they married European or Aborigine women and established their own settlements, which were generally built around a small, makeshift mosque. Another example is that of Canada, where Lebanese Muslim immigrants began to arrive in the late 19th century, often hoping to take part in the Klondike Gold Rush or the lucrative fur trade; some of them, such as Ali Abouchadi, became very successful entrepreneurs and laid the foundations for Canada's present-day Muslim community.⁶⁹

Intermarriage

Intermarriage between Muslims and non-Muslims has been historically important for the spread of Islam in many contexts. This is an area of research that only recently has begun to receive attention, as most converts to Islam via this process were women and, as Maya Shatzmiller noted in 1996, “not only was woman’s voice on the subject [of conversions] absent, but the sources devised a historiographical debate from which the feminine perspective was omitted all together.”⁷⁰ More than two decades after this observation, there is a significant body of research that has explored the nexus of intermarriage and conversion in Islamic history, but much more work needs to be done in this field.

Conversion through intermarriage was important to establishing the early Muslim community Spain. In around 785, Pope Hadrian in Rome wrote a letter expressing his concern that some Catholics in Hispania seemed only too willing to marry into Arab Muslim families, and Christian-Muslim unions were condemned at a council in Cordoba in 836.⁷¹ One prominent case was that of Sarah, daughter of Alamund

⁶⁸ Anwarul Q. Rathur, “Muslim Encounter Down Under: Islam in Western Australia,” *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal* 1, no. 1 (1979): 103.

⁶⁹ Hassam Munir, “Meet Ali Abouchadi, the trailblazing Canadian Muslim,” *iHistory*, retrieved from <http://www.ihistory.co/ali-ahmed-abouchadi/>; see also, Peter Baker, *Memoirs of an Arctic Arab: A Free Trader in the Canadian North, The Years 1907-1927* (Yellowknife Publishing Company, 1976).

⁷⁰ Maya Shatzmiller, “Marriage, Family, and the Faith: Women’s Conversion to Islam,” *Journal of Family History* 21, no. 3 (July 1996): 235.

⁷¹ Eduardo Manzano Moreno, “The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa,” in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 587.

of the Visigothic royal family. She was married twice to prominent Muslims, and in later centuries her descendants formed some of the leading Muslim families of Seville, including the Banū Hajjāj and Banū Maslamah.⁷² One of her descendants was the famous scholar of history, *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *hadīth* (Prophetic narrations), Ibn al-Qūṭiya (d. 971), who prominently mentioned the role of his great-grandmother in his discussion on the early history of Islam in al-Andalus.⁷³ A similar case is that of the daughter of the Visigothic nobleman Theodomir (d. 743), who married one ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Khaṭṭāb. The descendants of this couple came to be known as the Banū Khaṭṭāb and formed an influential family of Islamic scholars that lasted until the end of Islamic rule in Murcia in the 13th century.⁷⁴

The early modern Ottoman Empire also offers many examples of intermarriage involving conversion. A case in point is that of Beatrice Michiel of Venice who, in 1591, “opted for conversion without coercion or compulsion” and changed her name to Fatima Hatun.⁷⁵ Having been raised a Christian and married twice, she escaped her difficult second marriage by fleeing to Constantinople, where she converted to Islam and married one ‘Alī Agha. Her son from her first marriage, Giacomo, followed his mother into Islam nearly a decade later.⁷⁶ A similar case was that of the wife, unnamed in the sources, of Ferenc Csiszar, a man from 16th-century Várad (present-day Oradea, Romania). She reportedly went to Buda (Budapest) to marry a “Turk,” which in all likelihood involved a conversion to Islam despite this not being a condition for the marriage.⁷⁷ This trend was noted by the Jesuits involved in missionary work in Ottoman-ruled Hungary. It was also common enough for King Matthias Hunyadi (r. 1458-90) to feel compelled to write to the Pope requesting that the Christian men—and in some cases, women—whose spouse had left to convert to Islam should be allowed to remarry rather than hope

⁷² See, for details, Simon Barton, “Marriage across frontiers: sexual mixing, power and identity in medieval Iberia,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2011): 1-25.

⁷³ David James, *Early Islamic Spain: The History of Ibn al-Qūṭiya* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 50-51.

⁷⁴ Moreno, “The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa,” 586-7.

