

Turning Points: An Inquiry into the History of Islam

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I am not an expert on Islam. There are some around; some who have grown up close to its heartbeat, like Don Luidens. So, tonight I walk softly and carry a big Quran as I begin this paper.

Turning points are not the same as “tipping points.” Tipping points occur when there is a convergence of the “infectious few,” the “stickiness factor” and an “enabling context,” as you – many of you “Outliers” – understand from Malcolm Gladwell.¹ Turning points are surrounded by mounting change to be sure, but what sets them apart is their decisive character and in this case, the new trajectory a historical movement finds itself on.

Here are a couple of examples:

- The fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E. Temple worship could no longer be central to the practice of Judaism. A tactic employed during the Babylonian exile to preserve and perpetuate the faith became the norm in the diaspora – gathering for prayer and studying Torah in the Synagogue.
- The Billy Goat curse was supposedly placed on the Cubs in 1945 when Billy Goat Tavern owner Billy Sianis was asked to leave a World Series game at the Cubs' Wrigley Field because his pet goat's odor was bothering other fans. He was outraged and declared, "Them Cubs, they aren't gonna win no more," which has been interpreted to mean that there would never be another World Series game won at Wrigley Field. Clearly a turning point for the Cubs organization.

Over the past 11 years I have traveled nine times to a Presbyterian Church in Khartoum, the Sudan on a teaching assignment. The city is ringed by over a million

displaced persons from over 30 years of conflict in the south. These are black Africans many of whom have some connection with Christianity.

The great city has many minarets and the call to prayer blares out from loudspeakers the required five times a day. Since Islam embraces a lunar calendar this means that Ramadan makes its way slowly through each of the seasons. I have seen the empty streets during this season and heard the streets come alive after sundown. This modest exposure led me to explore Islam so I might have at least a basic understanding of beliefs and practices.

As I learned about Islam I learned that later teaching and practices sometimes differed markedly from earlier teaching and practice. What happened I wondered? The occasion to present a paper here encouraged me to follow up leads around a number of these. I will describe three turning points whereupon Islam found itself on one of these different trajectories. What I have inferred from my inquiry is strictly my own wonderings and I am happy to be corrected by those better informed, but will be wary if approached by, say, Bob Sterken or Jim Piers.

Before I name my top three turning points, I'll briefly mention the runners up.

1. **The writing of the Quran.** Written down in roughly 650 C.E. at the order of the third Caliph, Uthman. It secured a common identity around a common text in a single language. Since in Islam's view the only true Quran is in Arabic, all translations are merely interpretations. One interesting consequence: when Jews brought the printing press to Turkey in 1492, the careful Sultan allowed only Jews and Christians to use this novel device to print books and pamphlets – as long as they were not in Arabic so as not to risk corrupting the Quran.
2. **Succession after Mohammad.** Mohammad had no son when he died. Ali, his son-in-law was devoted but not a direct blood descendent. Abu Bakr, his father-

in-law was a capable leader. Capacity to lead won over the family descendant connection. This never sat well with some. In a later succession struggle, Ali finally was going to be selected but was murdered. Sunni follow from the Abu Bakr line and Shia from the followers of Ali. "Denominational" splitting had begun.

- 3. The loss of independent reasoning (*Ijhtihad*) in regard to Quranic texts and faith.** You may know the story of Charles Duell, commissioner the of the United States patent office in 1899. He proposed that the U.S. Patent Office be closed because "everything that can be invented has been invented!"² We can be grateful that Thomas Edison and others didn't believe him. That's essentially what a 10th century group of Sunni scholars decided. They agreed that all of the questions humans would face had been addressed and therefore no further reasoning would be allowed. Imitation would be the highest value (*taqlid*).³ Hence, the style of learning in *madressas*.

Turning Point 1: Marriage to Khadijah

From an historical perspective, Mohammad's marriage to Khadijah was a game changer. Without this event, there perhaps might be no Islamic faith.

First, some of the back story. Mohammad was born in Mecca around 570 C.E. and his parents died when he was young. He experienced the misery of being an orphan, but he also experienced the generosity first of a grandfather and later an uncle. From his uncle Mohammad learned his trade, working with caravans.

