

## E. The Birth of Triumphal Islam

1. The key to the story of Islamic culture and its role in shaping the world as a cardinal culture today is its origin as a *triumphal* religious culture. (The concept “triumphal” can be a synonym for “triumphant,” but it also connotes the *expectation* of triumph. It is in the latter sense that I employ it here.)
2. The religion of Islam began c.622 AD in Arabia, when an Arab merchant named Muhammad claimed to have received a revelation from God and was forced to leave the trading post of Mecca to escape persecution from the ruling elite of that tribal outpost and settled in the oasis of Medina to the north. This migration from Mecca to Medina is known as the “*hejira*” in Islamic culture.
3. The first aspect of Islamic *triumphalism* is embedded in the message that Muhammad delivered, i.e. in the religion itself. Muhammad claimed to have received a message that superseded those of Judaism and Christianity. He claimed that his revelation was the third and final revelation of the God shared by these religions, and that the Arabs (people of the Arabian peninsula) had been chosen by God (“Allah”) to be the champions of the new faith. Although Christians and Jews were worthy of a certain toleration because they were “people of the book,” they were expected to convert to Islam, in order to acknowledge the supposed final word of God. If they didn’t convert, they would have to live as “dhimmis” within an Islamic world, oppressed and taxed to symbolize their failure. People of all other faiths were viewed as objects of conquest, with no rights except the right to convert to Islam.
4. Importantly, the *hejira* is not a self-contained anchor fact, but merely the first episode in the anchor fact that is the first “*jihad*” (holy war), i.e. the Muslim *Conquest of Arabia (c.622-632 AD)*. That—in full—is the first anchor fact of Islamic history, because when Muhammad returned from Medina to *conquer* Mecca, he was two things at the same time: a prophet and a warlord.
5. When he had united the tribes of Arabia under his banner by force, Muhammad then famously sent two letters to the emperors of the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) and Persian empires. The letters had the same theme: *convert or be conquered*. (This is an ideal catchphrase to describe religious triumphalism.)
6. Muhammad did not live to enact these conquests himself, because he died in 632 AD, but his successors, known as “califs,” continued to conquer in the name of their



A map of Arabia, with present day borders indicated, shows the locations of Mecca and Medina, where the story of Islam begins.

religion. The Holy Land of Judaism and Christianity was conquered c.636 AD, and Persia was conquered c.651 AD.

7. Waves of conquest spread both westward, across North Africa and up into Iberia (Spain and Portugal today), and eastward into India. Both regions were invaded c.711 AD, soon after which the original triumphal incarnation of Islamic culture reached its maximum extent.



The Muslim empire or “Caliphate” created by Muhammad and his successors (the “califs”) stretched from Iberia in the West to India in the East. This empire, built in less than a century, was a key achievement that fueled the premise of religious triumphalism in Islamic culture.