

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Islam in Persia

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Pivotal as Persia was in the political developments of Muslim Asia, its primary contribution was to preserve, reinvigorate and transmit the spiritual legacy of Islam through its language, art and architecture. While the Arabs provided the ideational foundation of the edifice of Islam, it was the Persians who adorned it with beauty and embellished it with spirituality. The primary medium for this achievement was the Farsi (Persian) language, the lingua franca of the East and the court language of the dynasties in Persia, Turkey, Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. Persia was the fountain of *tasawwuf* that extended the boundaries of Islam after the Mongol-Tartar deluge. Indeed, Persia was the land where the soul of Islam was rediscovered.

The geography of the Persian landmass makes it a central piece on the chessboard of the Asian landmass. Sitting astride the Persian plateau south of the Caspian Sea, it dominates and controls overland access from the Mediterranean to India and China. In the medieval world, the trade routes from Alexandria in Egypt and Aleppo in Syria ran through Persia. The northerly routes connected Tabriz in northwestern Persia to the Central Asian cities of Samarqand and Bukhara, thence through the ancient Silk Road through Sinkiang to China. The southern trade routes ran through Isfahan to Kabul in Afghanistan and from there through the passes of the Hindu Kush to the vast Indo-Gangetic plains. Large caravans plied these caravan routes carrying with them not only the goods produced by the principal trading centers of the ancient world but also scholars and adventurers. Persia became a crucible of ideas, melting its own ideas with the ancient wisdom of China, India and the Mediterranean. Control of the Persian highlands gave a potential conqueror the ability to strike east or west, as was so decisively demonstrated by Hulagu Khan of the Mongols and Timurlane of the Tatars.

The battle of Al Qadasia (636-637) opened the Persian heartland to Islamic penetration. Victory at the battle of Nahawand (642) cemented the conquest. By the year 751, when Muslim armies overcame Chinese resistance at the battle of Tas, the Islamic domain extended beyond the Indus River to the east and the Oxus River to the north. The Zoroastrian world, once so powerful that it projected its power from Athens Kabul, was now a part of the larger Islamic world.

Some of the earliest Companions of the Prophet were Persians and their names are honored by Muslims the world over. Salman Farsi was one such distinguished Companion. During the first 40 years of Omayyad rule, the diffusion of Islam into the Persian heartland was slow. The Arabs made no attempt to force their religion on the Persians and left them alone as long they paid the protective tax and obeyed the laws of the state. Taxation, not conversion, appeared to be the primary concern of the Caliphs in

Damascus. The conquering Arabs zealously guarded their tribal social boundaries. The few Persians who accepted Islam were treated as *mawalis* (protected people), a term that accorded the newcomers less than full social status in the community.

The situation changed with the ascent of Caliph Omar bin Abdul Aziz (d. 619). Alone among the Omayyads, he made an attempt to reach out to the conquered people. Discriminatory taxes were abolished and the newcomers were accorded the same dignity as that given to the established Arab nobility. Conversion accelerated and when the Abbasid revolution erupted in 750, the Persian element tilted the balance of power in favor of the Abbasids. Foremost among the leaders of the revolution was Abu Muslim, a Persian general of singular capability and determination.

The Persians were carriers of an ancient civilization that had extensive interactions with the civilizations of China and India. They brought with them advanced technologies, effective methods of agriculture, a universal philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and a tradition of efficient state administration. Their presence was felt in the Islamic community as early as the time of the Prophet. It was Salman Farsi who suggested to the Prophet that a defensive trench be constructed around Madina to thwart the invading Meccan armies. The trench made a crucial difference in the outcome of the armed encounter, which was termed the Battle of the Trench. The Persian mastery of carpet weaving was noticed as early as the reign of Caliph Omar ibn al Khattab (r). After the battle of Madayen, an exquisite carpet called *farsh e bahaar* was brought to Madina from the Persian capital. In the following centuries, the caliphs of Baghdad, as well as the Persian dynasties in the outlying provinces, encouraged the art of carpet weaving. The caliphs adopted Persian methods of administration. Persian and Byzantine techniques of construction were used in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as well as in the extensive system of aqueducts built by the Omayyads. The Zoroastrians of Persia also had a unitary concept of heaven and the Arabs accorded them the status of "People of the Book", a status equivalent to that of the Christians and the Jews.

