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The Historical Context

The era from 200 to 600 CE was a time of dramatic change across much of Afroeurasia. Successful, long-enduring empires that had risen and flourished during the preceding centuries began to flounder. One by one, nearly all were extinguished by the end of the sixth century. Why and how this happened in such a limited span of time is the subject of this unit.

The Han empire in China. The first to fall was the Han Dynasty in China. The Han demise was a complicated affair. Not surprisingly, a large part of the story involved pressure from pastoral nomads who lived along China’s northern borders. Over the preceding centuries a confederation of nomadic groups known as the Xiongnu amassed so much power in horse cavalry that they were able to extort resources from the Han in return for agreeing to keep the peace. The Han cooperated, finding it cheaper to pay the Xiongnu than to fight them. For a while, this compromise worked well. But in 51 CE, a succession dispute divided the Xiongnu into two groups. This set off a chain reaction that had a severe impact on the Han. The Xiongnu nearest the Chinese border took the payment intended for the entire confederation. The farther group immediately retaliated, attacking the Han (for not paying) as well as their greedy Xiongnu kinsmen. As the confederation disintegrated, individual groups began to demand separate payments from the Han. The costs to the Han rose considerably, and at the same time nomadic cavalry raids increased. The Han were not getting what they continued to pay for.

At the same time, nature entered the fray as an enemy of the Han. In 153 CE a swarm of locusts laid waste to large areas of farmland. Deforestation that had started in much earlier times produced erosion and floods. The Huang He (Yellow River) filled with silt and began to flood more frequently, with more devastating results. Infectious diseases new to China began to arrive via the silk roads causing widespread epidemics.

The misery these disasters caused was compounded by the increasingly desperate economic situation of the peasants. Over time, the long-standing tradition of dividing land equally among all sons had reduced the size of the average farm to the point where farmers could not make enough from the land to pay their taxes. Farmers had little choice but to give over their small plots to wealthy aristocratic landlords whose legal status exempted them and their dependents from taxes. Thus the wealthy landlords grew richer, the peasants became poor tenant farmers, and the Han government lost tax revenue. As conditions worsened, poverty and frustration fueled a series of peasant revolts.

All of these dilemmas placed heavy demands on the Han government and called for creative and decisive leadership. But internal competition for power among factions within the Han court paralyzed the government and left it incapable of dealing effectively with the empire's many problems. The rising power of large landowners and the increasing independence of Han generals continually eroded the power of the emperor. In 220 CE the dynasty collapsed, and the most powerful among the generals divided the empire into several smaller kingdoms.

The Roman empire. Rome was next. Many of the same pressures that brought down the Han plagued the Romans as well. Similar in size to the Han empire, but more linguistically and culturally diverse, Rome was even more difficult to hold together in the face of such pressures.

As with the Han, increased trade along the silk roads brought new contagious diseases from afar. These diseases repeatedly ravaged populations throughout the empire. Because conditions were worst in the cities during such outbreaks, those who could afford to do so fled to their country villas.

Neighboring pastoral societies were also a problem for both the Han and Roman empires. Rome had a long and turbulent border with Germanic peoples, called Goths, who lived to the north and east along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. Roman rulers wished to keep the Germanic Goths out of Roman territory, but raids were frequent and the financial and logistical burden of maintaining troops along the border was enormous. Eventually, the Romans ended up with an arrangement similar to the one established by the Han with the Xiongnu. The Romans paid Gothic chiefs an annual tribute in return for an end to raids on Roman territory. In addition, the Romans allowed Goths to cross the border to sell their goods in Roman markets. In fact, many Germanic warriors served in the Roman army. This arrangement worked well for a time. One result of this interaction was that many Germanic men and women converted to Christianity, which by the fourth century CE was the religion of Rome.

The Huns brought this fragile peace to an abrupt end around 375 CE. After crossing the Volga River from Central Asia and conquering the farming peoples there, the Huns swept into eastern Europe and attacked Germanic settlements. Trapped between the borders of Rome and the onrushing Huns, the terrified Goths requested and received Rome's permission to migrate west of the Danube. The crossing was a disaster. According to the Roman historian Ammianus, the desperate refugees took to the dangerous, rain-swollen river, clinging to almost anything that would float. Some tried to swim. For those who survived the crossing, their problems were just beginning. The generals in charge of the refugees mishandled their resettlement, starving and mistreating them in the process. Within three years, these Germanic groups had regrouped and took their revenge, defeating a Roman army at Adrianople and killing the emperor Valens. This was the first time a Roman army had been beaten by Germanic peoples in Roman territory. It signaled an end to Roman military superiority. Other Goths, as well as the Huns, soon took notice.

The disappearance of Roman military invincibility was due in large part to serious economic and political problems within the empire. Epidemics and war led to a steep decline in population

during the third and fourth centuries. The loss may have been as high as thirty percent. Labor shortages developed. Trade and business slowed. Tax revenues plummeted. At the same time, the gulf between rich and poor grew. The emperor Diocletian attempted to save the empire by dividing it into more manageable eastern and western sectors governed by its own set of co-rulers. Making such reforms was politically risky and required the cooperation of the wealthy senatorial class. To gain that cooperation, Diocletian exempted rich families from taxes, shifting the burden to the lower classes. Members of the senatorial class could expect to earn as much as 120,000 gold pieces a year. Peasant farmers typically earned about five. Farmers who could not pay their taxes were sold into slavery along with their children. Aristocratic landlords gained land and wealth, while ordinary Romans sank into poverty or slavery. The benefits of Roman citizenship became less apparent to many Romans and loyalties faded accordingly. With conditions deteriorating in Rome, the emperor Constantine established a new capital at the Greek city of Byzantium, known henceforth as Constantinople. This city was in more populous and richer eastern part of the empire. And its strategic and easily defensible location astride the major maritime trade route between the Mediterranean and Black seas ensured its survival and continued prosperity regardless of Rome's fate. The elites of Rome flocked to the new city, continuing the economic abandonment of the old capital that had started during earlier outbreaks of disease.

