

**ECONOMIC FACTOR CONTRIBUTING TO THE SPREAD
OF ISLAM**

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It does not seem necessary at the present time to explain and prove that economic factors have a profound influence on the development, course, spread and movements of religions. Some such views have become almost axiomatic with many historians and popular writers. Among the adherents of the various religions, however, there are many who are still not convinced. At the same time those who acknowledge the importance of economic factors are far from being agreed about the relation of these to the social and ideational factors.¹

1. *M. Watt, I.I.S. p.4.*

While socialists and Communists try to relate and attribute all social and ideological, including spiritual and religious, movements to economic factors, religious leaders try to disassociate these entirely. Nevertheless, since Islam introduced itself as an inclusive and all embracing religion, taking into consideration the totality of man and his life, temporal as well as spiritual, individual as well as collective, it naturally produced some economic changes. It naturally introduced a completely different economic system of its own. It is therefore obvious that economic factors helped its spread and development although not as the only factor or even the main factors.

If the economic factors are in some sense fundamental, at least in the spread of Islam, the presumption is that they underlie its spread in all areas, times and circumstances and among all the peoples who embraced it. If economic factors are as important as a survey suggests that they are, then it is likely that they will be operative everywhere, and we must look everywhere to see whether we can detect them.¹

‘It is not possible to maintain that in every case the economic change connected with a religious change is a change in the means of production.’¹ A little reflection shows that closely similar economic changes do not always produce similar religious changes. Thus religious change cannot depend solely on economic change. The conclusion is reached that while economic change, whether by change of means, administration or technique is a basic determinant of the situation in which social change occurs, these economic factors do not completely determine the social response, since variations are possible through differences in intellectual and imaginative capacity”².

We can thus conclude that while economic factors helped the spread of Islam they should not be accounted as the only factors or even as major factors in general throughout the entire history of the

1. *Ibid.* p. 28.

2. *Ibid* p.30-42

spread of Islam. This is the case with other factors too.

The scope of this work does not permit us to go into the important question of the Islamic economic system. Our main purpose has been and is to explain factors or combination of factors which have helped the spread of Islam. Nevertheless, since economic factors have helped the spread of Islam a short review of Islamic economic policy would not be out of place.

Islamic economic system outlines:

- (a) Islam represents a complete way of life and its principles are all pervasive. There is no compartmentalisation or segregation of human activity in Islam. All activities and dealings are regulated. Economic policy in Islam is, therefore, an integral part of the religion of Islam.
- (b) Islamic economic system is based on equality, justice, moderation, collective self-sufficiency.
- (c) Man's spiritual development is fundamental but his physical welfare is instrumental. His spiritual development is not taken into consideration at the cost of neglecting his material needs.
- (d) Islam is based on faith in Allah who has given man the capability to choose between good and evil, and to assume full responsibility for his conduct. "Man hath only that for which he makes effort, and that this effort will be seen."¹
- (e) Islam is a universal system embodying eternal values which safeguard man's rights while constantly reminding him of his obli-

1. *The Quran, 53: 39 (40)*

gation to himself and society.

- (f) Islam forbids, exploitation and monopoly in all forms and strictly prohibits unearned interest such as Riba (usury), gambling, betting etc.
- (g) Islam honours labour and contracts, enjoins work and toil, encourages man to earn his own living by honest means and to spread his earnings.
- (h) Islam believes in an Islamic socialism which does not permit extremism but holds, the "Middle Course" Ummatun-wasatun Every member of the Muslim Community is under obligation to share his wealth with the rest of the community (Zakat) while he is equally entitled to live a private life and to own property.¹

1. *Islamic International Economic Conference, London, July 1977.*

Being an inclusive Religion, embracing all aspects of individual and social life, Islam established an economic system of its own along with its legal, educational, moral and theological systems.

Islam's economic system covered agrarian, commercial and industrial sides of the life of individual and society and established economic purpose, incentive, means and administration and thus spreading under various economic circumstances.

The creation of an Islamic common market, the encouragement of commerce, trade and productive activities, by Islamic law and by Muslim administrators established strong commercial relations throughout Muslim territories and between Muslims and non-Muslims. These relations were too strong to be broken even by wars. The commercial relations continued in spite of the wars and thus appreciably affected the history of the spread of Islam.