⁷⁵ Eric Dursteler, “Fatima Hatun née Beatrice Michiel: Renegade Women in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *The Medieval History Journal* 12, no. 2 (2009): 375.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁷⁷ Gabriella Erdélyi, “Turning Turk as a Rational Decision in the Hungarian-Ottoman Frontier Zone,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (2015): 333.

for their spouse's eventual return or worse yet, go searching for their spouse in Ottoman territory and potentially convert to Islam themselves in the process.⁷⁸

In British-ruled India, several *dalit* women (i.e., those from the downtrodden Hindu caste of “untouchables”) converted to Islam as part of intermarriage with Muslims. There are at least nine reported cases between 1924 and 1946, though four of these occurred between March and May in 1926 alone.⁷⁹ Considering that these were only the cases that were registered by the colonial police force in the province of Uttar Pradesh (UP) because they sparked significant unrest, the actual rate of conversion may have been much higher. It has been noted that although there were active *da'wah* efforts among the *dalits* of UP, “in many cases of individual conversion, particularly by lower castes, the reason [for intermarriage] was neither proselytism nor doctrinal conviction, but romance,” though romantic motivations were “possibly aided by greater mobility.”⁸⁰

Intermarriage has continued to play an important role in conversion to Islam in more recent times. One case is that of immigrant Muslims marrying Latina women in the United States in the mid-20th century. A 1947 study of Palestinian immigrants in Chicago revealed that one man had married a Mexican-American woman and had children with her.⁸¹ Similarly, and from around the same time, there are records of Yemeni Muslim men in southern California marrying Mexican-Americans and South Asian Muslims in Harlem marrying Puerto Rican-Americans.⁸² By the early 1990s there were an estimated 100 Latino converts to Islam in southern California alone, mostly women who had married Muslims since the mid-1970s.⁸³ A noticeable trend in their conversions was that “the conversion of one woman would lead to a string of conversions within her

⁷⁸ Ibid., 323.

⁷⁹ Charu Gupta, “Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India,” *The Journal for Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (August 2014): 678.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Lawrence Oschinsky, “Islam in Chicago: Being a Study of the Acculturation of a Muslim Palestinian Community in that City,” MA thesis (University of Chicago, 1947), 35.

⁸² Jonathan Friedlander, “The Yemenis of Delano: A Profile of a Rural Islamic Community,” in *Muslim Communities in North America*, eds. Y.Y. Haddad and J. I. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 441.

⁸³ Patrick D. Bowen, “U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From ‘Moors’ to ‘Latino Muslims,’” *Journal of Religious History* 37, no. 2 (June 2013): 181.

family.”⁸⁴ After having converted, these Latina Muslims led the effort to perform *da‘wah* in Latino communities in the U.S.

Another recent case is that of Chinese and Filipina women in Hong Kong converting to Islam through their marriages to South Asian Muslims. Muslims from British-ruled India first arrived in Hong Kong in significant numbers in the early 20th century as employees of the British administration. During the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during the Second World War, many disadvantaged Chinese women married these Muslims.⁸⁵ Beginning in the early 1990s, Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, mostly devout Catholics aged 21-35, increasingly began to convert to Islam and to marry Pakistani Muslims. In the Wan Chai district alone, there were 100 Filipino converts between 1993 and 1996, making up for about 70% of all converts to Islam, and this trend continued strongly into the early years of the 21st century.⁸⁶

Influencers

The conversion of social, political, and/or personal influencers to Islam has historically played an important role in drawing their followers, admirers, subjects, and/or acquaintances closer to the message of Islam.

In the life of the Prophet ﷺ, a prominent example of an influencer was Sa’d ibn Mu‘ādh. Sa’d was a chieftain of one of the clans of the Banu Aws tribe of Yathrib. The Prophet had sent Mus‘ab ibn ‘Umayr to teach the converts in the city and to invite others to Islam, but Sa’d strongly disapproved of this and confronted Mus‘ab. After a conversation, Sa’d embraced Islam, and then convened his clan and asked them how they felt about him. They replied that he was their chief, excellent in judgment, and committed to their best interests. He then informed

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Anita M. Weiss, “South Asian Muslims in Hong Kong: creation of ‘local boy’ identity,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 25, no. 3 (1991): 432.

⁸⁶ Sithi Hawwa, “From Cross to Crescent: religious conversion of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no. 3 (2000): 353.

them that he had embraced Islam, and by nightfall his entire clan had followed him.⁸⁷

The Prophet ﷺ also sent letters to rulers in the vicinity of Arabia, implicitly acknowledging their role as social influencers and inviting them—and, through them, their followers—to Islam. These included the rulers of Abyssinia, Byzantium, and Persia, and the governors of Ghassān (an Arab Christian client state of Byzantium), Yamāmah (an Arab kingdom in present-day central Saudi Arabia), and Alexandria.⁸⁸