Mecca had two important resources for those working and traveling the caravan route—water and a religious shrine, the Ka'ba. The Ka'ba is a masonry shrine in the shape of a cube of roughly 40 feet in dimension and is, according to Islamic tradition, to have been built by Abraham and his eldest son Ishmael. Because of water and worship,

Mecca was designated a safe zone by the different tribes so that each along with caravan groups could access both freely. At the time there were "said to be three hundred sixty idols housed in and around the Ka'ba, representing every god recognized in the Arabian Peninsula."⁴

Mohammad, while apparently good at his trade, was still dependent on his uncle. His own prospects were so dim that "when he asked his uncle's daughter, Umm Hani, to marry him, she rejected him outright for a more prosperous suitor."⁵ Somehow, he became a caravan manager for a wealthy widow, Khadijah. Khadijah was not only wealthy, but a respected leader among the Meccan Quraysh tribe. This was impressive and something unheard of at a time when women were still considered property and were prohibited from inheriting wealth from their husbands. Khadija entrusted Mohammad with an ambitious expedition to Syria after proving himself an able manager. He returned with double the profits she expected and she rewarded him with a proposal of marriage. Mohammad gratefully accepted.⁶ They were married using a Christian wedding liturgy presided over by her cousin. Mohammad suddenly found himself in a position of influence, wealth at his disposal, prestige through marriage in the community and time for leisure and religious pursuits.

So, how was this, a turning point for Islam?

1. Without the leisure and financial security that came with his marriage to Khadijah, Mohammad would likely have been driving camels instead of taking mountain retreats. With leisure he took time for personal reflection. On one of these religious retreats, he is reported to have been visited by the Angel Gabriel and commanded to "recite" since Mohammad could neither read nor write. This is the meaning of the Arabic word "Quran." This revelation is the genesis of Islam.
2. While Khadijah lived, Mohammad had but one wife. The marriage came about at her initiative and her proposal. The teaching that allows four wives comes

after her death in Medina. Mohammad's personal practice of acquiring additional wives does also, though he himself acquired nine.⁷

3. Khadijah dressed according to the custom of the day. From the literature she feels equal in power in the relationship. This, by all accounts, did not diminish her devout Muslim faith. She is, in fact, referred to as the first Muslim. Teachings regarding dress and the inherent value of women are among the revelations that come after her death and the migration to Medina. Here is an example related to worth from Surah 2:282: "Get two witnesses out of your own men, and if there are not two men, then a man and two women so that if one of them errs, the other can correct her."
4. With the social standing he enjoyed while Khadijah lived, Mohammad could preach the message that "there is no god but the God" and proselytize. After her death, the view that he threatened the traditional religions and the economic engine associated with the Ka'ba prevails and he and Islam's first adherents are forced to flee to Medina.

Setting aside the question of whether or not Islam would have arisen without the marriage to Khadijah, imagine how Islam would have been different with regard to gender had Khadijah outlived Mohammad! What if she had been the same age as Mohammad instead of 15 years his senior? Possibly a new and quite different vision of man and woman in an equal partnership might have been fostered by Islam. This would have challenged the rest of the world's cultures and religions.

In 1867 a young Turkish writer named Namik Kemal published a magazine article in Cairo that critiqued the prevailing view of women in the Islamic world (resulting from this turning point). It was his view that the comparative failure of Islamic society at that time was due to its treatment of women. He writes,

Our women are now seen as serving no useful purpose to mankind other than having children. They are considered simply for pleasure, like musical instruments or jewels. But they constitute perhaps more than half of our species. Preventing

them from contributing...is like a human body that is paralyzed on one side. Yet women are not inferior to men in their intellectual and physical capacities...The reason why women among us are thus deprived is the perception that they are totally ignorant and know nothing of right and duty, benefit and harm. Many evil consequences result from this position...⁸

I imagine Khadijah saying, "What took you so long?"

Turning Point Number 2: From Mecca to Medina

This experience was a watershed both for Mohammad and for the history of Islam in a number of ways. Without the social protection of Khadijah, Mohammad was suddenly vulnerable to his critics. The Quraysh tribe rejected both Mohammad and his message, "There is no god but the God," because it threatened the commercially profitable shrine at the Ka'ba as a one stop worship shop. On September 20, 622 C.E. he made the migration to Medina referred to as the *Hijrah* or "flight." The name is more than suggestive. Incidentally, this is year number 1 according to the Islamic calendar.

Rumors of Mohammad as religious leader preceded him to Medina and after his arrival he was "taken up as a holyman and leader for the strife-torn oasis."⁹ Most of the Arab peoples of Medina joined his band of believers and became Muslims. He mediated disputes between the tribes and was soon given the task of receiving, and utilizing for the benefit of the community, tax revenues. Picture the stunning move for Mohammad from pariah in one community to one holding religious authority, political power and wealth in a short year or two!