So by the time the Germanic army defeated Rome in 378 CE, the stage was set for collapse. The western empire, all but abandoned by the east, was ill-equipped to deal with the flood of Germanic and Hunnic migrants who surged across the borders. Indeed, these movements had the character of migrations of entire populations, along with their livestock and belongings, intent on making parts of the western empire their home. The Goths were divided into a number of groups. One of them were the Visigoths. Their chieftain Alaric led an attack on Rome and sacked the city in 410. Another group, the Vandals, did so again in 455. In 476 a Germanic general deposed the last western emperor. Meanwhile, the eastern empire, which became known as the Byzantine empire, or Byzantium, had enough financial and military resources to deter would-be invaders, including the Huns. In fact, Byzantium survived for another thousand years.

The Gupta empire in India. The story of the rise and fall of the Gupta empire is in many ways different from that of the Han and Roman empires. The Gupta empire was much younger, dating to about 320 CE. Before the rise of the Gupta, India had been governed by a number of kingdoms. All of them prospered from the enormous amount of trade that flowed through the region. Both the Han and Roman empires were major consumers of Indian cotton and spices. Chandra Gupta, the Gupta founder, built his empire by conquering some neighboring kingdoms and establishing alliances with others. Unlike the Romans or Han, who favored central control, the Guptas gained the loyalty and support of regional kingdoms by allowing them to retain a great deal of autonomy.

So long as the empire remained united and good order was maintained by regional authorities, Gupta rulers were content to devote most of their energy to promoting learning, religion, and art. This they did in spectacular fashion, resulting in what has been termed a "golden age" for India. Gupta scholars made remarkable achievements in many fields including literature, astronomy, and mathematics. Important discoveries were passed along the trade routes to be adopted by

other civilizations. One example is the use of Hindi (later termed Arabic) numbers, place value, and the decimal system. Gupta rulers also enthusiastically supported a revival of Hinduism, which had earlier suffered a decline owing to the rise of Buddhism. During Gupta rule the caste system was codified in greater detail, forming the basis for Indian law for centuries to come. For over two hundred years, India enjoyed a high level of organization, peace, and prosperity.

While Han China and Rome struggled to deal with attacks by pastoral nomads, the formidable Hindu Kush and Himalaya Mountains gave the Gupta some protection. The powerful Sassanian empire in Persia also provided something of a buffer against nomad invasion. But such defenses could not last forever. Central Asian nomads, sometimes referred to as “White Huns” or Hephthalites, invaded and occupied Bactria (Afghanistan) during the fourth century. In 455 CE, they crossed the Hindu Kush and invaded Gupta territory. Gupta forces at first repulsed the Hephthalites. But defense was costly, and attrition of resources eventually left the Gupta at the mercy of the invaders, who finally rampaged across northern India. With Gupta authority fading, India broke up once more into regional kingdoms. By 550 the empire was gone. So, in contrast to the complicated stories of disintegration that explain the fall of the Han and Roman empires, the Gupta story is relatively simple.

Common elements help explain why all of these empires collapsed between 300 and 600 CE. The most obvious common thread is the role of pastoral nomads. Competition among various groups of herding peoples for diminishing land and resources, combined with the comparative wealth of the settled empires they bordered, led nomadic confederations to first raid, then invade their neighbors. This set off a chain reaction of events that, when combined with internal weaknesses, helped bring down the Han and the Romans, while the Gupta simply fell victim to their conquests directly. The growth of trans-hemispheric trade, which had greatly enriched all three empires, also helped destroy the Han and Roman empires because long-distance communications permitted infectious diseases to travel across Afroeurasia and trigger widespread epidemics. India, however, seems to have been little affected by such outbreaks.

In the case of both the Han and Roman empires, wealth from trade was accumulated and concentrated in the hands of a relatively small elite class whose greed and indifference toward ordinary citizens led to widespread poverty and disillusionment. In the end, neither empire had the support of the majority of its own people. When these empires fell, few ordinary people mourned their passing. Internal political struggles also marked the final days of both the Han and Roman empires. Both had long survived such struggles in the past, but combined with other pressures, chronic infighting left governments unable to deal with crises at critical times.

By the time the Gupta succumbed to the Hephthalites, trade and communication had already begun to falter across Afroeurasia. Trade became more limited and dangerous to conduct. Warfare became more local. Where once great empires tied many diverse peoples together, there stood fragmented, regional kingdoms whose outlook was far more geographically and culturally limited. China, with its common script and traditions was eventually able to regain unity under the Sui. India would not see unification again until the Mughals arose in the early sixteenth century. The Mediterranean basin never regained unity.

Lesson 6

Student Handout 6.1—Transfers of Crops and Agricultural Techniques Across Afroeurasia, 300-1500 CE

Between 300 and 1500 CE, many of the food and industrial crops that we know today diffused over great distances across Afroeurasia. Important nutritional staples such as rice, hard wheat, and sorghum were added to the diets of larger numbers of people in areas where they were never grown before. Vegetables such as spinach, asparagus, artichoke, and eggplant enriched cuisine in new places, and fruits such as oranges, bananas, apricots, and melons added vitamin-rich refreshments to peoples' tables. Sugar became an irresistible and increasingly affordable sweetener in many new lands. Cotton, a vegetable fiber that was inexpensive, washable, absorbent, and colorful, was made into fabrics for all classes of people. It could be woven strong enough for sails and tents, and fine enough for see-through veils and laces. Animal products such as silk, wool, milk, and meat also traveled along the routes of diffusion. Some domestic animals—camels, horses, oxen, donkeys—were bred for pulling and carrying products along the trade routes.

The story of how these crops and animals traveled across the hemisphere is less famous than the trans-oceanic “Columbian exchange” of the sixteenth century CE. In fact, earlier exchanges across Afroeurasia paved the way for the Columbian exchange between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. Historians have asked questions about:

- Paths of diffusion: By what routes did plants and animals reach new lands, and when?
- Agents of diffusion: Who first brought them to new lands?
- Mediums for diffusion: How did culture play a role in encouraging or resisting diffusion?
- Demand and Supply: Why did people in particular regions want to raise new crops? What factors enabled farmers to grow new crops?