Improvement of trade and commerce did not take place at the cost of agriculture. Agricultural activities were strongly favoured, i.e. the tax on draught animals, which had earlier under Byzantine rule hindered agriculture, was removed, and a land-tax system was introduced which made it disadvantageous for the Sicilian farmers to leave cultivable land uncultivated.¹

However it is almost certain that the spread of Islam or even Muslim conquests were made with the minimum of disturbance to the economy of the lands into which Islam penetrated on the conquered

1. Denis Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily: Medieval Sicily, 800-1730* (London 1968) p.6.

countries.¹ The rapid establishment of organized central control, the creation of an Islamic Commonwealth, the introduction of fresh social, political and economic incentives improved the financial conditions of converts, Muslim communities and lands under Muslim rule. This is why in many cases prosperity and economic development was associated and attributed to conversion to Islam. In some cases Islam managed to solve many socio-economic problems left by previous religious institutions, e.g. producing a balance between commerce and agriculture; producing a socio-economic solution to the Indian Caste system and thus attracting those who continued to suffer from their former social and economic disabilities. In many cases converts were better off than before, e.g., converted cultivators were exempt in many cases from poll-tax² and other taxes. Agricultural activities were thus encouraged.

It should be mentioned here too that the economic impact of Islam from the beginning and throughout its development was so vast and deep that made some scholars suggest that Islam introduced a kind of social revolution³ or at least a middle course (Ummatun-Wasatun) with socialist tendencies.⁴ Some writers have even introduced Islam as a kind of socialism.⁵

Ample evidences can be provided to show how economic factors helped the spread of Islam. But too many examples may be wearisome. Change of administration, ruling power and technology or technical means can produce economic change and consequently cause the spread of a religion and the decline of another one. Islam certainly succeeded in doing these and thus helped with its own spread. Let us take the spread of Islam in Persia into consideration from this point of view. The incorporation of the Persians in the Islamic community

1. *H. Gibb, S.C.I., p.7*

2. *Ibid, p.9.*

3. *See M. Watt, Islam and the Integration of Society, pp.2-3.*

4. *See, Gibb, Whither Islam, Index, Islam.*

5. *See M. Watt, Islam and the Integration of Society.*

is one of the great triumphs of Islam. This is, in fact, the case with many other nations with old civilizations. But Persia can serve our purpose better here. At first sight it does not appear to be any basic change in the economic circumstances of the Persians between the Sasanian and the Caliphate the chief difference was that taxes were paid to different rulers. Nevertheless many important changes can be detected. Under the Sasanians there had been a steady process of urbanization and this had meant the growth of commerce and the eastward spread of ancient culture of Iraq. This process was continued and even accelerated under Islamic rule. The Islamic Empire being larger, the possibilities of trade were greater. This economic change and likewise the change of ruler affected different groups differently; but there can be little doubt that these changes had an important bearing on the whole hearted acceptance of Islam by the Persians.¹ The Persians embraced Islam much faster and more willingly than many other nations in similar circumstances, for example Egyptians. We know that Islam's concept of Umma and brotherhood worked as an economic factor.

This can be also explained as follows: A very important type of change that is found in the background of religious movement is a change of rulers or political and administrative change. One great example of this is the expansion of the Islamic religion. The Persians under the Sasanians suffered from heavy burdens of taxes, class system, feudalism co-operation of temporal and ecclesiastical powers. They had to pay for the heavy cost of keeping political rulers and Zoroastrian clergy the immense expense of wars between the Persian and the Greek Empires. The political, economic and social conditions made Persians embrace Islam partly as a revolt against their decrepit undesirable system.²

1. *M. Watt, I.I.S., pp. 28-29.*

2. *See Ibid, p.31.*

In equality, tyranny, injustice, political and religious pressure were the rule. Islam on the other hand, offered them what they were missing. Trade improved, a better political and administrative system was provided, less money was wasted. The Muslim conquerors of Persia belonged to a different social system from its Persian rulers. They were neither feudals nor belonged to any royal or imperial family. They were from the people, in the course of time the conquest led to religious change and the fast spread of Islam.¹ Persians were a people with a long cultural tradition and civilization with a political, social and economic system of their own. They became merged in a civilization whose central ideas were not theirs, and yet within this foreign civilization they attained a rich flowering of their own special gifts² Obviously, Islam had a special attraction for them politically, socially and economically. Attractive enough to make them abandon their old systems in favour of Islamic ones. Still, it does not seem right to presume that only such a selfish and low motive (remission of taxation or material advantage) have produced that deep acceptance of Islam by Persians.