This centralization of power led, as many might predict, to bad behavior. The Quraysh who had rejected his message and ostracized him and his followers were the first to experience this. In 624 Mohammad organized a raiding party to attack a caravan of Meccan Quraysh tribal members at Badr Wells outside of Medina. He succeeded and seized the wealth of the caravan. Financially enriched and buoyed by success, he prosecuted additional raids back in Mecca and the tribe their finally submitted and

swore allegiance and became Muslim in 630 C.E. Word spread throughout Arabia and made the tribal populations ripe for submission to the new faith and its leader.

What sort of turning point?

- Mohammad's message while yet in Mecca assumed that if only the Jews and Christians – people of the book – would hear his message they would re-orient their allegiance to Islam, the true faith traced back to Abraham. Surah 3:64 contains that message:

Say: O people of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and not one of us shall take others for lords besides Allah.

In and around Medina there were three Jewish clans that were allies of the Arab tribes. They had lived in relative peace for centuries. These were the first Jews who heard his particular monotheistic message. Nearly all rejected Mohammad as a prophet and consequently the Muslim expression of faith. Tensions arose and Mohammad expelled two of the clans from Medina. He had the men of the third tribe executed.¹⁰ World religions scholar Reza Aslan estimates the number of men killed at between four and seven hundred.¹¹

Not for the first and sadly not for the last time – a religious authority became entangled with political power with wealth to pursue ambitious goals with tragic results.

More specifically,

- Pacifism was taught and practiced while the Muslim community was still in Mecca.¹² Violence was now justified to pursue religious and political ends. First is the vengeful attack at Badr Wells and second the violation of the no conflict treaty around Mecca.

- Two religious practices changed. Prior to this move, prayers were offered in the direction of Jerusalem. Prayer was now offered towards Mecca. The fast associated with Yom Kippur was practiced by Muslims in Mecca, but in Medina the month of Ramadan becomes the designated fast month.

One can wonder what the character of inter-faith dialogue might have become had Mohammad retained a vision of uniting around the basic monotheistic creed and allowing for secondary differences. One might wish that he had embraced and attempted to reinterpret and apply Augustine's "In primary things unity, in secondary things liberty and, in all things charity," written two centuries earlier.

Or perhaps while reflecting on the faith of Abraham – whom Mohammad believed held the pure faith – and the covenant promise made to him, namely, that "through Abraham and Sarah all the nations would be blessed," he would have reaffirmed the notion that the one submitted to God must love one's neighbor even as one loves and looks out for one's own interests. A pacifist faith affirming the radical trust of Abraham in a promise-keeping God might have spoken loudly down through the violent centuries to our own.

Turning Point Number 3: Embracing the Public Policy of *Dhimmi*

In 628 C.E., after a 45 day long siege of Khaybar, the inhabitants capitulated under terms of a treaty known as the dhimma, meaning "protected" in Arabic. According to this pact Mohammad allowed the Jews living there to continue to cultivate the land on the condition that they pay tribute, not proselytize and wear distinctive dress. This became the precedent to all future subjugations involving people of the book, which included Jews and Christians. "*Dhimmi*" became the name applied to any indigenous non-Muslim populations who surrendered by treaty.¹³

This practice was codified under the second Caliph, Umar, third leader following Mohammad's death in 632 C.E. If one was a member of a group considered a "people of

the book" these rules applied, if one was pagan, three alternatives were available. One, submit and become a Muslim. Second, die, although in times of economic necessity one might be shown mercy and become enslaved. Or three, flee.

It's useful to remember that the intention of this policy was to be generous to people who had encountered the God of Abraham and possessed a written revelation. Islam's expansion was explosive. In the first century of its growth it reached west across North Africa, northwest to Spain, north to Constantinople and eastward through Persia and Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Returning to the turning point, the public policy set personal and corporate behavior on an unfortunate trajectory. Jewish historian Bat Ye'or has explored the practice and impact of living under the condition of what she calls dhimmitude. She writes that because of this relegation to a lower status, very early in Islamic history Jews and Christians became associated with Satan and hell. Ibn Abdu, a 12th century Muslim jurist in Spain, cited the Koran, "They are the devil's party (58:19)" in a legal treatise in support of a practice begun in 850 C.E. "whereby wooden images of devils be nailed to the doors of their homes to distinguish them from the homes of Muslims."¹⁴ Later, in Baghdad, Christians and Jews were required to wear prescribed clothing which bore yellow symbols.¹⁵ These and other regulations were reinforced by Muslim legislators and judges as a "divinely sanctioned system of discriminatory provisions," acknowledges Abdulaziz Sachedina, A University of Virginia professor.¹⁶

The "system" of discrimination extended to personal conduct in relating to Jews and Christians in daily affairs. Shaik Hasan Al Kafrawi, a professor of canon law in 1772 C.E. in Cairo, wrote to those seeking practical guidance,