Paths of diffusion: Tropical Southeast Asia was the source of many food and fiber crops that diffused during Big Era Five. First cultivated by farmers there, they spread to India, where they were first cultivated on a large scale. As they passed through India, the plants were refined for higher yields and other desirable qualities that improved their value as field crops. Another pathway to India led from East Africa via Yemen at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. Other crops originated in India, and its women and men played important roles in the agricultural development of Afroeurasia. Evidence from literary and other sources shows that during the Islamic period, starting in the seventh century CE, many crops diffused rapidly across the Mediterranean to North Africa, Spain, and West Africa and eastward to China. During the Mongol empire, a species of lemon was introduced from Persia to China, and a type of millet from China to Persia. After 1500 CE, certain crops, including sugar, rice, bananas, indigo, and cotton, crossed the Atlantic, where they played important roles in European colonization of the New World. Many are still global cash crops today.

Agents of Diffusion: Many sorts of people were involved in diffusing crops across Afroeurasia. The most obvious agents of transfer were farmers who migrated to new lands, taking seeds and animals with them. After all, they had direct knowledge of how to grow and raise these products. Some plants do not multiply by seeds, but by cuttings and grafting. Others, such as rice, need special care at certain

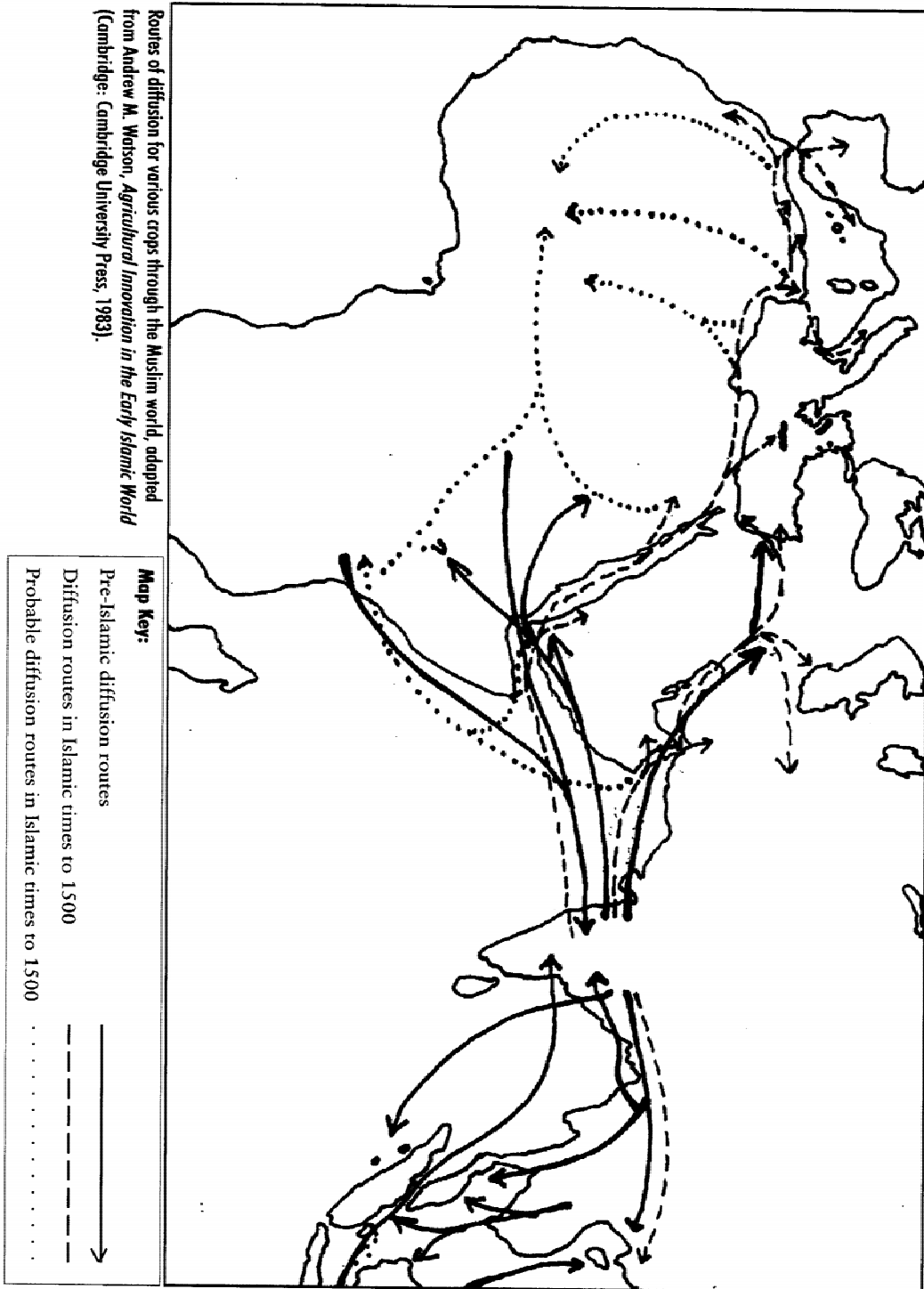
times. Rice seedlings have to be put into flooded fields at a particular time of year and the fields later drained so that the crop will ripen. Both irrigation and animal breeding techniques are specialized skills required for success in a new environment. At the top end of the social scale, royalty also played an important role in diffusion. Kings and queens received gifts from ambassadors that sometimes included rare plants for royal gardens and even a gardener to go with these plants. Military expeditions sometimes included scientists and geographers who collected plant and animal specimens, for example the scholars who accompanied Alexander the Great on his conquests in the fourth century BCE. Traders and pilgrims were more likely to bring news of new products than the plants or animals themselves, but they might also be harbingers of later diffusion.

Mediums for Diffusion: Movement of people, goods, and ideas favors diffusion. A major reason for the rapid transfer of crops during Big Era Five was the rise and spread of Islam. The conquest of a huge territory at the center of Afroeurasia and the subsequent creating of human links through a common religion and language (Arabic) encouraged rapid diffusion. The diverse regions connected together contributed native crops and farming practices, aided by economic prosperity and urbanization. The development of Muslim culture was a dynamic process of mingling among ethnic and religious groups. People were encouraged to make pilgrimages, trade, migrate, and spread learning. Further east, China under the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) reached a high level of manufacturing, trade, and agricultural production that involved diffusion of important crops such as sugar, cotton, and new varieties of rice. Along the trade routes, fruits and vegetables traveled in iced packing for the wealthiest consumers, but dried fruits and grains reached ordinary tables in quantity. Books on medicinal plants, veterinary medicine, and nutrition carried with them the seeds of demand for new crops. Wealthy rulers and elites opened new lands to irrigation and farming on a large scale.