Prosperity and economic development almost always followed Islam everywhere. Taking another case from an entirely different area and era we quote a Chinese who accompanied the Emperor of China to Java in A.D 1413. He says: "In this country there are three kinds of people: first, the Muslims, their dress and food is clean and proper. Second, the Chinese; what they eat and use is also very fine and many of them have adopted Islam and observe its precepts. The third kind are the natives who are very ugly and uncouth, they go about with uncombed heads and naked feet and believe devoutly in devils, theirs being one of the countries called evil-countries in Buddhist books"³

1. See *M. Watt, I.I.S.*, p. 33.

2. See p. 114.

3. *Groenevelat*, pp. vii, 49-50 (p.1.p.383)

It has been suggested that one of the reasons why Islam spread in the State of Calicut, as indeed in many parts of India, is that the local princes whose aggrandisement depended on Muslim merchants, either foreign or native, favoured Islam and encouraged conversion to Islam¹ This was supposed to improve the prosperity of the country and increase commercial activities.²

The socio-economic structure of a society is always interwoven. This can be clearly recognized in the social changes that Islam produced in the traditionally caste ordered society of India and as a result vast economic changes were produced in favour of the development of those who embraced Islam. It is even suggested that conversion to Islam among the lower caste made them one of the most progressive communities in India. Such is also the case with those who accepted Islam from among the Tuyans, the Mukkarans (fishermen) as well as from the Cherumans (agricultural labourers) and other sects and castes to whom Islam brought deliverance from the disabilities attaching to the outcasts of the Hindu social system.³

Merchants in many parts of the Muslim World have been the missionaries of Islam. In many places they were looked upon as the agents of prosperity and financial development. They were therefore also helped by the local authorities in their missionary activities. The inhabitants of the Laccadive and Maldiva Islands, who are all Muslims, owed their conversion to Islam to Muslim merchants.⁴ Muslim merchants carried their religion with them into the infidel cities of India. They did the same in the Malay Archipelago. They travelled far and wide and established trade link between different parts of the world. They carried the produce of China and Ceylon to India, to Turkistan and to Persia.⁵ They helped local people and princes in various ways

1. *Innes*, p. 190 (p , p. 269), *Zayn al-Din*, p. 34-5.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 33, 36 (p. I, p. 271-2).

3. *Ibid*, p. 272.

4. *Arnold*, p.1, p. 273.

5. *Masuidi*, Vol. 1, p. 207.

and were granted privileges to preach their religion freedly. The workers in spreading Islam in East Africa were also Muslim merchants.¹ It is true that the spread of Islam has not been due entirely to material and financial causes, but the success of Islam has been facilitated by the worldly success of Muslims and their financial help to non-Muslims.²

The association of Islam with the financial development of individual Muslims has also been noted by European writers. Islam brought labour, hard work and prosperity to the lands it penetrated. The economic developments of the state and individual are closely intertwined. But in the areas where Muslims were a minority their financial status, was strong compared to that of others. Some scholars have noticed the strong financial status of the individual Muslims and they have even attributed it to their religious stand, e.g. "It has been remarked that at the present day Muslims of the West of Java who study their religion at all, or have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, form as a rule the most intelligent and prosperous part of the population."³ In another part of the Malay Archipelago, the trade in cloves brought the Muluccans into contact with the islanders of the Western half of the Archipelago. These traders were all or almost all Muslims. They had the trade of the Archipelago under their control for a long time.⁴

Muslim merchants in China managed to establish themselves in the form of a community as early as the Tang dynasty (A.D. 713-742)⁵ or little later⁶. They were so influential that they openly performed their rituals in their mosque.⁷ It seems that they were very cultured,

1. *Becker, Islam in Deutsch Ostafriks, p. 53.*

2. *Arnold, p.I, p. 355.*

3. *Ibid, p. 390 quoting from many sources.*

4. *Do Barros, Dec. iii. Liv. v. cop. v., pp. 579-80 (p.I, p. 391)*

5. *De Thiersant, vol., 1, p. 253.*

6. *Ibid, p. 70-71.*

7. *Arnold p. 300 quoting from other sources.*

rich and popular.¹ Some were appointed to high positions.² It is true that other factors helped the spread of Islam in China too but the commercial and trade relations seem to be the strongest factor of them all. Not only did Muslims gain a good reputation in the field of international trade but they also promoted internal development and commerce as a minority group, e.g. the Chinese Muslims are said to be keen men of business and successful traders. They monopolized animal farming, and the beef trade, and carried on other trades with great success.³ The Muslims developed foreign trade and commerce also in Africa greatly. They even founded commercial cities such as Jenne in A.D 1043 and Timbuktu about 1100 A.D. The extension of trade and the establishment of commercial centres helped the development of Islam in the areas concerned.⁴

