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Minorities

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This chapter treats both Muslim minorities under non-Muslim rule and non-Muslim minorities under Muslim rule. Due to the limitations of space, it includes only the most significant minorities.

Muslim Minorities under Non-Muslim Rule

The question of the majority-minority relationship has been relevant to Muslims since the emergence of Islam. Muslims began their history in Mecca as a minority persecuted by the polytheistic establishment of the city (610–30). This situation, however, did not last long. Following the conquests of the seventh century, the Muslims became an elite ruling over non-Muslim majorities in the vast expanses of the emerging empire. The process of conversion to Islam was much slower than the conquests themselves; scholars disagree on when Muslims became a majority in the Middle East and North Africa. It is clear that this transformation did not take place before the 11th century, but some argue that it did not occur until the beginning of the Mamluk period in the 13th century. In the Indian subcontinent, the Muslims never exceeded a quarter of the population, although various Muslim dynasties ruled substantial parts of India from the 13th to the 19th century. Historians of Indonesia—where Islam spread by slow penetration of traders and divines rather than by conquest—have not been able to chart demographic developments with great confidence, but Islamization apparently started there (probably in the 15th century) with the ruling elite so that Muslim rulers initially controlled a mainly non-Muslim population. It is not possible to say when exactly Muslims became a majority in Indonesia, which at the time of writing is the state with the largest Muslim population. Similar difficulties face the historians of sub-Saharan Africa. The coastal region of East Africa became a Muslim majority area between 1200 and 1500, while comparable development in West Africa differed from region to region. The Chinese Muslim minority developed during the Tang dynasty (618–907); its growth accelerated during the period of the Mongol invasions, and in 2006 it numbered 20 million, according to government estimates.