Demand and Supply: Introduction of a crop or domestic animal alone does not amount to diffusion, because it may not become established in its new home. For example, finding historical evidence in a document of the introduction of a plant to a particular society is helpful but insufficient. The mention of a crop in a marketplace, cook book, poem, picture, song, or land tax records is evidence that it was successfully introduced. To become important, however, a new crop had to be in demand. Farmers are almost always conservative, because their investments in land, seed, and labor must succeed every year if they are to survive. They cannot risk producing what people may not want to buy. People do not easily change what they eat and wear, but an expanding society that is prosperous and open to novelty more easily creates demand. For example, the development of a sophisticated, urban Muslim society encouraged acceptance of new ideas, demand for new products such as cotton textiles, and desire among ordinary people to imitate what the wealthy elite consumed. Opening new lands to farming, building and maintaining irrigation works, providing ample labor, and encouraging merchants and sellers to ply their trades all increased the supply of new products.

The most remarkable part of the story of agricultural diffusion is the long period of time and the diversity of people involved in the cultivation, refinement, and spread of crops and animals. Also, intellectual and spiritual influences were as important as the economic and political factors. Crops evolved and moved with the history of human civilization from earliest farming to the present day. Today, rice, wheat, silk, cotton, sugar, coffee, tea, bananas, citrus fruits, olive oil, sheep, cattle, and thousands of other products travel around the world from one marketplace to another.

MAP: BOTANICAL TRAVELERS



Map reprinted by permission from Douglass and Alavi, *The Emergence of Renaissance: Cultural Interactions between Europeans and Muslims* (Council on Islamic Education, 2000)

Lesson 6

Student Handout 6.1—Botanical And Zoological Travelers

COFFEE In early Islamic times, coffee began to be grown in Arabia, near the Red Sea. Coffee cultivation did not, however, become important until the 15th and 16th centuries, when many trees were planted in Yemen, and the taste for coffee began to spread to other Muslim lands. Coffee merchants became very wealthy in cities like Cairo, and coffee drinking spread to Europe. After a Turkish diplomat introduced it to Parisians in 1669, the consumption of coffee skyrocketed in Europe during the 17th century, with the growth of coffeehouses that also sold two other new drinks—chocolate and tea. Coffeehouses played an important role in the social and political life of European cities. Like sugar, coffee was introduced into Europe’s overseas colonies, and became a vital cash crop. In 1714, the French brought a live cutting of a coffee tree to Martinique in the West Indies. With this single plant, the coffee business in Latin America began. Today, it is a major source of revenue for several African and Latin American countries. A global commodity, coffee may be a major contributor to the modern work ethic.

(Sources: Ferdinand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 256-260; “Coffee,” *Microsoft Encarta 96 Encyclopedia* (Microsoft 1993-95).

CITRUS FRUIT Lemons, limes and oranges were once rare, exotic items. A few hundred years ago, a child who received a single orange as a gift would have been quite happy. Citrus fruits grow on trees whose fragrant blossoms made them a favorite in royal gardens. The use of citrus juice and rinds in cooking, for marmalade, in candied lemon and orange rinds, and in various cosmetics and medicines helped this crop spread around the world. Cultivation of citrus fruits began in China, India and Malaysia. Each region domesticated different varieties, like kumquat, sweet orange, sour orange, lemon, lime, and citron. Grafting produced new varieties as cultivation spread. Some types of citrus had not spread west of India before Islamic times. Possibly reintroduced to the Mediterranean, the citron became widespread, and other types of citrus, like the lemon, the lime, and the sour orange were commonly mentioned in literature by the tenth century. Spain became the most famous place for oranges and other citrus, with its famous gardens celebrated in poems and songs, and in groves planted by royal gardeners that still stand today, like the Patio de los Naranjos in Cordoba. From royal plantations to backyard gardens, citrus trees have been part of Muslim culture. Citrus played an important role in the Age of Exploration itself, when captains learned to protect their crews from scurvy (a seaman’s disease caused by lack of vitamin C) by carrying preserved lemons or limes on board. English seamen, for this reason, were called “Limeys.” European explorers, once in India, are credited with introducing varieties of sweet oranges from there to the rest of the world, but as with cotton, the techniques for growing them had been learned centuries earlier. Citrus is an important global cash crop today, and a vital source of Vitamin C.

COTTON This fiber crop may have originated in India or ancient Egypt, and its textile varieties and cultivation techniques were certainly developed in India. Indian cotton goods were exported widely from India in ancient times across the monsoon and overland routes, but its cultivation spread slowly. During pre-Islamic times, it had spread into China, and probably as far west as East Africa. Much of this early diffusion, however, is cotton of an annual variety. High-yielding annual varieties of fine cotton fiber and their widespread cultivation diffused as a result of the economic development of Muslim lands, with their vast production of textiles of all kinds. Cotton was grown on a very wide scale, and processed at many centers. This new cotton plant spread as far as the frontiers of Christian

Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Techniques for growing cotton became known to the Spanish and became very important in the New World. There, Old World familiarity with cotton and the methods for growing it united with New World varieties that produced longer fibers. With that, another of the cash crops that supported European colonization and economic growth of the Americas was born. Importation of these varieties back into the Old World gave the early industrial revolution a great push. The cotton mills of England, by 1830, were importing raw cotton from the Middle East and the American South, and selling calico printed cottons (whose styles and techniques were learned at Calicut, India) all over the world, fueling both industrial revolution and the growth of empire. Cotton, the word for which came from the Arabic *qutn*, also contributed to the development of the United States' economy and global trade. On a personal level, cotton has also played a role in providing inexpensive, comfortable clothing for the masses, contributing to health and hygiene.