It is not easy to associate such a complicated matter as the conversion to a single cause. Nevertheless, it is not very illogical to think that a certain group of people had a greater share in leading others to a new religion. This is the case in the Malay Archipelago. It is impossible to fix a precise incentive for the acceptance of Islam by the people of this area, and indeed in any other area; but Muslim merchants and traders are believed to have spread Islam in this area. These merchants adopted the language and customs of the natives, married their women, and succeeded in incorporating themselves among the chiefs who held the foremost rank in the state. Since they worked together with greater ability and harmony than the natives, they gradually increased their power more and more. . . they formed a kind of confederacy among themselves and established their own state and government . . . Though such a confederacy gave them great power, yet they felt the necessity of keeping on friendly terms with local and traditional power and of insuring their freedom to those classes whose support they could not

1. *De Thiersant*, vol. 1, pp. 19-20; *Howorth*, vol. 1, p. 161.

2. *Ibid*, vol. 1, p. 161.

3. *Broomhall*, p. 224.

4. *Tarikh al-Sudan*, p. 12 (p.1, p. 321).

afford to dispense with.¹ The more intelligent rulers in Africa, as elsewhere must have seen that co-operation with the traders would lead to greater wealth and power and they therefore encouraged Muslim merchants who in turn, helped the spread of Islam. Frequently a ruler found that the trading community which was Muslim, was becoming so strong that he must co-operate with it or lose his power, and co-operation involved a formal profession of Islam, though such confession by a ruler would not automatically introduce Islam as the state religion.²

Trade has always had a special place in Islamic civilization. The importance of trade and commerce in Islam and in Islamic history has made some scholars even believe that the religion of Islam was first and foremost a religion of traders.³ We cannot enter here into the discussion whether Islam is exclusively a religion of traders, as some believe,⁴ or a religion of peasants and nomads, as some others do.⁵ These observers of Islam have usually interpreted Islam and its history to support their own argument at the cost of ignoring facts. Islam, however has laid a great emphasis on earning one's own living, whether by commerce, or by agriculture or industry. The first Muslims were men from the commercial centre of Mecca and the agricultural oasis of Medina.⁶ Economic practices in the heyday of Islamic communal strength and the institutions built thereon reflected a certain common bent among Muslims, namely, preference for agriculture and cattle-raising at home and trade abroad.⁷ Islam and Islamic civilization has always produced an atmosphere favorable to trade. While various factors have helped the spread of Islam, there are parts of the world, such as East, West Africa and South-East Asia and other areas where

1. *Padre Gainza, quoted by C. Semper, p. 61 (p.I, p. 369).*

2. *M. Watt, I.I.S., p. 130.*

3. *W.M. Watt, The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe, p. 15.*

4. *H. Gibb, Islamic Society and the West, p. 276.*

5. *Like Ernest Renan.*

6. *W.M. Watt, I.I.M.E., p. 15.*

7. *C.E. Farah, Islam, p. 141.*

conversion to Islam has come about mainly through activities of businessmen.¹ These, while in pagan areas have made no secret about engaging in worship five times a day. Their sincerity and their serene assumption of the superiority of Islam have impressed the pagans, with whom they had business relations. Conversion, together with intermarriage, have led to the formation of Muslim communities in pagan areas and these have gradually grown.² Thus throughout the Islamic world conditions generally favoured commercial activities. The whole was a single free trade area and led to the extension of commercial and trade links, relations and activities between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslim traders thus took Islam with them wherever they went.