Part of the wisdom behind the Prophet’s decision to send these letters is revealed in the fact that in many parts of the world, the conversion of an influential political leader to Islam was an important milestone in the spread of Islam in that region. The case of the Umayyad leader ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685-705) is illustrative, especially because it implicitly reveals that this process (i.e., conversion by influence) played a role even in the Islamization, even of regions that had been conquered by Muslim forces. (Shām was the first region outside of Arabia to fully come under Muslim rule).⁸⁹ However, as Thomas Carlson has argued, the Islamization of Syria was “a multi-faceted social and cultural process” that could not be considered complete even in 1516, when the Ottomans conquered the region—nearly a thousand years after it fell under Muslim rule.⁹⁰

Many factors played a role in the Islamization of Shām. One of them was Shām’s centrality to the early Muslim empire, as the Umayyad dynasty (r. 661-750) chose Damascus as its capital. The Umayyads sought religious legitimacy as a means to justifying their rule, and Syria was the first region in which efforts toward that end took shape.⁹¹ ‘Abd al-Malik publicized Islam in Shām as a matter of policy: he made Arabic the official language of the empire’s administration, minted distinctly

⁸⁷ Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 109-10.

⁸⁸ Zafar Bangash, *Power Manifestations of the Sīrah: Examining the Letters and Treaties of the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ)* (Richmond Hill: Institute of Contemporary Islamic Thought, 2011), 225-6.

⁸⁹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007), 93.

⁹⁰ Thomas A. Carlson, “The Geography of Islamization in Syria, 600-1500,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 4 (2015): 791.

⁹¹ David Cook, “The Beginnings of Islam in Syria during the Umayyad Period,” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2002, p. 280.

Islamic coins for the first time, had milestones featuring the *basmalah* set up to help travellers find directions, and had the iconic Dome of the Rock constructed in Jerusalem.⁹²

By institutionalizing Islam in Shām, ‘Abd al-Malik and other influencers in the region after him—including leaders such as the famous Salāh ad-Dīn (Saladin, d. 1193) and prominent Islamic scholars such as Ibn ‘Asākir, al-Nawawī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Dhahabī (all fl. c. 13th century)—inevitably enabled non-Muslims to engage closely with Islamic beliefs, practices, and worldviews. From there, many non-Muslims chose to embrace the faith, some rejected it, and others may have even borrowed from it.

A social influencer involved in the spread of Islam in parts of Southeast Asia was the famous Chinese Muslim admiral Cheng Ho (d. 1433). Between 1405 and 1433, Ho led seven maritime expeditions for the Ming dynasty, which took him to the major ports of the Indian Ocean and as far away as Mombasa (Kenya). Curiously, many of Ho’s crew were Hui Muslims like himself, and some performed *hajj* during the voyages.⁹³ Ho, his Muslim shipmates and the Chinese Muslim envoys who followed them to Java and other parts of Southeast Asia all helped Islam spread in this region, primarily by establishing mosques.⁹⁴ Their pioneering efforts can be appreciated through the fact that, today, there are over 105 million Javanese Muslims, making them the fourth-largest ethnic group among Muslims (behind only Arabs, Bengalis and Punjabis).⁹⁵ To this day, many mosques in the region are named after the mariner, such as the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang, Indonesia.

A more recent example of a social influencer’s role in the spread of Islam is that of Warith Deen Muhammad, the Supreme Minister (1975-6) of the pseudo-Islamic, US-based movement known as Nation of Islam (NOI). Having embraced Sunni Islam privately, he gradually reformed the NOI to conform to the orthodox Islamic

⁹² Chase F. Robinson, *‘Abd al-Malik* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2012), ch. 6.

⁹³ Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 171.

⁹⁴ For a detailed discussion about these contributions, see Kong Yuanzhi, “On the Relationship between Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia,” *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 10 (2008), <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-10/on-the-relationship-between-cheng-ho-and-islam-in-southeast-asia/>.

⁹⁵ This is based on the CIA Factbook’s estimate for the 2014.

tradition, and called on his followers to do the same.⁹⁶ In what may be considered the largest mass conversion to Islam in US history, an estimated 70,000 NOI members followed W. D. Muhammad into the fold of orthodox Islam.⁹⁷

It is important to note that influencers were not always in privileged positions within society; “grassroots Islamization” led by personal influencers also occurred. This was the case, for example, in the Lindi and Mtwara regions of southeastern Tanzania in the early 20th century. In the late 1800s, most people in the region were not Muslim, but today Muslims form a large majority of the population. Many conversions took place between 1910 and 1950 through a process in which ordinary villagers served as “crucial mediators.”⁹⁸ Muslim traders and Sufi scholars had long been present on the Tanzanian stretch of the Swahili Coast, but they had not been able to deliver the message of Islam in the rural areas that were further inland. At the same time as the peak of an anti-colonial struggle (culminating in the Maji Maji war of 1905-7), “ordinary villagers who had spent some time on the coast began to work as Qur’an teachers, while local networks of lineage elders endorsed the construction of mosques.”⁹⁹ German officials described these men as *schamba-waalimu* (“field-teachers”). They were “otherwise undistinguished villagers, respected for their learning and commitment, but neither particularly wealthy nor of high ritual or social status,” but they are remembered for taking the initiative to “fetch” Islam from the coast and spread it across the region.¹⁰⁰