SUGAR CANE This is another “industrial crop” that has had a major impact on agriculture, economics, and social life around the world. It may also have encouraged the professional development of dentistry more than any other food. Sugar cane produces more calories per acre than anything else known, and it has many uses. Its juice can be sucked raw on the stalk or cooked and eaten. Its best-known use is refined sugar, crystallized from the juice boiled to syrup. Depending on how many boilings, it may be brown, red or white. Molasses is a mineral-rich byproduct of sugar. The crushed cane is excellent for feeding cattle. Sugar cane, like so many other important crops, was originally cultivated and refined in India, Southeast Asia, or Indonesia, from a wild grass high in sugar content. It has been grown for so long that it is not known when it was first domesticated. It may have reached China as early as 1000 BCE, and Yemen and Persia by the seventh century. Small amounts of sugar may have been exported to western Afroeurasia as medicine or curiosity in ancient times. From Persian areas to the Levant, Cypress, North Africa, Sicily and Spain, sugar cultivation and refining followed the spread of Muslim culture. By 1500, it had reached some islands in the Atlantic, like Madeira and the Canaries. It was produced on a large scale for domestic use and for export in Muslim lands, India, and China. Sugar, whose name is derived from the Arabic *sukkar*, most likely became known to Western Europe by way of Muslim Spain. We can imagine the Christian rulers and elites adopting candies (also a word derived from Arabic) and sweetened desserts from their Muslim counterparts. There is also literary evidence of this transfer. One of the lasting memories of the translator-scholars who visited Toledo's famous libraries must have been marzipan, a confection of almond paste and sugar that was a specialty of the city. The Crusaders tasted sugar and saw it growing in the Levant. European visitors to the Ottoman court tasted Turkish delight and other sweet pastries, and wrote rapturously about it to folks back home. Nevertheless, sugar remained a luxury until the seventeenth century, when supplies from plantations, worked by slave labor, began to arrive in larger quantities. Sugar is another cash crop that financed Europe's colonization of the world, both as refined sugar and as rum, one of the products of the triangular trade that bought African slaves to the Americas. The popularity of sugar in Europe stimulated production in other places, too, and another global commodity was born. In 1747, German chemist Markgraff isolated sugar from the sugar beet. This brought the sweetener within reach of northern climates and within the budget of the masses. Sugar had conquered the world and made fortunes for many.

HARD WHEAT (pasta and semolina) Italian food calls to mind pasta and sauce, but it might surprise you to know that both tomatoes and the hard wheat used to make all sorts of pasta were introduced not too many centuries ago to Italy and the rest of Europe. Pasta is an invention of long distance travelers. Hard wheat was ground into flour, mixed with water and salt to make a dough and sieved into couscous, formed into small balls, rings, or tubes that could be strung on strings to dry, or

laid in the sun. A highly nutritious, compact traveling food that stored well for a long time, it needed only to be boiled in water to eat. It could be mixed with meats, beans and sauces. Hard wheat is important because it can grow with less rainfall than other types, and it can also be stored longer without spoiling. Hard wheat contains a lot of gluten—the substance that makes its dough very elastic. Its flour is also excellent for making flatbreads. Hard wheat may have originated in East Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean, but its cultivation spread widely under Muslim influence. It became an important crop in Spain and Italy, from where it spread to Europe. Along with the spread of hard wheat, which is high in gluten, went the art of making many forms of pasta. The proof of its spread to Europe from Muslim lands lies in the various words for noodles derived from Arabic terms. Thin pastry is also a product that must be made with hard wheat flour.

TOMATOES The other spaghetti ingredient—tomato sauce—did not appear until tomatoes were brought from the Americas during the Colombian Exchange. Tomatoes were first thought to be poisonous, as members of the nightshade family, but they soon caught on, and became so much wedded to Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cooking that it is hard to imagine them as not being a very old food item in the region. The rapid spread of tomatoes around the world offers a good example of rapid global diffusion of new products and foods after 1500, when the routes of the Columbian Exchange linked up with existing cultural connections in the Old World.

RICE This grain originated as a food crop in the Far East, except for some wild varieties in the Americas and elsewhere. Rice is the only grain that can be eaten just by boiling it; most others must be ground into flour. Rice offers excellent nutrition and high yield per acre. Rice, however, can only be grown where there is enough water for the fields to be flooded for the young plants; therefore, rice cultivation spread hand-in-hand with Muslim irrigation technology and widespread organization. A staple food crop in the Far East, rice was often a luxury, though a very popular one, in other lands where it was not so heavily cultivated. Muslim farmers, merchants, and even monarchs contributed to bringing cultivation of Asian rice from China and Southeast Asia into Muslim lands around the Mediterranean, then on to East and West Africa, and to Spain and Italy. Rice was also imported into Europe from Muslim lands, as it does not grow in colder regions. Rice and its cultivation played a decisive role in the colonization of the Americas, where it was an important crop used to feed slaves. It was grown together with cotton and with sugar cane to feed those who labored on the plantations. It also became an American food staple that is still grown.

Excerpted by permission from S. Douglass and K. Alavi, *The Emergence of Renaissance: Cultural Interactions between Europeans and Muslims* (Council on Islamic Education, 2000).

Student Handout 2.1—The Spread of Islam

A Slow Process. In the century after Muhammad's death, Muslims conquered territory "from the Atlantic to the borders of China." Many students reading this often wrongly imagine that this huge region instantly became "Islamic," meaning that most of the people living in those lands quickly became Muslims. To the contrary, the spread of Islam in these vast territories took centuries, and Muslims made up a small minority of the population for a long time. In other words, the expansion of territory under Muslim rule happened very rapidly, but the spread of Islam in those lands was a much slower process. There are several kinds of historical evidence of this gradual conversion process that we will examine in this lesson.

"Let there be no compulsion in religion." The Qur'an specifies, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2: 256). This verse states that no person can ever be forced to accept religion against his or her will. It tells Muslims that they cannot force people to convert to Islam. Muhammad set a precedent as the leader of Madinah. Under his leadership, the Muslims practiced tolerance towards those of other religions. They were signers of the Constitution of Madinah and of treaties with the non-Muslim groups. According to tradition, Muhammad often discussed religious ideas with the Jews, Christians, and polytheists (believers in many gods), and he heard their questions about his teachings. The Qur'an records some of the questions that people put to Muhammad, and his replies. Muslim leaders after Muhammad were required to be tolerant, based on the authority of both the Qur'an (in this and many other verses), and the Sunnah, that is, custom practiced by Muhammad or by early members of the Muslim community.