The Persians immediately made their presence felt in the intellectual domain. The Arabs had established themselves in military cantonments which in time grew to be centers of intellectual activity. Most of the Persians who had accepted Islam migrated to these centers so as to establish a cultural and religious linkage with the resident Arabs. As the city-cantonments grew in size, so did the need to define the social and judicial framework of the evolving community and its interfaces with other communities. This need gave birth to the sciences of *Fiqh*. The city of Kufa, a border town between the Arabic-speaking and Persian-speaking worlds became a center of learning and a place of congregation for scholars. One such scholar was Imam Abu Haneefa, after whom the Hanafi School of *Fiqh* is named. Imam Abu Haneefa was of Afghan-Persian parentage and was familiar with the concerns of the non-Arab segments of the community. The school of *Fiqh* evolved by him and his disciples reflected these concerns.

It was in the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Mamun (d. 833) that the Persians became a decisive political force in the Abbasid Empire. Mamun's victory over his brother Amin (810-813) for succession to the Caliphate was in no small measure due to the intervention of the Persians. Mamun's armies had a large number of Persian soldiers led by Tahir, a dynamic Persian officer. The victorious Caliph rewarded Tahir for his fidelity by appointing him the governor of southern Iraq. The Tahirids soon became autonomous and while maintaining their allegiance to Baghdad, established the Tahirid dynastic rule. They introduced Persian court etiquette and were the first to encourage the use of the Farsi language in the official circles.

By the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Persians outnumbered Arabs in the lands east of the Tigris River. The preponderance of Persians had a profound impact on the political, linguistic and intellectual landscape of the Islamic community. The Tahirids established a Persian dynasty (820-822) with their

capital at Neshapur. Mathematicians like Al Khwarizmi (d. 862) and historians like Al Tabari (d. 923) found patronage in the Persian courts.

The sciences of *Fiqh and hadith* flourished in Persia as they did in the Arab heartland. One of the greatest of the *muhaddithin*, Imam al Bukhari (d. 869) lived during this period in Khorasan. Imam al Bukhari traveled through much of the Islamic world, collected and examined over 300,000 *ahadith* and after a rigorous scrutiny, selected approximately 7,000 as valid. His collection of *ahadith* is one of the most authoritative ones in the Islamic sciences and is accorded the same honor as the collections of Imam Ja'afar as Saadiq, Imam Muslim, Imam Tirmidhi, Imam Abu Dawud, Imam Malik Ibn Anas and Imam Ahmed Ibn Hanbal.

Persian political influence reached its zenith under the Buyids who rose to power in southern Iraq (932). Increasing conversion had shifted the center of gravity of the empire away from Baghdad into the outlying provinces both in eastern Persia and the Maghrib. Court intrigues had sapped the strength of the Caliphate. There was increasing military pressure from the Fatimids in Egypt. The Abbasid Caliph Mustakfi, desperate to seek help, invited the Buyid prince Ahmed to defend Baghdad against the Fatimids. The Buyids, who practiced the Ithna Ashari *Fiqh*, were only too happy to assume the role of protectors of the Sunni Caliphate in Baghdad. In return, Ahmed received the title of Mu'iz ad Dawla and was given the reigns of the empire. For several years thereafter, the Persian Buyids were effective rulers of Baghdad until the Seljuks rescued the Abbasids.

It was under the Samanids of Khorasan (901) that the Persian language, arts and architecture blossomed into their fullest expression. The cities of Samarqand, Bukhara, Neshapur, Mashad and Herat grew into world-class centers of learning. Samanid patronage produced a galaxy of notable men of science and letters like Abu Nasr Al Farabi (d. 950) and Abu Ali Ibn Sina (d. 1037). The patronage of the arts continued when the Ghaznavids displaced the Samanids (962-1026). Mahmud of Ghazna made his capital city a beacon of art and culture. Al Baruni (d. 1048), one of the foremost historians and chroniclers of the age, lived at the court of Mahmud. Firdowsi, one of the most celebrated Farsi poets and author of the Shah Nama, lived in Ghazna. Firdowsi composed the Shah Nama, a classic poem that extols the achievements of pre-Islamic heroes of Persia, as a tribute to Mahmud. The great poet was disappointed with the reward he received for the masterpiece whereupon he composed a poem belittling the emperor and sent it to Mahmud. The emperor, who was on his campaigns in India, regretted the treatment he had given the poet and sent a more handsome reward. Firdowsi did not live to receive the gifts. As the camels laden with the gifts entered through one gate of the city of Ghazna, the body of Firdowsi was being carried out for burial through another gate.