There is no doubt that trade is a tradition of important consequence which helped the birth and shaping of Islam.³ The fact that Muhammad himself worked as a trader and his wife Khadija was also a trader is of special interest. This helped to create a favourable attitude towards trade and commercial activities in Islam. Muslim traders see themselves as sharing the task of spreading Islam with the prophet of Islam. Again the pilgrimage of "hajj" which is one of the five pillars of Islam encourages Muslims from all parts of Islamic lands to meet at Mecca. So the hajj became not only a powerful factor in promoting religious unity and spreading Islam but it also materially assisted in strengthening the ties of commerce between Muslim lands and peoples, and between them and non-Muslim lands and peoples.⁴

Islam was introduced to Indonesia by Merchants from India.⁵ "Islam was first spread in the Philippines by traders and adventurers in 8th/14th century, but its spread was checked when Spaniards arrived

1. *W.M. Watt, I.I.M.E., p. 16.*

2. *Ibid, p. 16.*

3. *C.E. Farah, Islam, p. 21.*

4. *See: the Legacy of Islam (ed. Arnold) Chap. 3.*

5. *S.G.F. Brundon, D.C.R. Ch. Islam.*

in 1565 A.D.” “Much of the missionary work of spreading Islam was done by traders who travelled far afield.”¹ From India Islam spread to Malaya and from there to Sumatra. Early in 9th/15th century, traders from Hadramaut came to Java, where there were already Muslims, and as usual engaged in missionary work. Islam reached Philippines in 8th/14th century through Muslim traders who visited coastal regions. The history of the spread of Islam in Africa is also associated with the proselitizing activities of Muslim merchants and traders, e.g. Islam spread in Southern and Western Sudan by “peaceful Muslim merchants and Yarse Muslim refugees from the Mandingo cities such as Timbuktu and Djenne who received permission from the Mossi to settle in the country. They lived under many restrictions and were forbidden by Moronabas to recite their prayers in public places (Tauvier 1912: 585-86). Despite these restrictions the Muslims were able to extend their influence through the conversion of the cadet sons of the rulers.”² “The chief of a tribe himself became converted to Islam in gratitude to a Muslim Hausa trader who cured his illness.”³

“In some places, Islam even gained a footing without any governmental or material power to support it. This was the pattern in the overseas regions, where Muslim traders, often of great daring and enterprise, brought with them their Muslim culture and faith and established small Muslim communities. The traders gained a hearing from local rulers, to whom they brought commercial advantage and, by their superiority of bearing, were able to impress their hosts, who allowed them to establish trading posts, granted concessions to them and permitted them to marry local women.”⁴

Muslim sea trade extended from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, down the coast of East Africa as far south as Sofala, and eastward

1. *Ibid*

2. *Gods and Rituals, ed. by John Middleton, p. 357*

3. *Ibid, p. 359.*

4. *G.E.. Marrison, C.A..M. p.. 37.*

to many factors, their numbers dwindled and the Muslims formed the vast majority. Thus there was a steady trickle of converts and with the passage of time this completely altered the proportion of Muslims to non-Muslims.¹ Though poll-tax may have caused some conversion, it certainly could not have been the only factor or even the main factor for conversion.

1. *W.M. Watt, Islamic Political thought. p. 6.*

conomic advantage is not to be regarded as the only factor. However, as we see, even Western Christianity regards the acceptance of Islam in many cases as an indicator of the weakness of Christianity.

All non-Muslim subjects had to pay poll-tax in return for security and for exemption from military services. But they preferred to accept Islam instead. Not unnaturally this led to a vast access of converts to Islam.¹

However, the poll-tax imposed by the Muslim conquerors was in comparison to the poll-tax imposed by previous rulers, Byzantine and Persian Empires, less heavy and the peace treaties were usually more humane and generous.² The poll-tax was indeed in return for their protection by Muslims. When Herclius massed his troops against the Muslims, and the Muslims heard that they were coming to meet them, they returned to the inhabitants of Hims the tribute they had taken from them saying: "We are too busy to support and protect you — take care of yourself."³ In fact the term Dhemmy means protected and is derived from the root Dhemma or protection.

The Jewish and Christian population, almost always, obtained the usual lenient treatment regularly accorded to the "People of the Book"⁴.

Considering the circumstances, it is appropriate to conclude that it was Islam itself supported by the dissatisfaction with previous religions, rather than the financial burden, that converted people to Islam. Immediately after the Muslim conquest the non-Muslims constituted the vast majority, but in course of time, because of the conversion, due

1. *A. Gukllaume, Islam, p. 80*

2. *Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 1, p.62.*

3. *Baladhuri, op. cit. pp. 165-211, abridged by Hitti.*

4. *Baladhuri, op. cit. pp. 165-211, abridged by P. Hitti.*

ors inevitably declined.¹

We are not certain that these suggestions correspond to historical facts. Most of the Muslim jurists and historians do not agree with his suggestion. Nevertheless, even if conversion relieved them from levied on the protected (Dimmis) it imposed upon them a heavier tax paid by the Muslims.