With some exceptions, Muslim leaders have adhered to this precedent over time. One major type of evidence for tolerance by Muslim political leadership is the persistence of many religious minorities in the lands Muslims have ruled. Spain is one example, where Christians and Jews lived and worshipped under Muslim rule and contributed to the society in many ways. The writings of well-known Jewish and Christian scholars, physicians, scientists, and artisans still exist. After the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain following the conquests of Ferdinand and Isabella, Jews settled in North Africa under Muslim rule. They were also invited by the sultan of the Ottoman empire to settle in Istanbul. Some of these communities still exist today. In Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, for example, Christian and Jewish groups that pre-date the coming of Islam still exist, as do the Coptic Christians in Egypt, after 1400 years of Muslim rule there.

Becoming Muslim. Muhammad preached Islam at Makkah and Madinah in Arabia for about twenty-three years, while he received revelation of the Qur'an, according to Islamic teachings. For the first ten years (612 to 622 CE), he preached publicly at Makkah. After the migration to Madinah he preached for ten years, until his death in 632, only in his own house—the first *masjid* (mosque)—to people who came to hear him. Preaching in houses or in the *masjid* became the pattern in Islam.

To accept Islam, a person only has to make the profession of faith (*shahada*) in front of two or more witnesses. Even after a person has accepted Islam, he or she may take a long time to learn and apply its practices, going through many different stages or levels of understanding and practice over time. As Islam spread among large populations, this process was multiplied.

Different individuals and social classes may have had different understandings of Islam at the same time. Also, many local variations and pre-Islamic customs remained, even after societies had majority Muslim populations for a long time. These differences have been a source of diversity among Muslim societies and regions.

Growth of Muslim population. It is quite easy to map the large territory ruled by different Muslim political groups, or to illustrate the expansion of an empire. We can shade in areas of a map, and we can track the dates of Muslim rulers and dynasties from the time of Muhammad to the present day. It is more difficult, however, to understand why historians speak of a geographic area as a “Muslim region,” “Muslim society,” “Muslim civilization,” or even “the Islamic world.” At a minimum, such terms must mean that most of the people who lived in those places considered themselves to be Muslims, that is, people who believed in the religion called Islam. By what point in time did the majority of people in those places accept Islam, and how rapid was its spread? What effect did the gradual or rapid spread of Islam have on language, customs, art, and politics? How did the fact that many people were converting to Islam relate to the development of Muslim culture and civilization? We know, of course, that substantial numbers of people in those regions continued to practice the faiths they had belonged to before Islam, including Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. The social contributions of people of these religions continued under Muslim rule. As these former majorities became minorities, how were they affected? How did the presence of a large region in which the majority of its inhabitants were Muslim affect adjoining regions where the majority accepted other faiths?

The process of conversion. In the decades after Muhammad’s death, nearly all of the inhabitants of Arabia accepted Islam, except Christian and Jewish communities, which were allowed to continue practicing their faiths. As Muslim rule extended into regions beyond the Arabian tribal system, however, *khalifas*, that is, the successors of the Prophet as leaders of the Muslim community, did not encourage conversion to Islam among the populations of newly conquered areas.

Nevertheless, during the early caliphates (632–750) non-Arabs began to accept Islam. Conversion took place at first among the lowest classes of people. Men and women migrated to Muslim garrison cities to look for jobs and to offer their services to the ruling group. Learning about Islam in these centers, some converted and expanded the Muslim population. These migrants became associates, or *mawali*, of Arab tribes, a traditional method of integrating outsiders. Some migrant Arab and *mawali* converts founded families that later made important contributions in preserving and spreading Islamic knowledge. They became scholars of Islamic law, history, literature, and the sciences. In this way, Islam spread in spite of the policies of political rulers, not because of them.

During the years of the Umayyad Caliphate (Umayyad dynasty) from 661–750 CE, the overwhelming majority of non-Arab populations of the empire, which stretched from Morocco to Inner Eurasia, did not practice Islam. Toward the end of that time, the North African Berbers became the first major non-Arab group to accept the faith. Within a few centuries, Christianity disappeared almost completely in North Africa (today’s Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco), though Christian groups persisted in many other Muslim regions. Jews remained as a small minority, with many living in Muslim Spain. The spread of Islam among Iranians and other peoples of

Persia was the second major movement, beginning about 720 CE. Both of these early groups of converts caused problems for the central government. In North Africa, Berbers set up an independent caliphate, breaking up the political unity of Islam. In Persia, the revolution arose that replaced the Umayyad with the Abbasid dynasty in 750, though only a small proportion of the population of Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia, centered on the Tigris-Euphrates valley) had at that time accepted Islam. From then, however, Islam was no longer the religion of a single ethnic or ruling group, and the rates of conversion climbed more rapidly in lands under Muslim rule.

For example, Arab Muslim forces conquered Egypt in 642, but by 700 few Egyptians had become Muslims. By 900 CE, about fifty percent of the population was probably Muslim, and by 1200, more than 90 percent. In Syria, Islam spread even more slowly. There, the 50-percent mark was not reached until 1200, nearly six hundred years after the arrival of Islam. Iraq and Iran probably reached a Muslim majority by around 900 CE, like Egypt. In much of Spain and Portugal, Islam became established in the 500 years following the initial conquests of 711 CE, though it may never have become the majority faith. After Spanish Catholic armies completed the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, many Muslims and Jews were either expelled from Spain or converted to Christianity. Islam continued to exist, however, until after 1600. As in Spain and Portugal, Islam withered away in Sicily, the Mediterranean island that Muslims had conquered in the ninth century.

In Persia, Inner Eurasia, and India, Muslim law treated Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Hindus just as it treated Jews and Christians. Muslim rulers offered adherents of these religions protection of life, property, and freedom of religious practice in exchange for the payment of a tax, as an alternative to military service. In Sind (northwestern India), the Buddhist population seems to have embraced Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries. Buddhism disappeared entirely in that region. Hinduism, however, declined there more slowly than Buddhism did.