However, it was the Mongol deluge that transformed the landscape of Islamic history and brought the Persian element into the forefront of Islamic intellectual activity. When Genghiz Khan descended from the highlands of Central Asia onto the Farghana valley (1219), Islamic civilization was primarily city based. As conversion had proceeded in Persia and Central Asia, so had the migration of people to the cities. This movement had resulted primarily from economic considerations. Official patronage was focused on a few principal towns that became magnets for scholars and peasants alike. The management of social interactions in an urban milieu demanded a heavy emphasis on the rules of the Shariah and its juridical exposition in the schools of *Fiqh*. Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and of the various schools of *Fiqh*, was the language of the learned circles.

Genghiz Khan destroyed the urban centers of learning. In some cities, more than 90% of the population was slaughtered. Throbbing urban centers became grazing land for Mongol horses. Mosques and madrasas alike were razed. The Arabic-speaking learned elite perished or fled, some towards India, others towards Egypt and Anatolia. With its Arabic-centered urban civilization in ruins, the leadership

of the remnants of the community fell to the rural areas where Farsi was the spoken language. And it was from the huts and hermitages of the Persian landscape that Islam emerged once again to conquer the conquerors and carry forth its message to the far corners of Asia, Europe and Africa.

Historical currents had prepared the world of Islam for just such a calamity. More than a hundred years before the Mongols descended from the Gobi desert, the heart of Islam was beating to a different rhythm from that of the *kazis* and *ulema* with their zealous emphasis on the finer points of *Fiqh*.

Imam Al Ghazzali (d. 1111), perhaps the single most important integrator of Islamic knowledge in the first millennium of Islam, had brought *tasawwuf* into the mainstream of Islamic sciences. Indeed, through his own example, he had made *tasawwuf* the focus of Islamic life. Following his work, intellectual activity in the spiritual dimension of Islam accelerated. The towering personality of the age who represented this dimension was Shaykh Abdul Qader Jeelani (d 1186).

Shaykh Abu Muhammed Mohiuddin Abdul Qader Jeelani was born in Jeelan in northern Persia in 1077. It was a period of intense intellectual activity and the Shaykh received his early training from local *ulema*. In 1095, as a young man of eighteen, he set out to Baghdad seeking additional knowledge and training. He sought and received instruction from the luminaries of his age, including Shaykh Abu Wafa Ibn Aqil, Shaykh Muhammed Al Baqlani and Shaykh Abu Zakariya Tabrizi. At the age of fifty, he received his *ijaza* (diploma) from Shaykh Kazi Abi Saeed Al Muqrami and was commissioned to head the *madrasah* of Shaykh Kazi Abi Saeed in Baghdad.

Shaykh Abdul Qader's fame soon spread throughout the land. The courtyard of the *madrasah* was too small to hold the crowds, so the lectures were moved to the Jami Masjid. The Jami Masjid too proved to be too small so the lectures were moved to a vast open field on the outskirts of the city. It is said that as many as 70,000 people listened to the Shaykh at one time. Scribes recorded his sermons and passed them on for posterity.

The lectures of the Shaykh covered every facet of Islamic life, including *kalam*, *hadith*, *Fiqh*, *tafheem ul Qur'an* (commentaries on the Qur'an), ethics, *Seerat un Nabi* (life and example of the Prophet) and *tasawwuf*. He was strict in his observance of the Shariah and chided those who were remiss in their observance of its injunctions. In the intense spiritual atmosphere of the age, many self-proclaimed *ulema* claimed that their special insights into religion gave them an excuse not to observe the obligatory prayers, fasting and zakat. Shaykh Abdul Qader chided them and declared that any position not based on the Shariah was atheism. The Shaykh's exposition of *tasawwuf*, recorded in *Al Fathu Rabbani*, is a veritable fountain of spirituality and has inspired Muslims and many non-Muslims for over 800 years. The Shaykh's humble disposition endeared him to the poor and his forthrightness and rectitude brought him the respect of the high and mighty. Sultans and emperors alike waited to see him and partake of his wisdom.