However, Wellhausen was challenged by Daniel C. Dennett.² Wellhausen himself believed that the poll tax amounted to so little that exemption from it did not constitute sufficient economic motive for conversion.³ Conversion relieved a man of poll tax but not of land tax. In some cases conversion did not relieve a man even from poll tax.⁴ It seems very unlikely that such a selfish and material motive (such as tax relief or remission of taxation) could have produced that deep acceptance of Islam by many peoples with ancient culture and old civilization such as Persians, Egyptians, Syrians, Mesopotomains, Indians and others. Such a presumption is an insult to these peoples.⁵

“As for the poll-tax (Jizya) it should be explained that the People of the Book (Christians and Jews), who made up the bulk of the population in the areas into which Islam spread, were allowed to maintain their religion in Muslim lands on the payment of a poll-tax. This system created a strong economic advantage in joining the rank of Islam and over the centuries many ancient eastern Christian communities have had their numbers thinned where sacrificial faith has not always been strong enough to stand up to economic pressure”⁶. But this eco-

1 *Wellhausen, p. 177; CF, pp. 169-187, 151-153, 297-300*

2. *See D.C. Dennett, Islamic Taxation, Harvard University Press, (N.Y. 1973).*

3. *Ibid, p.9, Wellhausen, p. 176.*

4. *Tabari, 11, 1435.*

5. *See M. Watt, I.I.S., p. 115*

6. *G.E. Morrison, C.A.M. p. 33*

religious demands on converts. The financial loss was so great because of mass conversion that Jarrah wrote to Umar II asking him to let him restore the tax. But Umar refused to follow the suggestion, replying: "Allah send Muhammad as a Guide (Hadi) to summon men (to Islam) and not as tax collector (Jabi)." When Jarrah further persisted and suggested the use of pressure, Umar removed him from office.¹

The following account could also clarify this point further. Ashras Ibn Abdullah, a governor of Hisham, planned to convert all the inhabitants of Transoxiana to Islam by offering freedom from taxation as an inducement. The Muslim missionaries who were sent out were so successful that protests were raised not only by the revenue officials — whose perquisites depended on the sums they collected — but also by the local chieftains who had reason to fear considerable harm to their own prestige if the democratic faith of Islam took too a firm hold on the peasantry.² In some cases people were so uninterested in their old religion that they asked their Muslim rulers to do them a favour by letting them convert to Islam in return for not paying tax. They even revolted against the administration if they were refused the favour.³

However, it should be born in mind that those who accepted Islam only to escape the tax burden would not and could not be good Muslims as they obviously were not good Christians, Jews, etc. for they abandoned their former religions.

Nevertheless, it has been suggested by Julius Welhausen that there existed strong economic motive for conversion and the effects of widespread conversion was that the revenue collected by the conquer-

1. *Tabari*, 11, 1354 (quoted by *Levy, S.I., Vol. 1, p. 34 — 1st ed.*).

2. *Barthold: Turkestand*, p. 190.

3. *Ibid*, p . 190, for full details concerning *Islamic Taxation*, see p.00

on them by Muslims, the history of Islam can provide us with proofs that many people accepted Islam in order to escape the financial burden and exploitation laid on them by their political and religious systems and leaders. The case of the people of Creation serves as an example. The excessive taxes levied on them by the Byzantine Empire and the financial losses caused by their religious leaders made them from time to time leave everything behind and take refuge in Muslim lands such as Egypt and Turkey and accept Islam there.¹ It seemed as if the lands conquered by the Muslims from the Byzantines were really liberated, for the people helped the Muslims or at least were happy to be free from the Byzantine rule; Again the case of Sicily serves as a useful instance. The Christian population of Sicily which lived under the Muslims felt less aggrieved than that which lived on the main land under the Lombards or Franks. Christian slaves often accepted Islam in the hope of better treatment or manumission. In Val di Mazara province of Sicily where slaves abounded, Islamisation progressed swiftly,² for they could enjoy Islamic justice, equality, fraternity and freedom. Taxation was lower than under the Byzantine.³