All of the lands described above had Muslim rulers. After the decline of the unified Muslim empire—from about 750—Islam gradually spread to lands outside the boundaries of Muslim rule. After 1071, Anatolia (or Asia Minor), which makes up most of modern Turkey, came under the rule of Turkish animal-herding groups that had become Muslims. Islam spread gradually for centuries after that, and when the Ottoman Turkish empire enfolded much of southeastern Europe in the mid-fourteenth century, most Albanians and Bosnians, as well as some Bulgarians, became Muslims.

Continuing Spread. Beginning in 1192, other Muslim Turkish military groups conquered parts of India, including most of the north all the way to present-day Bangladesh, which borders the Bay of Bengal. The number of Muslims in India gradually increased from that time. The people of Bangladesh had been Buddhists, but beginning about 1300, they rapidly embraced Islam. Elsewhere in India, except for Punjab and Kashmir in the far northwest, Hinduism remained the religion of the majority.

In South India and Sri Lanka, both merchants and Sufi preachers, that is, followers of mystical Islam, spread the faith. By 1300, traders and Sufis also introduced it to Southeast Asia. Over the next two centuries, Islam spread from Malaysia to the great archipelago that is today Indonesia.

Entering a region where Buddhism, Hinduism, and local polytheist religions existed, Islam required several centuries to become well established.

In Inner Eurasia beginning in the eighth century, Islam gradually spread to the original homelands of the Turkic-speaking peoples until it became the main religion of nearly all of them. Islam also spread into Xinjiang, the western part of China, where it was tolerated by the Chinese empire. Islam entered southern China through seaports, such as Guanzhou, the city where the earliest *masjid* exists.

Africa. Before 1500, Islam spread widely in sub-Saharan Africa. Before 1000 CE, the first major town south of the Sahara that became majority Muslim was Gao, a commercial center located on the Niger River in Mali. Over the centuries, many other rulers and parts of their populations followed this pattern. By 1040, groups in Senegal had become Muslims. From there, Islam spread to the region of today's Mali and Guinea. Muslims established the kingdom of Mali in the thirteenth century and the Songhai empire from 1465 to 1600. Farther east, Kanem-Bornu near Lake Chad became Muslim after 1100. In West Africa, like Turkestan, India, and Indonesia, traders and Sufis introduced Islam. When rulers accepted the faith, numerous Muslim scholars, lawyers, teachers, and artisans migrated into the region to help build Muslim administration and cultural life. African Muslim scholars became established in major towns like Timbuktu, where they taught and practiced Islamic law as judges. By 1500, Islam was established in West Africa in a wide east-west belt south of the Sahara. Local polytheistic religions remained strong, however, and Islam did not become the majority faith in this region until the nineteenth century.

In East Africa, traders spread Islam along the coast beginning at least by the tenth century. By the fourteenth century, the numerous commercial city-states along the coast from today's Somalia to Tanzania were predominantly Muslim. In the Sudan, south of Egypt, the population of Nubia gradually became Muslim during the fourteenth century, through immigration of Muslim Arab pastoral groups and because Christian rule became weak in that region.

Strong Governments and the Spread of Islam. By understanding that the expansion of Muslim rule was different from the spread of Islam, we can see an interesting trend. Ironically, Islam has spread most widely and rapidly among populations at times when Muslim rule was weaker and less unified. When Muslim political regimes were decentralized, disunited, or completely absent, Islam as a religion flourished and often spread to non-Muslims. Influence by traders and Sufis and influence of Muslim scholars, lawyers, and artisans in the cities aided the spread of Islam to new areas. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire in southeastern Europe, or the Sultanate of Delhi, and the later Mogul empire of India had little success in spreading Islam, though they did gain territory. Non-Muslim populations seem to have viewed these powerful, tax-gathering Muslim rulers negatively, and so they resisted conversion to Islam. Whoever did embrace Islam in such circumstances, if not for material gain, usually did so because of the efforts of merchants, teachers, and traveling Sufi preachers, who were not part of the government.

Study Questions:

1. In what important way was the conquest of territory by Muslims different from the spread of Islam?

2. How many centuries do historians think it took from the time Islam was introduced until it became the religion of the majority population in Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Spain?
3. To which regions did Islam spread mainly as a result of trade and travel?
4. How might laws tolerating other religions have affected the spread of Islam among the population?
5. Construct a simple time line tracing the spread of Islam using the dates in the text above.
6. Locate the regions mentioned in the text on a map, and make labels showing the dates when 1) Islam was introduced there and 2) when it embraced a majority of the population. Compare your map with Student Handout 2.3 map.

Student Handout 2.2--Chronology of the Spread of Islam

Beginning more than 1400 years ago, Islam has spread from the small trading town of Makkah on the Arabian Peninsula to become a world religion practiced on every continent. Like other world religions, Islam has been spreading ever since its origin, both through migration of Muslims to new places, and by individuals who have accepted Islam as their religion, having chosen to convert from other religions.

During the first century after Muhammad began preaching, rapid expansion of the territory under Muslim rule took place as a result of military campaigns. This territory did not instantly become "Islamic," meaning that most people rapidly became Muslims. Rather, the spread of Islam among the population took centuries, even in the regions conquered in the seventh century CE.

The following chronology marks dates when various regions were first introduced to Islam. It also gives the dates when Muslims probably became a majority of the population in those regions. The timeline also records trends in cultural and religious influence by both Muslims and non-Muslims which affected the spread of Islam.

7 th Century CE		<p>622 Muhammad and the Muslims migrated from Makkah to Madinah at the invitation of the Madinans. Muhammad became the city's leader, and the first Muslim community was established.</p> <p>630 Makkah surrendered to the Muslim force, placing the city under Muslim rule. Many members of Quraysh accepted Islam shortly after.</p> <p>632 Muhammad died, leaving much of the Arabian Peninsula under Muslim rule.</p> <p>634-650 Muslim armies defeated Byzantine and Persian imperial armies, bringing Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Iran under Muslim rule, including the cities of Jerusalem, Damascus, and Alexandria.</p>
8 th Century CE		<p>711-715 Spain, Turkistan and Sind (northern India) were brought under Muslim rule.</p> <p>750s Muslim soldiers settled in Chang'an (Xian), the largest city in China. Muslim merchants also visited and settled in southern Chinese ports.</p>
9 th Century CE		<p>*c. 800-850 Islam became the faith of the majority of people in Iran.</p> <p>819 The Samanids became the first independent Muslim state in northeastern Iran and Inner Eurasia. By the 900s CE, Islam became the majority religion in that region.</p> <p>*c. 850-900 Islam became the majority religion in Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia.</p>

10th – 12th
Centuries CE

*c. 940-1000 Islam became the majority religion in Muslim-ruled parts of the Iberian Peninsula (today's Spain and Portugal).