Shaykh Abdul Qader Jeelani inspired a galaxy of Sufi sages in the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. After he passed away in 1186, his disciples carried his message to the far corners of the Islamic world. The Qadariya Sufi *tareeqa* was established to give concrete expression to his spiritual and social ideals. It was the first of the many *tareeqas* that were to dominate the Islamic landscape after the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Qadariya *tareeqa* radiated its influence to every continent of the Old World and was instrumental in bringing millions into the fold of Islam. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Uthman Dan Fuduye, inspired by visions of the great Shaykh, waged his struggle to establish a just social-political order in West Africa. In India and Pakistan he is referred to as *Ghouse ul Azam Dastagir* and is accorded a position of honor next to only that of the Prophet and the early Companions.

The work of Shaykh Abdul Qader Jeelani and those who immediately followed him was the life raft that rescued Islam after the Mongol devastations. For an entire generation, between 1219 and 1250, the horsemen from Mongolia roamed the Eurasian continent destroying ancient cities, reshaping, reforming and remolding entire societies. The concurrent challenge from the Crusaders of the West was no less menacing. Indeed, the Crusaders made a determined attempt to convert the Mongols to Christianity, or at least to forge an alliance with them with the avowed intent of extirpating Islam. Following the Battle of Ayn Jalut (1261) the military threat subsided but the threat of losing Asia to non-Islamic ideologies remained.

And it was *tasawwuf* that rose to take up the challenge and rescue Islam in its gravest hour. The genius of *tasawwuf* lay in its ecstatic and inclusive character. It was the Islam of the heart, not of the mind. The disappearance of a city culture that had supported the Islamic edifice of *Fiqh* and *fatwa* had thrown the mantle of leadership to the countryside where Islam was based on emotion and devotion. The *khanqahs* established by the Qadariya and other Sufi orders became the focus of Islamic life. A *qanqah* had five distinct functions. First it was a mosque wherein the faithful offered their obligatory prayers. Second, it was a *madrasah* where instruction was provided on the Qur'an and the sciences of *Fiqh*. Third, it was a retreat where individuals could seek solitude and focus on their inner selves or congregate for *dhikr* (recital of the name of God). Fourth, it was a place to mold the very character of people under the watchful guidance of a shaykh and teach them the virtues of selfless service, chivalry, courage, devotion to the Divine and a universal outlook on life. And fifth, it was a place of rest for the weary traveler, or a refuge for the family fleeing from the persecutions of the times.

Persian ecstatic Islam more than met its challenges. By 1295, the Il-Khanid (Mongol) Ghazan accepted Islam and Persia was back in the forefront of Islamic life. From the Persian heartland, Islam spread to the subcontinent of India-Pakistan and projected itself into the Archipelago of Malaysia and Indonesia. To the west, it reinforced its presence in sub-Saharan Africa and grew to be the dominant faith on that continent. The Ottomans who emerged after the Mongol-Tartar deluge were themselves heavily influenced by *tasawwuf*. And it was out of the caldron of Sufi ideas that the Safavid dynasty emerged.

With the destruction of the urban centers of learning wherein Arabic was the medium of instruction, Farsi emerged as the medium of expression for ecstatic Islam. Five hundred years of association with Islam had transformed Farsi and had exposed it to the rich lexicon of Arabic. And now it was the turn of Farsi to take center stage. It was through Farsi that sublime poetry and exquisite prose found their expression in the post-Mongol, Timurid, Safavid, Mogul and Ottoman periods.

Perhaps the greatest of the Farsi poets and one whose impact is still felt in the modern world, was Maulana Muhammed Khudawandagar Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273). No other savant personifies the transition from the pre-Mongol urban-empirical Islamic civilization to the post-Mongol rural-ecstatic civilization, as does Rumi. His Islamic name was Muhammed; Khudawandagar and Jalaluddin were his titles. He is called Rumi due to his residence in Konya which was located in a province referred to at the time as "Rum", meaning an old province of the Roman Empire. His disciples called him Maulana (meaning, our guide and teacher). He was born to Persian-Afghan parents in 1207 in the city of Balkh in Afghanistan. His father, Bahauddin Walad was a scholar of repute, a Sufi master of the Kubrawiyah tareeqa and was held in high esteem by the local people. The sensitive mind of Rumi absorbed the scholarship and spirituality of his parents. But the quiet life of Balkh was soon shattered by the firestorm from Mongolia. As Genghiz Khan descended on Khorasan and advanced towards Persia and Afghanistan, Bahauddin Walad fled to Nishapur where the young Rumi met the celebrated poet Fareeduddin Attar, author of the classic *Mantiq at Tayr* (Conference of the Birds). Attar saw in the young lad the potential of a genius and gave him a copy of his works as a gift.