Another case of conversion via influencers who were not in particularly privileged positions in society occurred in the early centuries of Islamic history in the form of the *mawālī* system of patronage. The Arabic word *mawla* may be used to refer to a “client” in a patron-client relationship. During the early period of Muslim rule in what is today known as the Middle East, non-Muslims would commonly become “clients,” or *mawālī*, of the emerging Arab Muslim elite as a way to protect and

⁹⁶ Dawn-Marie Gibson, *A History of the Nation of Islam: Race, Islam and the Quest for Freedom* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), 77.

⁹⁷ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 288.

⁹⁸ Felicitas Becker, “Commoners in the process of Islamization: reassessing their role in the light of evidence from southeastern Tanzania,” *Journal of World History* 3 (2008): 236.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

pursue their own interests. As Patricia Crone has noted, this did not necessarily require the client's conversion to Islam.¹⁰¹ However, the opportunity to engage with their Muslim patrons is likely to have influenced many clients to convert. Soon, many of the *mawālī* had *mawālī* of their own, thus creating a “snowball effect” of conversions to Islam through personal networks of influence, especially in the first four centuries of Islamic history.¹⁰²

Lastly, on the topic of the spread of Islam via influencers, it is important to briefly revisit the pioneering thesis of Richard Bulliet in this field of research. Through a quantitative analysis of the names listed in biographical dictionaries from the early centuries of Islamic history, Bulliet showed that Islam spread very slowly as evidenced by the slow rate of the change, for example, from names that were identifiably Christian to those that were clearly Muslim.¹⁰³ Looking primarily at the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, Bulliet also showed that the regional “conversion curves” of this period are ‘S’-shaped, accelerating as more and more of the population converted before leveling off, thus implying that people primarily chose to convert due to their personal interactions with Muslims.

Bulliet helpfully compared the spread of Islam to the model of diffusion for a new technology or technique, a process which generally also follows an ‘S’ curve: “a few innovators would first adopt the new technique, then it would catch on with a bandwagon effect causing the steep rise in the middle of the curve, and finally there would be a steadily diminishing number of new adopters as the potential market for the new technique became saturated.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Bulliet posited that the more Muslims a non-Muslim was surrounded by and personally interacting with, the more likely they were to convert to Islam, until most non-Muslims in the region had converted.

¹⁰¹ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 237 n. 358.

¹⁰² John Nawas, “A Client's Client: The Process of Islamization in Early and Classical Islam,” *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 1 (2014): 144.

¹⁰³ Alwyn Harrison, “Behind the Curve: Bulliet and Conversion to Islam in al-Andalus Revisited,” *Al-Masāq* 24, no. 1 (2012): 39.

¹⁰⁴ Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam In the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 28.

II: The Acceptance of the Message

The preceding discussion focused on *how* the message of Islam spread. The question of *why* it was accepted by individuals is more difficult to explore, simply because we are unable to determine their exact motivations. Some converts, such as Malcolm X, wrote about their journey to Islam, thus giving us a glimpse into the reasons behind their decision. However, for the overwhelming majority of cases in Islamic history, we can only speculate broadly on three of the motivations that were arguably most prominent. These motivations have already been discussed in relation to the examples offered above, but are elaborated on in this section.

The Islamic emphasis on justice

The historian Bahjat ‘Abd al-Latif has pointed out that, “[f]rom its very inception, the message of Islam showed great concern for the poor and the disadvantaged who often comprise the majority of the population, and it aimed to liberate them and raise their standing. This was perhaps one of the strongest incentives for accepting the call to Islam...”¹⁰⁵ Richard Eaton has described this as the “religion of social liberation” thesis.¹⁰⁶

This thesis is rooted in the Islamic emphasis on the pursuit of justice, in contrast to other faith traditions which allowed for (if not encouraged) passivity and promised only otherworldly salvation. Discussing the origins of Islam and the very reason for Prophet Muhammad’s personal retreats to the Cave of Ḥirā’ leading up to the first revelation, Ahmed Afzaal has argued that “[s]ooner or later, the crisis of meaning caused by a sensitive person's encounter with the brutal fact of injustice has to be addressed in the realm of social and material reality. While one’s *ideal*

¹⁰⁵ Bahjat Kamil Abd al-Latif, “The Prophet Muhammad and the Universal Message of Islam,” in Idris El Hareir and El Hadji Ravane M’Baye (eds.), *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture, Volume Three: The Spread of Islam Throughout the World* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 39.

