

## THE FOUR CALIPHS

After the passing away of the Prophet two important questions arose among his community. Who was to succeed him? How would the rapidly growing Islamic community be governed?

Muhammad was loved and revered as God's prophet, and he was considered divinely guided in his political and social decisions. Who could fill the Prophet's shoes, and how could they maintain the divine truths of Islam in a violent and ever-changing secular world?

The Prophet's closest companions, Abu Bakr and Umar, argued that the Islamic community must remain united under a single leader, as it had been under the Prophet.

Some thought the Prophet should be succeeded by Ali, his closest male relative. This was the most common way of selecting a new tribal leader. However, Ali was relatively young and inexperienced in politics, and so the majority voted for Abu Bakr, one of the oldest and most generous Muslims and the Prophet's closest friend.

The four men who led the Islamic community after Muhammad became known as the four "*rightly guided*" caliphs. In Arabic, "*Khalifah*" means *deputy*. The authority of the caliph was rooted in his role as the representative, or regent, of the holy Prophet.

### ABU BAKR

Abu Bakr served as caliph from 632 to 634 CE. This was a particularly critical time for Islam, as many of the tribes that had embraced Islam now sought to break away from the Islamic community and regain their traditional independence.

Abu Bakr managed to put down a series of tribal uprisings and succeeded in unifying Arabia. He virtually doubled the size of the lands controlled by the Muslims.

### UMAR

Umar served as the second caliph for ten years, from 634 to 644 CE. With the rapid growth of Islam, Islamic society was rapidly changing as well. Umar realized that the old custom of tribal raiding was critical to the survival of many poorer desert tribes. Umar organized the tribes into a permanent fighting force which boiled out of Arabia and conquered the entire Middle East.

They invaded Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt and, in 637 CE, defeated the Persian army. By 641 CE, Palestine, and Egypt. These military achievements were not "religious wars." The goal was economic, a continuation of the tradition of raiding the Arabian tribes had practiced for centuries.

Umar's era was marked by his straightforward, puritan character. It came to be seen as a golden age by many Muslims, a peaceful age unmarked by the religious and political strife that was to arise later.

### UTHMAN

After Umar, Uthman became the third caliph, 644 to 656 CE. He had a gentle character and was loved by the people. Uthman established an official version of the Qur'an, which had previously existed in several variants.

Muslim armies continued to expand into new lands, including much of North Africa, Afghanistan, and western India. As a result of all these conquests, Muslim society was changing. The younger men no longer lived like their desert nomad ancestors. They were now members of a disciplined, full-time army spread over vast distances. Uthman refused requests by the military commanders and powerful Muslims families to take over conquered territory as their own private estates.

When a group of petitioners from various provinces traveled to Medina to complain of their corrupt governors, Uthman put them off. Their discontent turned to rebellion, fanned by a false rumor that Uthman was plotting to have them all killed once they returned home. The group broke into Uthman's house and assassinated him. Then the assassins proclaimed Ali as the new caliph.

### ALI

Many Muslims were shocked at the killing of Uthman, who was one of the earliest Muslims and, like Ali, had been a son-in-law of the Prophet. After Ali became caliph, he was urged to punish Uthman's killers. Ali did not rush to punish the killers, nor did he condemn Uthman.

Ali decided to replace every governor appointed by Uthman. The new leader of Umayyad clan, Muawiyah, was also the governor of Syria. Muawiyah refused to step down as governor or to accept Ali as the new caliph. In 661 CE, Ali was murdered by one of the Kharijites.

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**Muawiyah appointed himself as caliph and tried to reunite the Muslim community from his new capital in Damascus.** The shift of power to Damascus symbolized the end of an era. The united Muslim community, under the guidance of a prophet, was now a thing of the past as was the era of the four devout, rightly guided caliphs, who had been among the closest companions of the Prophet.

Muawiyah ruled as caliph from 661 to 680 CE. He continued to maintain the separation of the Arab Muslims from the local populations and continued to discourage conversion to Islam.

### THE Umayyad DYNASTY

Muawiyah appointed his son Yazid as his successor, despite opposition from many Muslims who felt that their leaders should be elected according to Arab traditions. In the Iraqi city of Kufah, Muslims still loyal to Ali claimed Ali's son Hussain should be caliph and invited him to lead them. Hussain left Madinah with a small band of followers and their families. In 681 CE., on the plain of Karbala outside Kufah, they were surrounded by Yazid's Umayyad troops and all of them were massacred. Today, Muslims still mourn the martyrdom of the Prophet's beloved grandson, Hussain.

In western Arabia, rebels against the Umayyads sought a return to the purity of the early days of Islam. In central Arabia, Kharijite forces set up an independent state, and there were Kharijite uprisings in Iraq and Iran as well. In 691 C.E., after eight years of struggle, the uprisings were put down and unity was restored by the Syrian forces of Abd al-Malik, a cousin of Muawiyah. Abd al-Malik ruled as Umayyad caliph until his death in 705 C.E. After the rebels were quelled, his reign was peaceful and prosperous. Arabic replaced Persian as the official state language. The old segregation between Muslim troops and the local populations began to break down. In 691, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the first great Islamic monument, was completed. This was the beginning of a new tradition of distinctively Islamic architecture.

Political and religious discussions centered on how to practice Islam in this new era. Was it Islamic for the Umayyad court to live in luxury while so many were poor? What did it really mean to be a Muslim? Should the Islamic community welcome non-Arab converts and become an Islamic rather than an Arab community? These intense debates were to shape the practice of Islam from the eighth century until today.

A revival of Islamic spirituality was begun by Hasan al-Basri (died 728 C.E.). Hasan grew up in Medina, close to the Prophet's family. He advocated a simple, ascetic lifestyle, similar to that of the Prophet. Hasan taught his followers to meditate on the inner meaning of the Qur'an and to seek to surrender fully to God's Will. This is generally considered to be the beginning of the Islamic spiritual movement called *tasawwuf*, known in the West as *Sufism*. Although Hasan and his followers deplored the luxury and license of the Umayyad court, they accepted the Umayyad caliphate in order to preserve the unity of the Muslim community. In this, they differed from the Kharijites, who still remained totally opposed to Umayyad rule.

### MUSLIM SPAIN

The Umayyad conquest of North Africa expanded to the conquest of most of Spain and the establishment of a Muslim Spanish kingdom by 750 C.E. Spain became a center of interchange between Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars. Many of the great works of Greek philosophy and medicine entered Europe through this interchange. The cities of Cordoba and Granada became great centers of art and learning.

By the tenth century, Cordoba, the capital city of Muslim Spain, was one of the greatest cities in the world. At this time, cities like London and Paris had dirt streets and no sanitation. Cordoba had clean, paved, well-lit streets and running water. There were 70 libraries, and the largest, the sultan's library, contained 400,000 volumes. The Great Mosque of Cordoba was regarded as an architectural masterpiece.

The writings of the great Spanish Muslim Cordoban philosopher Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, influenced Western philosophers for over four centuries.

After centuries of religious coexistence, the Inquisition and the rise of Christian militancy led to the reconquest of Spain, which was completed in 1492 C.E. Muslims and Jews were forced to accept Christianity or to go into exile. Many Jews emigrated to Ottoman Turkey, where the sultans welcomed them and allowed them complete freedom of trade and of religion. Sultan Beyezid II commented, "*Spain's loss is my gain.*"

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