Exemption from tax encouraged people to adopt Islam, not because the tax was too heavy a burden but mainly because they did not attach enough importance to their old religion to hold to it at the cost of a small tax. On the other hand it shows Muslims, interest in their religion to accept peoples Islamization in return for financial loss. The following account clarifies this point further. The Umayyad ruler, Umar II (A.D. 717-720) offered a remission of taxes to converts. To Jarrah, his governor in Khurasan, he wrote: "Remit the poll-tax to anyone who turns in prayer to Mecca." This step seemed so successful that great numbers of the population hastened to adopt the new faith — with disastrous results to the revenue. Jarrah reported the unexpected and undesired consequences of the simplification of the

1. *T. Arnold, p.1, p. 151.*

2. *Aziz Ahmad, A History of Islamic Sicily, p. 22.*

3. *Ibid, p. 23.*

bia, Africa and Asia. Many trade centres were established and the Muslim rulers made special efforts to extend trade and commerce among their subjects. The Muslim Emperors did this at the international level. This can be recognized particularly during the Umayyads, Abbasids and Ottoman Empires.

Not only did the Muslims establish peace and security and encouraged trade and commercial relation between people, they also helped build roads and bridges which helped trade a great deal. They did this for two main purposes: (a) military, (b) commercial and later on for administrative purposes.

In some cases financial reasons were responsible for conversion to Islam. These reasons have been elucidated in a number of ways. While some church leaders try to relate the conversion to Islam to the burden of, capitation-tax, recent scholarly and impartial research have proved that this has no sound foundation.¹ But on the other hand there is some evidence to prove that "unbearable financial oppression on the part of the Christian spiritual leaders who should protect the Christian population has often stirred it up to open revolt. It is not surprising to learn that many of the Christians who could not bear the church revenues and taxes any longer went over to Islam to deliver themselves from such tyranny."² One reason for turning to Islam was the financial hardship, depression, tyranny, forced labour, heavy taxes and other forms of financial difficulties which the Christians suffered at the hand of their feudal landlords which made them look at the Muslim rulers as God's blessing.³

While some biased missionaries have been trying to show that some people accepted Islam to escape the burden of taxes imposed

1. *Arnold, p.1., p. 192.*

2. *Pitzipios, second partie, p. 87 (p.1, p. 170, 187-9); Zamarevich, fol. 13; Favlati, Tome, vii, p.109; Bizzi, fol. 19b (p.1, p.154).*

3. *Pashley, vol 1., pp.30,319; vol. ii, pp.284, 291, 298, 185 (p.1, p. 204).*

the later period of conversion to Islam, the process was not the work of Muslim traders astride the traditional caravan routes or in control of interior markets; the agents of Islam were now more varied, numerous and powerful, situated in the port regions of the Western Coast of Africa. There were Shiahhs from Lebanon, sunnis from Syria and many other nationalities.¹

To summarise Islam helped the establishment of an economic relationship amongst the nations living under Muslim rule. It established and organized international trade link between the different parts of the Muslim World. The Muslim merchants soon found themselves in the Far East and China. They travelled extensively by land and sea, all over Africa, Asia and even Europe. Trade between Muslims and non-Muslims spread the knowledge of Islam. In many areas the Muslim merchants did all the missionary work directly and indirectly. Muslim traders ususally received a ready welcome at the, courts of African chiefs, princes, or kings, for they (Muslim merchants) found them a market for the commercial products of the land and imported objects in exchange. In this way not only did they establish their influence, helped the spread of Islam, but they also developed trade, commerce and prosperity.²

The Turkish dominions for instance, were certainly better governed and more prosperous than most parts' of Christian Europe and the mass of Christian population engaged in agricultural activities enjoyed better life and collected more fruits from their labour under the Turks. They certainly did not have compulsory free labour which they did very often under non-Muslim government. The establishment of a strong stable Empire certainly resulted in producing productive peace and security. This was of extreme importance especially in Ara-

1. *C.E. Farah, Islam, p. 267*

2. *Massaja, Vol, N.P. 132 (p. I.P.351).*

The role of traders and merchants in the spread of Islam has been so great that a modern writer regards trade as one of the two main factors helping the spread of Islam. After reviewing the spread of Islam throughout the world he states: "This process of expansion has usually been effected in one of two ways; either (a) by Muslim traders and merchants who, as in the case of the modern growth of Islam in Africa, have commended their faith to others in the course of their business activities and have married local women who, with their children, have then become Muslims; or (b) by the political control of new territory by Muslim rulers and the subsequent adherence to Islam of the inhabitants of the region. In neither case has conversion to the Islamic religion usually been the result of persecution or force."¹