¹⁰⁶ Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 127.

interest lies in developing an appropriate theodicy and a hope for salvation in the hereafter, the problem of injustice can only be adequately addressed by pursuing the fulfilment of the *material interest* of the weak, poor, and the marginalized.”¹⁰⁷ Thus it has been widely noted that many of earliest of the *ṣaḥābah* (companions) of the Prophet ﷺ were those who were disadvantaged in Makkan society.¹⁰⁸

It should be noted that the cases in this category, which may readily appear to be mere “conversions of convenience,” were not necessarily devoid of conviction on part of the converts. Many disadvantaged converts, such as the companions Yāsir al-‘Ansī and Sumayyah bint Khayyat, did not convert to Islam merely because it promised to change their material reality; if that had been the case, they likely would have relapsed under the severe torture which led to their martyrdom.¹⁰⁹ Rather, it is plausible to assume that they had conviction in the truth of the Islamic worldview, the appeal of which included—but was not limited to—its emphasis on social and economic justice. Of course, this is not a denial that some conversions probably *were* nominal, but a reminder that convenience should not simply be presumed to have been the primary motivation.

One common example of the appeal of Islam’s “social liberation” is the spread of Islam in South Asia. Hinduism’s caste system, one of the most enduring forms of social stratification in history, relegates the lower castes such as *shudras* (laborers) or *dalits* (“untouchables”) to a severely disadvantaged position, with little to no hope of upward social mobility. Thus, early Muslims in South Asia “endeavoured to carry Islam to numerous Indian castes that were despised, rejected and discriminated against. These castes accepted Islam once they became aware that it was based upon justice, equality and solidarity among human beings.”¹¹⁰ British

¹⁰⁷ Ahmed Afzaal, “The Origin of Islam as a Social Movement,” *Islamic Studies* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 225.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 41.

¹⁰⁹ Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr, Trevor Le Gassick (trans.), and Ahmed Fareed (ed.), *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad, Volume I: Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1998), 358.

¹¹⁰ Abdallah Salem al-Zelitny, “Islam in Afghanistan,” in Idris El Hareir and El Hadji Ravane M’Baye (eds.), *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture, Volume Three: The Spread of Islam throughout the World* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 595-6.

officials observed this process underway as late as the early 1900s, and Indian historians such as Niharranjan Ray have also attested to it.¹¹¹

In the context of the early modern Ottoman Empire, many Christian women chose to convert to Islam because it offered them a more favorable situation. Lady Elizabeth Craven (d. 1828) of England remarked that “the Turks in their conduct towards our sex are an example to all other nations.”¹¹² Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire—who were considered legal subjects at puberty—had access to many legal privileges, including the right to own and control property without male interference and the right to register their complaints in court.¹¹³ Non-Muslim Ottoman women could also access these Islamic courts for judgment and often did, preferring them over their own Christian or Jewish community courts. They were particularly interested in the relative freedom that Muslim women enjoyed to obtain a divorce to escape an unfulfilling marriage.¹¹⁴ Many of them went a step further and converted to Islam.

Another example is found in the context of the Second World War. In the months following the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, many Jews tried to escape persecution by converting to Islam. Between April and October, at least 20% of Sarajevo’s Jews embraced Islam or Catholicism.¹¹⁵ The Ustaša regime (the Nazi’s local Croatian fascist ally) was so alarmed by this that they quickly banned conversions. Nevertheless, Fehim Spaho, the Grand Mufti of Yugoslavia, urged Ustaša officials to protect the Jewish converts to Islam and instructed the *‘ulamā* (scholars) to offer them shelter, and many were saved from the Holocaust in this way.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Peter Hardy, “Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1977): 188; Niharranjan Ray, “Medieval Bengali Culture,” *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1945): 49.

¹¹² Guity Nashat, “Women in the Middle East, 8,000 BCE to 1700 CE,” in Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (eds.), *A Companion to Gender History* (Oxford: Wiley, 2004), 245–6.

¹¹³ Dursteler, “Fatima Hatun,” 363.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany’s War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 213.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Even today, this trend can be seen in the rates of conversion to Islam in prisons, particularly in the United States, which has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. Up to 40,000 prisoners convert to Islam in the US annually, making up about 80% of all religious conversions in the prison system.¹¹⁷ Prisoners convert for a variety of reasons, including protection (especially from the prisons' gang and/or drug cultures), as a form of repentance and spiritual renewal, or because of the emphasis on social justice that they see as central to the Islamic tradition.¹¹⁸ This last aspect is not an overstatement; Muslims have been at the forefront of the movement for all prisoners' rights in the U.S. since the 1960s, and even today they are "arguably the most proactive litigants" in the prison system.¹¹⁹

The Islamic emphasis on unity

The Islamic emphasis on unity has kept Muslims connected to the religious, demographic, and sociocultural "heartland" of the *ummah* irrespective of their "distance"—both physical and metaphorical—from it. Practicing the obligatory pillars of Islam helped keep individual Muslims and the small, emergent Muslim communities in far-off regions united: *salah* (daily prayer, preferably in congregation) helped the Muslims unify locally, and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in one's lifetime, if physically and financially capable) helped them identify as integral members of a global *ummah*.

