Outline Lecture Seven—The Abbasid Empire and Sectarian Divides within Islam

Key Question today:
1. How did the Abbasids’ cosmopolitan ambition as an imperial power reflect the need to accommodate the increasing diversity within the Islam?
2. What were the key sectarian splits in Islam and how did they evolve?
3. How were theological debates expressions of social, ethnic, and class tensions?

I) From Arab Kingdom to Islamic Empire
   a) Features of the Umayyad Caliphate
   b) Challenge from the East
      i) The impact of propaganda and social instigators
         (1) E.g. Abu Muslim, a Persian convert
   c) Who were the Abbasids?
      i) Founder of the Abbasid line, al-Mansur
      ii) Presented Abbasid line as a movement to restore the integrity of Islam
      iii) Using religion to gain legitimacy—Caesaropapism
   d) Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258)
      i) Changes brought about by Abbasids
         (1) Socially—Ended exclusive dominance of the Arab military aristocracy
         (2) Culturally—Shift center of gravity to the east, Persian heritage
            (a) Shift of capital from Damascus to Baghdad “Madinat al-Salam”
         (3) Politically—Centralized autocracy
            (a) Adoption of the Persian tradition of the “benevolent despot”
               (i) Al-Farabi on the role of the khalifa:
         (4) Militarily—Supported by professional soldiers
      ii) Overall, still relied on the foundations of Arabization and Islamization

II) The Many “Traditions” of Islam
   a) Speaking of Islam in the plural—i.e. diverse “currents” in the faith
      i) Class disparities, ethnic conflicts, and regional differences often found expression in religious terms
   b) The Kharijite Movement—“Egalitarian anarchists”
      i) Emphasis that leadership should be based on merit and piety, not lineage
      ii) An ideal khalifa’s ultimate responsibility was towards the umma
      iii) E.g. Zanj Slave Revolt in salt-flats of Basra 869-883
         (1) East African slaves led by Ali Ibn Muhammad, an Iranian agitator
   c) The Shi’ā Tradition
      i) Three defining events:
         (1) Opposition to the appointment of Abu-Bakr
         (2) Martyrdom of Al-Husayn
         (3) Treachery of the Abbasids
      ii) Shi’ā ideals
         (1) Rule as a model of piety and virtue
            (a) Found greater appeal among the fringe elements of society
         (2) Concept of a Mahdi
(a) E.g. “The Veiled One” Al-Muquanna 776-789

iii) Splits within the Shi’a
   (1) Mid-8th century debate over lineage of imams
      (a) Contention following the death of the 6th Imam, Ja’far in 765
      (b) Two sons—Musa and Isma’il
   (2) “Twelvers” awaiting the “Hidden Imam” in the line of Musa
   (3) “Isma’ilis” followed a “living and active imam” in the line of Isma’il

iv) Fatimid Caliphate 901-1094
   (1) Inspired by Isma’ili doctrine
   (2) New capital in 973 set up in al-Qahira (“The Victorious”)
   (3) Extent of Fatimid power

d) The Appeal of Sufism—from 10th century
   i) Reaction to the secularization of Islam and the caliphate
   ii) Anti-dogmatic Practice
   iii) Ascetic practice seeking mystical and ecstatic union with God
      (1) Through meditation, singing, poetry, and dancing
         (a) E.g. The Whirling Dhirvishes
         (b) Poetry—Sufi Mysticism of Jalal-al Din Rumi (1207-1273)

e) Conclusion: Legacy of Sectarianism in Islam