The role of traders in the task of spreading Islam is a real one. Even when and where material power favoured the spread of Islam it was the traders who earnestly undertook the actual task of spreading Islam. e.g. "Even though the Moguls are solely credited with giving Islam its golden prince in India, the Arab traders, ever since the eighth century, had made the preaching of Islam in the heart-shaped peninsula their special concern, beginning at the Malabar Coast and penetrating inland."²

It is suggested that the pattern of the spread of Islam in almost all parts of Africa is similarly that of being introduced by traders who later on gained enough power to rule or to influence the ruling power.³

Stepped up economic activity, the security of travel and communications, the development of cities, the free effulgence of Islamic culture in public places in recent times have helped Muslim merchants and traders in the propagation of Islam. Interestingly enough, during

1. *T. Ling, A History of Religion, p. 330.*

2. *E.J. Jurji, G.R.M.W., p.212.*

3. *M. Watt, I.I.S., pp. 126-130*

Africans. The winds blow from the Persian Gulf towards Africa during four months of the year and then in the reverse direction. Sailing ships traded between South Arabia and the Persian Gulf to Africa and even to India and China. This is shown by Asian coins and pottery and other remains in East Africa.¹

“Muslim traders did not intervene in tribal or local life and did not attempt to introduce Islam to local peoples in many areas. Yet Islam spread through the examples of the traders and by Islamic toleration.”²

Modern facilities have helped Muslim traders to penetrate to areas that they had never visited before. New communication has helped Muslim traders to spread Islam more rapidly than even especially in Africa. Thus even in modern times Islam is principally spread by traders. “Today, Islam makes its fastest progress mainly through traders and other non-professional evangelists, precisely in an area where it must compete peacefully with Christianity and paganism for the allegiance of individuals and small groups.”³

One of the many examples of the spread of Islam by trade and traders is the spread of Islam in East Africa, e.g. the North of Mozambique up to Lake Nyasa is predominantly Muslim, along the old trade route, and in Malawi, particularly among the Yao people who have taken to Islam more than another peoples in these parts. The Yao are an inland people but their trade with the coast not only brought them into competition with the Arabs but subjected them to Islamic influences from the late nineteenth century, and they in turn, became chief agent of the spread of Islam.⁴

1. *Geoffrey Parrinder, Religions in Africa, p. 194.*

2. *Ibid, p. 196-197.*

3. *D.L. Edwards, Religion and Change, p. 81 (1st ed.).*

4. *Geoffrey Parrinder, Religion in Africa, p. 197.*

to India, Ceylon, Malaya, Indonesia and China. In all these regions small but prosperous Muslim communities grew up, and by the end of the fifteenth century the Muslims had gained a monopoly of the Indian ocean trade and controlled most of the commerce of its hinterlands. In one region – Indonesia – Islam became the dominant religion, having been established in Northern Sumatra at the end of the thirteenth century from whence it spread to Malaya, Java and the other islands of the East Indies by the sixteenth century.¹

The history of the spread of Islam in the East Indies is another instance where it has taken place in the main by the peaceful approach adopted by Muslim traders, merchants and immigrants². The following account is admittedly typical: “The better to introduce their religion, these Mohammadan traders adopted the language of the people and many of their customs; married their women . . . and increased their personal importance, and succeeded finally in being reckoned among the foremost chief in the state.” The influence of Islamic “social prestige” thus helped the spread of Islam in this part of the world (East Indies)³

The process by which Islamic influences infiltrate a pagan African environment seem to follow a reasonably uniform pattern . . . The first phase is commonly for Muslim merchants and holy men to visit a country or even begin to reside there.⁴

Islam was speed in East Africa by Persian and Arab traders. The establishment of Islamic common markets created an atmosphere of understanding amongst traders of different countries and nationalities. In East Africa Islamic traders were Persian as well as Arabs and North

1. *Ibid*, pp. 37-38

2. *W.H.T. Gairdner, The Reproach of Islam*, p. 114

3. *Ibid*, p. 113-115.

4. *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, p.. 263.