The Mongol avalanche soon engulfed all of Persia and Bahauddin fled once again with his family, this time to Baghdad. News of the arrival of Shaykh Bahauddin reached Kaikubad, the Seljuk ruler of Konya. Kaikubad was a patron of scholars. He invited Bahauddin to settle in Konya whereupon the Rumi family set out for Anatolia, visiting the cities of Mecca and Madina on the way and performing their Hajj. Shaykh Bahauddin died in 1231 leaving the young Jalaluddin in charge of the *madrasah* he had founded.

In 1232, Rumi met Shaykh Burhanuddin Muhaqqiq Tirmidhi, himself a student of Shaykh Bahauddin and became his *murid*. Under Shaykh Burhanuddin's direction, Rumi mastered the sciences of *kalam*, *hadith*, *Fiqh*, *tafheem e Qur'an*, Arabic and Farsi grammar and *tasawwuf*. But the luminary who inspired Maulana Rumi to his ecstatic poetry was Shaykh Shamsuddin Tabrizi. Maulana Rumi met Shaykh Tabrizi in 1245 and the two forged a spiritual friendship that inspired the Maulana to compose poetry. When Shaykh Tabrizi disappeared from Konya in 1247, the Maulana was distraught and sent messengers to look for the Shaykh all over Anatolia and Syria. The search proved futile, but the Shaykh had impelled the spiritual ocean of the Maulana just as the setting moon impels the waves of the ocean. The Maulana poured forth his ecstasy in his first collection, *Diwan e Sham e Tabrizi*, a work of unmatched rhythm, music, alchemy and spirituality.

The work that bestowed a universal stature on Maulana Rumi was the *Mathnawi*. A collection of over 27,000 verses, the *Mathnawi* is a veritable rhapsody of love of the human soul for the Divine. The Maulana drew upon the scriptures as well as the classics of Farsi and Arabic to construct a symphony of the soul in its journey towards the Master. Each verse is of incomparable beauty, each story of unsurpassed wisdom.

It is said in Sufi circles that God took a drop of love from His infinite Ocean Love, without in any way increasing or decreasing the depth of the Ocean and bestowed it upon humankind, dividing it equally between every man and woman ever created. If one were to claim that the Maulana captured the very essence of that drop of Divine Love that has sustained humankind, it would not be an exaggeration.

The *Mathnawi* is the epitome of Islamic *tasawwuf*. It has had a profound impact on Islamic culture and poetry, especially in the arc extending from Europe through Turkey, Persia, Central Asia and the Subcontinent. It has been translated into most modern languages. The Maulana stood at the pinnacle of spirituality as expressed in the Farsi language. His work continued to inspire Muslim writers and poets through the centuries. Some, like Shamsuddin Muhammed Hafiz (d. 1391), approached the spiritual heights of the Maulana. Other great ones like Abdur Rahman Jami (d. 1492) and Mohammed Iqbal (d. 1938) paid him homage. It is a tribute to this sage that the most popular poet in America today is not Shakespeare or Milton but Jalaluddin Rumi.

The legacy of Persia was the spiritual archetype that dominated Islam for 500 years. It was the renowned Sufi masters, men like Shaykh Abdul Qader Jeelani, Khwaja Moeenuddin Chishti, Maulana Rumi, Shaykh Bahauddin Naqshband and Shaykh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi who served as role models for Muslims. Paupers and emperors alike sought to emulate their example. Architects and artisans derived their inspiration from them. Reformers and counter-reformers alike used their names to draw attention to their movements. Timurlane, conqueror of Asia, was an ardent supporter of Sufi masters. A Sufi shaykh trained the Ottoman Sultan Muhammed, conqueror of Istanbul. The Safavid dynasty of Persia grew out of a Sufi movement. Mogul Emperors Akbar and Jehangir were so devoted to Shaykh Salim Chishti that they performed pilgrimages to his *qanqah* on foot. Uthman dan Fuduye initiated his reforms in West Africa in the name of Shaykh Abdul Qader Jeelani. And Shaykh Shamil of the Caucasus who resisted the Russians for thirty years was inspired by the Naqshbandi *tareeqa*.