It is no surprise, for example, that after becoming the first known Japanese convert to Islam on November 1, 1909, Omar Yamaoka was disembarking in Jeddah by December 10, on his way to perform the *hajj*.¹²⁰ Immediately afterward, Yamaoka's next initiative was to have a mosque built in Japan, a physical unifying

¹¹⁷ Mark S. Hamm, "Prisoner Radicalization and Sacred Terrorism: A Life Course Perspective," in Richard Rosenfeld, Kenna Quinet, and Crystal Garcia (eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Criminology Theory and Research: The Role of Social Institutions* (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012), 174.

¹¹⁸ SpearIt, *American Prisons: A Critical Primer on Culture and Conversion to Islam* (Sarasota: First Edition Design Publishing, 2017), 13.

¹¹⁹ SpearIt, "Muslim Radicalization in Prison: Responding with Sound Penal Policy or the Sound of Alarm?" *Gonzaga Law Review* 49, no. 1 (2014): 37.

¹²⁰ Selçuk Esenbel, "Fukushima Yasumasa and Utsunomiya Tarō on the Edge of the Silk Road: Pan-Asian Visions and the Network of Military Intelligence from the Ottoman and Qajar Realms into Central Asia," in Selçuk Esenbel (ed.), *Japan on the Silk Road: Encounters and Perspectives of Politics and Culture in Eurasia* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 103.

space for Japanese Muslims; the Tokyo Mosque opened in 1938.¹²¹ By then many other Japanese had embraced Islam and there was a trend of trying to perform the *hajj* soon after conversion; eight Japanese Muslims attempted to perform the *hajj* between 1934 and 1938, five of whom sailed for Makkah at least twice.¹²²

Two descriptions of the sense of unity and affirmation that converts find as they perform the *hajj* were written in the past century by Muhammad Asad and Malcolm X.

Asad, best known for his English translation and commentary of the Qur'ān, embraced Islam in 1926, and performed the *hajj* soon afterward. Describing the Black Stone in the Ka'bah, he said, "The Prophet was well aware that all the later generations of the faithful would always follow his example: and when he kissed the stone he knew that on it the lips of future pilgrims would forever meet the memory of his lips in the symbolic embrace he thus offered, beyond time and beyond death, to his entire community."¹²³ And heading to Mount 'Arafāt, he felt as if "the wind shouts a wild paean of joy into my ears: 'Never again, never again, never again will you be a stranger!'"¹²⁴

Malcolm X converted to orthodox Islam due to his experience of the *hajj* in 1964. He himself commented on the effect: "Islam's conversions around the world could double and triple if the colorfulness and the true spiritualness of the Hajj pilgrimage were properly advertised and communicated to the outside world."¹²⁵ The *hajj* can thus be said to have cemented the conversions of Yamaoka, Asad, Malcolm X, and countless others.

The *hajj* also served as a sort of international forum and marketplace. In pre-modern times, the journey for *hajj* often took months, if not years, and many Muslims deliberately prolonged the journey by stopping in major cities and centers of trade and studying with scholars along the way, and by staying for extended periods of time in Makkah and Madinah to exchange news, knowledge, and ideas,

¹²¹ Mikiya Koyagi, "The Hajj by Japanese Muslims in the Interwar Period: Japan's Pan-Asianism and Economic Interests in the Islamic World," *Journal of World History* 24, no. 4 (2013): 859.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 850.

¹²³ Ismā'īl Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muhammad Asad and Islam," *Islamic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2000): 230.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹²⁵ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 396.

and to trade in goods and services. This exchange not only provided a sustained integration into the *ummah* for recent converts but also opened up windows of opportunity that could lead to even more conversions.

A case in point is the famous *hajj* of Mansa Musa of Mali in 1324-5. He is said to have led a large caravan and carried so much gold, which he distributed in charity and gifts along the way, that it caused hyperinflation and derailed the economies of Cairo, Madinah, and Makkah for years. He became so famous for freely distributing his wealth that he inspired curiosity about his distant kingdom and thus initiated a steady stream of Muslim traders, travelers, and scholars to Mali.¹²⁶ On his way back, he brought back many Islamic texts as well as several scholars, including the Andalusī poet and writer Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Sāhilī, who settled in Timbuktu and was tasked with leading the construction of the city's famous Djinguereber Mosque.¹²⁷ He thus played an influential role in Timbuktu's emergence as the preeminent Islamic city in West Africa, from where Islam gradually spread to the rest of the region.

