CHAPTER 5

The Spread of the Faith

As long as one viewed Muhammad as the Prophet of the Arabs, assuming a mission beyond the Arabic-speaking regions made no sense. Whoever converted did so for social or economic reasons, and he made the effort to become an Arab himself by learning the language. This was a thorny path; neophytes became “clients” (mawālī) of the one who accepted their conversion and, to begin with, were regarded as second-class people in the tribe they were associated with. One did not take this upon oneself without a compelling reason and certainly not because of religious enthusiasm; for this reason it has rightly been assumed that the new Muslims mostly came from the lower classes of the respective indigenous pre-Islamic population.\(^1\) Anyone whom the Arabs really had need of, they left to his own conviction; qualified personnel of the administration, physicians, astrologers, for a long time – in Egypt over centuries – remained Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, even Manicheans.\(^2\) The great reservoir out of which the converts were drawn during the first decades of Islam were prisoners of war.\(^3\) They ended up in slavery and only as Muslims could they expect to be set free by their masters; setting free a slave was not simply an act of humanity but either atonement for a violation or a means to win access to Paradise. Later, farmers emigrating from the countryside made up an additional second large contingent.\(^4\)

The biographical sources only take note of the successful classes; naturally, as always, they were the exception. But the conditions for advancement were in fact unusually favourable. Becoming a prisoner of war and the

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2 Examples see below pp. 491 f. and 497 f.

3 Examples see below pp. 87 f. and 179.

4 On this P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses* 49 ff. and now in EI\(^2\) V1, 877 f. s. v. Mawla; also Cahen in: EI\(^2\) IV, 1031 s. v. Kharâdj; one should note that every convert became “a client” but not every client had to convert; above all, distinguished people who for whatever reason entered into a closer tie with an Arab tribe often remained in their old religion (cf. the examples in Crone 137, fn. 358).
client-relationship levelled out social differences that had been dominant in the society of the conquered; at least in this manner, from the beginning, Islam created equality. Whoever once succeeded in coming to one of the newly founded cities which arose in Iraq or was accepted into the army as this frequently happened in Syria and Iran, would quickly become literate and have the opportunity to make the most of the knowledge he brought with him from a superior culture. Sometimes, as in Iran for instance, the Arabs were in such a minority that they had no other choice but to secure for themselves the help and goodwill of their new Muslim brothers.\textsuperscript{5} Everywhere that “clients” appeared in large groups or in the majority they constantly came together beyond the confines of their tribe in the desire to break down the exclusivity of the Arabs in favour of a new Islamic solidarity. In this respect the future was now theirs because this was what the religion demanded; already the Prophet had taken the first steps to change the concept of clientele relations with a view to solidarity based on the faith – at the time, of course, only for the Arabs.\textsuperscript{6} So it happened that the clients in particular showed special interest in reflecting on religion and making religion the object of learning; once they had lost the ties to their old society, their identity was solely and exclusively based on Islam. Shaʿbī (d. after 100/719),\textsuperscript{7} a member of a South-Arabian tribe, was annoyed in his old age that “the have-nots” (ṣaʿāfiqa), “the lowest filth” (banū stihā, viz. ist al-dunyā) spread themselves about in his mosque and disturbed the peace with a lecture on law.\textsuperscript{8} Sometimes it seems as if Islam was invented by them.\textsuperscript{9}

Naturally, many an individual among them became rich. This did not come about over night; but one can observe how in the third generation at the latest so much money had been accumulated that people found the leisure to sit in the mosque and pursue learning.\textsuperscript{10} The wars of conquest had created an enormous economic space in which long-distance commerce could freely

\textsuperscript{5} On this Bulliet 53 ff.
\textsuperscript{6} These connections are treated by J. Juda, \emph{Die sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Aspekte der Mawālī in frühislamischer Zeit} (diss. Tübingen 1983), pp. 53 ff.; cf. also D. Pipes in: \emph{Slavery and Abolition} 1/1980/132 ff. and Lapidus, \emph{History} 48 ff. On the juridical situation now in detail P. Crone, \emph{Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law}, there especially pp. 36 ff. The position of clients in a pure Arab environment can still be observed today in the Yemen (cf. T. Gerholm, \emph{Market, Mosque and Mafraj} 140 ff., also 114 ff.; Crone, ibid. 44 ff.).
\textsuperscript{7} On him EI1 IV, 260 f.
\textsuperscript{8} IS VI, 175, ll. 3 ff. Also Fasawi II, 592, ll. 7 ff.; banū stihā is a variant. For an additional disparaging remark of Shaʿbī about mawālī who pursue learning (this time grammarians) cf. Mubarrad, \emph{Kāmil} 405, 7 ff.
\textsuperscript{9} On this cf. also the anecdote in Tawḥīdi, \emph{Baṣāʾir} 11, 414, last l. ff.
\textsuperscript{10} Examples see below p. 214 or Chpt. B 2.2.7.; also Spuler, \emph{Iran in frühislamischer Zeit} 141 f.