1099-1187 Western European Crusader armies held Jerusalem.

11th c Muslim traders in West Africa began to spread Islam. Muslims settled in the Champa region of Vietnam and introduced Islam.

1040s The Almoravids, a Muslim Berber ruling group, spread Islam in Mauritania and other parts of West Africa. They campaigned against the Soninke kings of Ghana.

1060s The Almoravids ruled in North Africa and Muslim Spain (al-Andalus). The empire of Ghana weakened.

*c.1200 Islam became the majority religion in Syria.

13th – 14th
Centuries CE

13th c. Ghana's empire collapsed and Mali rose. Rulers of Kanem, near Lake Chad, became Muslim.

End 13th c. Muslims settled in northern ports of Sumatra (today's Indonesia). Muslim traders had close trade and cultural contacts in the trading cities on the east Indian coast, such as Gujarat.

ca.1300 Islam became the majority faith in Anatolia (part of today's Turkey).

1295 the Ilkhan ruler Ghazan "the Reformer" was the first Mongol leader to become Muslim, along with most of his Mongol generals.

1324-25 Mansa Musa, king of Mali, made the pilgrimage journey to Makkah, strengthening Mali's links with Islam.

14th c. Mali, Gao, and Timbuktu, cities on the Niger River in west Africa became important centers of Muslim trade and scholarship

15th Century CE

15th c. A ruler of Malacca converted to Islam, while that port city was becoming an important stop on the China-Indian Ocean trade routes. From Malacca, Islamic influence spread in the Malay peninsula and nearby islands.

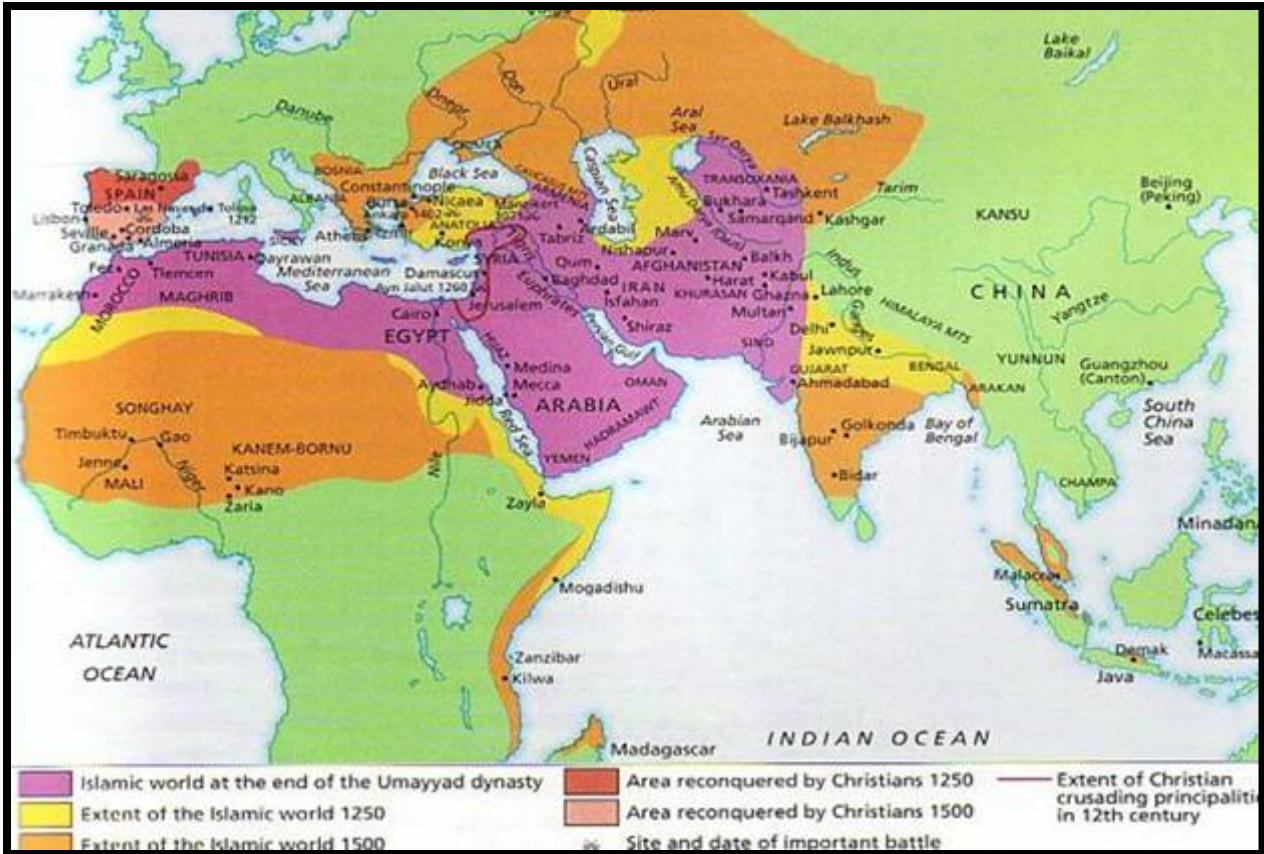
1453 Ottoman forces conquered the city of Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire.

1085-1492 Spanish Christian forces carried out Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula.

1495 Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain, while others were forced to convert to Christianity.

Sources for the Chronology: Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979); Khalid Y. Blankinship, "Politics, Law and the Military," in S. L. Douglass, ed., *World Eras: Rise and*

Student Handout 2.3—Map of Expansion of Islam



Map from Francis Robinson, ed. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 47.