Of course, this sense of unity extended beyond the experience of *hajj* as well. For example, in 1894 the Ottoman sultan chose to send a British convert to Islam, Abdullah Quilliam of Liverpool (also known for starting Britain's first mosque), as his representative to the opening ceremony of the Shitta-Bey Mosque, the first major mosque in Lagos in present-day Nigeria.¹²⁸ He was warmly received by Muslims across West Africa, and at least one person from the region, John Thomas Brimah, later embraced Islam after reading Quilliam's *The Faith of Islam*.¹²⁹ In the words of the *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, "The existence of Islam in Liverpool [...] seems to have inspired West African Mohammedans [*sic*] with new life."¹³⁰

¹²⁶ One person who was drawn to Mali based on reports he had heard was the famous traveler Ibn Battūtah, who visited in 1352; see David Waines, *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta: Uncommon Tales of a Medieval Adventurer* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 172.

¹²⁷ John Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'dī's Ta'rikh al-Sūdān Down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), lvi.

¹²⁸ Brent Singleton, "That Ye May Know Each Other": Late Victorian Interactions between British and West African Muslims," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2009): 374.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 376.

¹³⁰ "Sierra Leone Mohammedan in Liverpool," *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, February 3, 1894, p. 5.

The universality of Islam

Dr. Umar Abd-Allah said it most eloquently: “In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African. Sustained cultural relevance to distinct peoples, diverse places, and different times underlay Islam’s long success as a global civilization.”¹³¹ This reflects an established principle of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), articulated by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyyah, and others, that all customs (‘*urf*) are permissible by default except what is proven to be forbidden.

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Richard Eaton has observed about Islamization in Bengal, particularly, that “what made Islam in Bengal not only historically successful but a continuing vital social reality has been its capacity to adapt to the land and the culture of its people, even while transforming both.”¹³³ The same can be said about many of the regions to which Islam spread.

The spread of Islam has been a historic success in large part due to the fact that it generally occurred in ways that were not overtly disruptive of local cultures and lifestyles. This is a very important point in today’s sociopolitical climate, as much Islamophobic and anti-refugee rhetoric, particularly in Europe, is based on the ostensible threat of Islam to Europe’s Judeo-Christian heritage and culture.¹³⁴

Historically, however, early Muslim communities generally adhered to a distinctive subculture, adopting everything they deemed acceptable in the dominant

¹³¹ Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “Islam and the Cultural Imperative,” Nawawi Foundation, 2004, p. 1, retrieved via the University of Alberta from

<http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/amcdouga/Hist347/additional%20rdgs/article%20culture%20imperative.pdf>.

¹³² Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymīyah, in Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim (ed.), *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā*, v. 29 (Madīnah: Majma’ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā’at al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 16-17.

¹³³ Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 315.

¹³⁴ See, for example, Gabriele Marranci, “Multiculturalism, Islam and the Clash of Civilizations Theory: Rethinking Islamophobia,” *Culture and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2004).

(or hegemonic)¹³⁵ culture and refraining from what they felt clearly conflicted with their faith. The Muslims certainly *exposed* the non-Muslims around them to Islamic traditions and values in culturally sensitive ways but did not *impose* these upon anyone (though there were rare exceptions to this, as discussed [previously](#)).

An example of this is the role of literature, an important component of culture, in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia—in particular, the corpus of the *Book of One Thousand Questions*. This is purported to be a collection of 1,000 questions that ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām, a Jewish rabbi in Madinah, had put to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ before he decided to embrace Islam. Originally compiled in Arabic, it was translated into Malay and Javanese.¹³⁶ The Javanese translations in particular were adapted to be relatable to Southeast Asians, both Muslims and non-Muslims, and were used to demonstrate the discursive and intellectual power of Islam and, in turn, to provide non-Muslims with a culturally-grounded text that addressed their questions about the *dīn*.¹³⁷

Another illustrative case is that of the different “bodies of practice” of Islam found on the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, which has a population of only about 260,000 people, 97% of them identifying as Muslims. Scholars have noted that the people of Mayotte “have long considered themselves Muslim, and their allegiance to Islam is salient in ritual and cosmology.”¹³⁸ However, though the *fundis* (teachers) commonly defer to the authority of the Qur’ān and Sunnah (the Prophetic example), the relative isolation of the island has allowed for peculiar local traditions to develop which interpret the scriptural texts in different ways. These range from a “religious dance” known as *daira* to a strict prohibition on the *fundis* from indulging in politics.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ For a discussion on the merits and shortcomings of Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, see T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 567-593.