The Persian spiritual influence extended to the architecture of post-Mongol Islam. Islamic architecture is a projection of the heavens on earth and seeks to realize in the matrix of material form a hint of the transcendence of heaven. Hence geometry is divided into two parts: functional geometry and supernal geometry. Functional geometry is the exoteric aspect of mathematical forms; supernal geometry describes the meaning behind those forms. Thus a dot is not just the limit of space as defined in mathematics, but also the onset of the creation of space. A dot moves and creates a line, which is not just a linear connection of points but the beginning of creation of space and a reminder (in the Arabic and Farsi languages) of the name of Allah. A line rotates and creates a circle, which becomes a representation of justice inasmuch as it shows no directional bias. And so on.

The inherent focus on transcendence enabled Muslim architects to realize in the construction of mosques and minarets alike something of the transcendence that lies hidden in geometrical forms. The genius of Persian architecture was that it applied that transcendence to the non-religious domain as well. Specifically, the application of supernal geometry with its emphasis on symbols and meaning to the construction of tombs and cenotaphs resulted in the erection of monuments of unparalleled beauty. The Timurids, the Safavids and the Ottomans all constructed tombs over the graves of sages and royalty alike to capture something of the essence of heaven on earth.

This art form reached its pinnacle in the Mogul court of Shah Jehan who built the Taj Mahal in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. The erection of this monument with its unsurpassed beauty and harmony could have been possible only in the framework of an ecstatic Islam in which love, not ritual, was the first step in the ascent of man to heaven. Conversely, such a structure would not have been possible in the classical age of Islam with its heavy emphasis on doctrine, the rational and the ritual. Classical Islam erected the edifice of law. In the post-Mongol period, the edifice of law was used by the Persian-speaking people as a platform on which they erected monuments of love.

From a historian's perspective, the most important contribution of the Farsi-speaking world was the institution of *zawiya* (the Turkish *tekke*). The Persians did not invent this institution any more than they invented the science of *tasawwuf*. But it was in Persia and in the contiguous regions of Anatolia and the subcontinent that it emerged as the central institution of community life. The *zawiya* was based on the mosque-*madrasah* paradigm that had existed from the earliest days of Islam. The Persians-and the Turks and the Indo-Pakistanis-extended its function to include the cultivation of religious ecstasy through *dhikr* and the remembrance of God. The *zawiya* also became a nucleus for youth movements wherein young men learned the virtues of chivalry and courage and nurtured their character under the watchful eye of a Sufi shaykh. Ibn Batuta, in his *Rehla*, describes in detail the *zawiyas* he visited in Anatolia, Persia and India. Each Sufi order had its own *zawiyas* in which young men-and women-gathered to pray, to learn the Qur'an and *Fiqh*, to perform *dhikr* and to cultivate a comradeship based on faith. As commercial activity resumed after the Mongol destructions, these *zawiyas* also became centers of guilds and trade associations. A calligrapher, for instance, would undergo years of training in the control of hand muscles, preparation and maintenance of his tools, concentration on his work and focus on his soul. He would also be a member of one *tareeqa* or the other from which he would learn the discipline of the heart, which alone is the springhead of creative work. The Sufis made Divine Love accessible to the most illiterate peasant as well as the most sophisticated scholar. It was this immediacy of Divine Presence that molded the character of Muslims for five hundred years after Genghiz Khan. And the *zawiya* was the institution that made this possible.

The *zawiyas* spread to all parts of the Islamic world and were instrumental in ensuring the stability of Muslim societies up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the largely rural milieu of India, Pakistan, Persia, Turkey and North Africa, the historical role of the *zawiya* was pivotal. It was the men of the *zawiya* who were the

backbone of the Turkish marches and the rapid expansion of the Ottoman Empire. It was the men of the *zawiya* who took Islam from Delhi and Lahore to the far corners of the subcontinent. It was the men of the *zawiya* who triumphed over the Portuguese at the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir (1578) and rescued North Africa from the same fate that had befallen Muslim Spain.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *zawiya* came up against the cold efficiency of the joint stock companies from Europe. The encounter took place just as political and social decay was overtaking the Islamic world. In the encounter, the joint stock companies triumphed. But the spiritual legacy of the *zawiya* endures to this day as a haunting reminder of a traditional Islam that once dominated the interconnecting landmass of Asia, Europe and Africa.

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