Jews and Christians shall never begin a greeting; If you encounter one of them on the road, push them into the narrowest and tightest spot; the absence of every mark of consideration toward them is obligatory for us... This is in order to humble them and to honor the true believers.¹⁷

You get the painful point. Today Reformist-minded Muslims like Canadian Irshad Manji and author of *The Trouble With Islam Today*, are blunt in their assessment of where this has led the Muslim community. In telling her own story she writes,

Praise Allah for the Internet....I picked up some jaw-dropping aspects of my religion. How many of us know the degree to which Islam is a "gift of the Jews?" The unity of God's creation, the inherent and often mysterious justice of God, our innate capacity as God's creatures to choose good, the purposefulness of our earthly lives, the afterlife...these and others came to Muslims via Judaism. This discovery astounded me because it suggested that Muslims need not be steeped in anti-Semitism. If anything, we have reason to be grateful rather than hateful to Jews....Where in the madressa curriculum was that acknowledgment? It's as if nothing happened before Islam....If we understood that we're spiritual mongrels benefiting historically from both Jews and Christians – would more of us be willing to accept the "other"?¹⁸

Some Muslims today are addressing this turning point. Reflecting on the impact of this policy, liberal-minded Muslims today turn to Quranic texts like Surah 2:23 that affirm that we were made to be one human community that listens to God. Or Surah 4:1, that one should take care as to how one asserts personal rights since every human is a creature of God. Or Surah 5:32's teaching that to murder one person is to murder all humankind and to save the life of one is as saving all humankind. Many of these Muslims have experienced freedom of expression, including the practice of religion, in Europe and North America and are not willing to surrender their freedom nor do they wish to see other's freedoms diminished. Yet, "systems" are hard to dismantle.

I would like to introduce a couple of additional thoughts around this sensitive topic. First there is a Teacher who is reported to have addressed his disciples with these words, "Why do you see the speck that is in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"¹⁹ In writing this paper I am not comparing historical trajectories within Islam with any other world religion, including my own. Nor am I

ignoring or worse, exonerating the atrocities associated with any other world religion, including my own.

Secondly, I respect the larger view of Princeton University professor Bernard Lewis who wrote in 2009 of the experience of medieval dhimmitude,

Some [non-Muslims] look back with yearning on the good old days of dhimmitude. Second class citizenship, maintained by law, guaranteed by custom and tradition, respected by both government and people, is considerably better than no citizenship and no rights at all, which is the lot of majorities and minorities alike under the rule of tyrants that dominate so much of the Middle East at the present time.²⁰

I'm left with a final question, how to best treat my Muslim neighbor? The best answer I believe is to guarantee each one the same freedoms I enjoy. Even as Islam expands globally, it adapts locally. Harvard professor Ali Asani writes, "Rather than discussing Islam, we might more accurately talk about 'Islams'"²¹ This faith like other world religions tends to come to reflect its cultural experience. For this reason and others I would like to see Muslims constitutional freedoms fully protected and fully enjoyed. It may be that in the long run, being a good neighbor might just foster the same response in turn.

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2000, p. 19.

² Howard Hendricks, *Color Outside the Lines*, Nashville: Word, 1998, p. 1.

³ *The Trouble With Islam Today*, p. 140.

⁴ Reza Aslan, *No god but God*, New York: Random House, 2006, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁶ Lothar Schmalfluss, "Muhammad" in *Handbook to The World's Religions*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 311.

⁷ The Quran, Surahs 4 and 33.

⁸ Cited in Bernard Lewis, *Islam: The Religion and the People*, Upper Saddle, NJ: Wharton School Publishing, 2009, p. 112.

⁹ F. E. Peters, *One God, Three Faiths*, Barnes & Noble, 2004, p. 34

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- ¹⁰ Montgomery Watt, "The Way of the Prophet" in *Handbook*, p. 308.
- ¹¹ *No god but God*, p. 94.
- ¹² *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, trans. By Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall, NY: Mentor Books, p. 195.
- ¹³ Bat Ye'or, Jewish Internet Association, www.dhimmi.org.
- ¹⁴ *The Dhimmi*, document 8, p. 185, cited in Bat Ye'or, "Islam and the Dhimmis," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, Number 42, Spring, 1987, p.83.
- ¹⁵ Irshad Manji, *The Trouble With Islam Today*, New York: St. Martins, 2003, p. 65
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ *Jewish History Sourcebook*, www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1772-jewsiniislam.html.
- ¹⁸ *The Trouble With Islam Today*, pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁹ Matthew 7:3
- ²⁰ *Islam: The Religion and the People*, p.188.
- ²¹ News.NationalGeographic.com/news. November 21, 2009, p. 1.