

Exploring the Factors Behind Islam's Swift Expansion

Islam is one of three major world monotheistic religions. Judaism and Christianity eventually became world religions. Islam spread much more quickly. Many reasons can be cited for this including a political vacuum that helped Muslims gain control of the Middle East and parts of Europe. Islam also was flexible, making it welcoming to many people. Missionaries also spread the faith, helped by a separation of religious and secular powers.

Three Faiths: One Spread Rather Quickly

The [three major](#) monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Judaism and Christianity are now practiced worldwide. Both religions took centuries to establish and spread throughout the Middle East. And, later to the world at large.

What about [Islam](#)? Muhammed first was revealed the wisdom of the Quran in 610. His small band of followers was refugees in 622, controlled Mecca within a decade, and then the religion started to expand. Muslims quickly ruled over the Middle East and within a century gained control of Spain and was threatening Western Europe. The [Golden Age of Islam](#) had begun.

Spread as a Divine Plan

Muslims believe that Islam, which literally means "submission to the will of God," is a result of Allah (God) revealing himself and guiding his people, who followed his will.

Islam, therefore, spread quickly as part of a divine plan. Secular historians have their own reasons for explaining the spread of Islam. I will provide this perspective in this discussion.

Arab Tribes Unite

Islam developed from a combination of existing religious traditions in the Arabian Peninsula. Different beliefs, including polytheism (belief in many gods), Judaism, and Christianity, were practiced by various people in the region at the time.

Divided Arab tribes were united in part by Islam. Muhammed himself was a merchant and married to a wealthy widow. It is not too strange such a person turned out to be the founder of a new religion, including gaining the trust of his tribe, and spreading the faith.

Islam demanded faithful allegiance to one set of beliefs. "Jihad," a struggle of faith, was not only a personal religious duty. Jihad had a political dimension that encouraged the spreading of Islam into new lands. This helped give incentives and drive people to spread [the faith](#).

Military Expansion

Christianity was the major religion of the Byzantine Empire, which grew out of the eastern region of the old Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire was centered in modern-day Turkey. When Islam began, it was an important regional power, with control of Northern Africa.

The Byzantine Empire had a golden age in the sixth century under Emperor Justinian. It was in a weaker state during the rise of Islam. A united Arab force, helped by religious zeal, was able to quickly conquer Byzantine armies and fill in the power vacuum.

As Arab military control spread, the religion of Islam thrived as well. The religions of conquerors tend to do well. Also, the Muslims (see more below) were open-minded. If a region agreed to respect Muslim authorities and pay taxes, it could live in peace.

And, Muslims were willing to work with them to establish a growing empire. Non-Muslims were used to help run things. Muslims continued to spread their power into Spain and Portugal, the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the Fifth Century. Control was more divided and open for conquest. Muslims took advantage and their religion spread along with their secular power.

Missionary Zeal

Some religions are insular. They are not very concerned about converting people. Christianity spread by converting people. Islam did as well.

Muslims believe Allah revealed wondrous truths to Muhammed, who was told to "recite" and spread God's message. Missionaries spread Allah's message. Schools grew up to teach and debate Islam. Education and learning were honored. For instance, though some math students might not approve, the word "[algebra](#)" reflects its Arab origins.

[Sumbul Ali-Karamali](#) and others argue Islam benefited from an openness to diversity and personal examination of faith. There was a separation of faith and secular law. This allowed missionaries, for instance, to focus on spiritual matters without secular authorities interfering.

[Sufism](#) (perhaps from the "wool" garments Sufis wore) played an important part in these missionary efforts over the centuries. They had many mystical experiences, which still fascinate some people (like Madonna) today. It also has wondrous poetry and literature.

Early Islam Included Flexibility

Islam required a basic floor of religious belief in one God (monotheism). Nonetheless, within this basic range, a certain freedom of religion was honored. Christians and Jews, for instance, were allowed to practice their faith as long as they supported Islamic governments.

Christianity worldwide is practiced in a variety of ways. Mexican Catholicism and New England Protestantism differ while sharing certain basic Christian beliefs.

Islam is the same. It adapted to local customs. New political dynasties could practice their own form of Islam. Muslims often married into powerful families of non-Muslims, who eventually started to practice Islam. Political power ebbs and flows. A form of Islam, however, remained.

Consider the spread of the [Mongol Empire](#), starting with the great Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan worshiped a form of polytheism. But, the Mongols were practical when it came to religion. They adapted to the local beliefs, including when they conquered Arab lands.

Islam could be the religion of the leaders of the political dynasties in control while other religions and religious beliefs continued to be practiced. Many communities adopted aspects of Islamic culture while keeping their own religious beliefs. Islam continued to spread.

Can Islam Thrive Today?

Islam eventually spread to the New World. Slaves from Africa often were Muslim.

Islam for some became an alternative to a religion (Christianity) deemed to be controlled by whites. Malcolm X in the 1950s and 1960s was an American missionary of the faith.

Some Muslims believe it is unfortunate that Islam seems to have worldwide devolved. [They argue](#) that the golden age of Islam offered a more tolerant age that helps explain why the religion once spread so quickly.

Islam in some places did not fully adapt to modern times. In some cases, including after the Islamic Revolution, the freedom of the past became an unjust theocracy. Islam in those countries might still be popular for a variety of reasons but often in a troublesome form.

History perhaps provides some lessons on how Islam can thrive, positively too, today.