Eurasian Empires. This map depicts the political landscape of Europe, North Africa, and western Asia during the seventh century. These regions were unsettled after the fall of the western Roman Empire. The Iranian Plateau would remain stable for a few more decades under the Sasanian Empire, which had ruled there since the third century. The Iranian Plateau shared a border with the Byzantine Empire, which occupied much of the territory of the former eastern Roman Empire—Anatolia, Egypt, North Africa, and Greece—and small parts of the former western Roman Empire as well, which included parts of Italy and southern Spain. The Frankish Empire was a newcomer. Founded during the sixth century, it was the first political entity to attempt the reunification of the former western Roman Empire, although its reach was limited to territory in modern France and Germany.
The Origins of Islam. This map depicts the religious and political geography of Islam in its earliest decades. Islam began in the commercial crossroads of Arabia when the trader Muhammad experienced divine revelations, starting in 610. Muhammad’s followers spread Islam throughout the Arabian peninsula during his lifetime and during the reigns of his immediate successors, the “rightly guided caliphs,” who were both religious and political leaders. As this map reveals, the new religion coexisted with the venerable Byzantine, Visigothic, and Sasanian Empires and the rising Frankish Kingdom.
Islam after 656. During the seventh century, Islam became institutionalized as a religion and as a political force that sought to found a territorial empire. Umayyad Muslim armies conquered territory in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, which were former lands of the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires. The successor Abbasid Caliphate expanded Muslim dominion further, moving the capital to Baghdad with its Persian cultural heritage. From that central location, the caliphate embraced Hellenistic, Indian, and Chinese ideas. Islam expanded into the Iberian peninsula in Europe. Muslim and Frankish armies fought to a draw in France.
Christianity before Charlemagne. Christianity’s founder lived six centuries before Muhammad. However, in its first three hundred years, Christianity spread only to densely populated regions near Mediterranean and Black Sea ports and along navigable rivers. Between 300 and 600, both Catholic Christians (who spread north and west through the territory of the former western Roman Empire) and Orthodox Christians (who occupied the Byzantine or eastern Roman Empire) sponsored missionaries, churches, and monasteries that became centers of diffusion, as this map depicts. By the end of the eighth century, most of the people who lived in the territories depicted on this map were Christian.
Christianity and Charlemagne’s Empire. Charlemagne established an empire that in 814, as depicted on this map, extended far beyond the borders of the historical Frankish Kingdom to include all of the Italian peninsula and much of Germany. His empire was significant for political history, because it was the largest and most culturally diverse European polity to emerge after the fall of the western Roman Empire. More than that, it was important for the history of Christianity. Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the Catholic pope and spread religion and politics together. His empire helped to consolidate Christianity in western Europe.