¹³⁶ Ronit Ricci, “Translating Conversion in South and Southeast Asia: The Islamic *Book of One Thousand Questions* in Javanese, Tamil and Malay,” PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Ronit Ricci, “Conversion to Islam on Java and the *Book of One Thousand Questions*,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146, no. 1 (2009): 28-9.

¹³⁸ Becker, “Commoners in the process of Islamization,” 233.

¹³⁹ Michael Lambek, “Certain Knowledge, Contestable Authority: Power and Practice on the Islamic Periphery,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 34.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of the universality of Islam is its ability to absorb even the Mongols after they caused unprecedented destruction in large parts of the Muslim domain. As Ishayahu Landa has noted, “[t]his issue is of special importance, as it provides a relatively rare case in Islamic history in which the rulers adopted their subjects’ religion and not vice versa.”¹⁴⁰ Of the four khanates which were carved out of Genghis Khan’s vast empire, the Mongol leadership of three of them embraced Islam within a century of his death. The details of this process make for too deep a discussion to be dealt with here, but what is important to note is that the Mongol converts were able to fully enter the fold of the Muslim community while holding on to many of their cultural beliefs and practices. A case in point is El-Qutlugh Khatun, a Mongol princess who performed the *hajj* in 1323, soon after conversion.¹⁴¹ She was described by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī as “a good Muslim who often gave good advice to the Muslims” and it was noted that she gave large amounts of *sadaqah* (charity) while on her journey, including 30,000 dinars in Makkah and Madinah alone.¹⁴² At the same time, she was “sharp-minded and courageous/skilled in horsemanship,” rode a horse (rather than a camel, as was the norm), and personally led traditional Mongol ring hunts in the Arabian desert to feed the pilgrims she was traveling with.¹⁴³

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the examples presented above are not exhaustive, nor has their relation to the spread of Islam been discussed as thoroughly as it could have been. However, they collectively serve the purpose of this article: to illustrate that Islam could—and historically *did*—spread by means other than “the sword” (i.e., forced conversion). The examples demonstrate the role of *da‘wah*, trade, intermarriage, migration, influencers in the communication of the

¹⁴⁰ Ishayahu Landa, “New Light on Early Mongol Islamisation: The Case of Arghun Aqa’s Family,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, no. 1 (2018): 77.

¹⁴¹ Yoni Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj: The Biography of El Qutlugh Daughter of Abagha Ilkhan (r. 1265-82),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 3 (2011): 333.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 358-9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 334.

message of Islam, the role of Islam's characteristic emphasis on justice and unity, and the universality of Islam in the widespread acceptance of this message.

It is hoped that the many historical “moments” which make up the larger “story” of the spread of Islam will inspire readers to explore particular moments in more detail through their own research. This is essential for developing our appreciation of the complexity of the spread of Islam, which is one of the most transformative processes in human history—comparable in scale and intricacy to Christianization or secularization—and which certainly cannot be oversimplified in a slogan such as “Islam was spread by the sword.” It is also hoped that the discussion in this article can inspire and inform *da‘wah* efforts in the present.

Lady Evelyn Cobbold (d. 1963), a Scottish noblewoman who declared “I am a Moslem” during a private audience with the Pope,¹⁴⁴ recorded the following in her diary: “The more I read and the more I studied, the more convinced I became that Islam was the most practical religion, and the one most calculated to solve the world's many perplexing problems, and to bring humanity peace and happiness.”¹⁴⁵ The discussion in this article has focused primarily on some of the more prominent structural factors that have contributed to the spread of Islam, such as trade and migration. However, it is important to note that in recent years there has been a “cultural turn” in the historiography of conversion to Islam.¹⁴⁶ Memoirs, diaries and other first-hand accounts of converts, in which *they* describe their journeys to Islam, are increasingly becoming available. These, along with a growing body of psychological research on why many people convert to Islam today, offer two important areas of further research on the subject of conversion to Islam in history.

I am grateful to Justin Parrott, Dr. Samuel Ross, and Dr. Nameera Akhtar for their insightful feedback and suggestions.

¹⁴⁴ The exact date of Cobbold's conversation of the Pope is not recorded, though it must have occurred before the publication of her book, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, in 1934, since she mentioned it therein.

¹⁴⁵ Marcia Hermansen, “Roads to Mecca: Conversion Narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims,” *The Muslim World* 89, no. 1 (January 1999): 60.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas A. Carlson, “When did the Middle East become Muslim? Trends in the study of Islam's “age of conversions,” *History Compass* 16 (2018): 4-5.