

Islam is the second largest of the religious traditions in the world. It has more than one billion followers. It is often viewed as a religious tradition which originated in the seventh century for protesting the injustice in Arabia. Then, it grew to be a religion covering three continents just before the colonial expansion by the Western people.

Nowadays, this religion is seen as inconsistent and complicated. Moreover, most of the people misunderstand it.

Millions of people think that Islam is a violent religion. The reasons for this idea could be the prohibitions against women, enslaving, hurting and killing innocent people. Also, because of the fact that the culprits of the terrorist attacks in the world are mostly Muslim, people become more inclined to think that Islam is violent.

Christian colonials had the same stereotypes about Muslims and they are actually starter of this thinking. Nowadays, non-Muslim people are scared of and filled with hate towards them.

Then, are you ready to break some stereotypes? With this summary, you will see how can a faith inspire the people of literature, religion, army, science and the others in their pursuit of creating an equal society over 1.500 years.

## Islam's first and only aim in this world is to create a fair society.

Let's identify the religion. It is the set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas, and practices that define the relations between human being and sacred or divinity. In religions mostly there is a revelation based on the exemplary history of a nation, of a prophet or a wise man who taught an ideal of life. Besides their history, there is also an external history in which they dealt with the ruling powers.

Religions are in a world-wide conflict to live and reach wider communities. According to them, this conflict is trying to break their divine ideal.

For instance, in Christianity, Jesus told his followers that the Kingdom of God is an analogy of personal salvation, not a prototype for a brand new society in the world.

In Hinduism, a war is justified when it is fought to uphold Dharma or protect the weak and the innocent.

Take the Enlightenment Era, even though the scholars wanted to separate the church and state, they didn't want to annihilate from public life. They thought that faith is a personal matter and it should be protected from politics and everyday conflicts.

Moreover, every religion is shaped by its time. Because people start to believe in religions since they are not happy about the justice of that time.

In order to reach transcendence, one should learn to see the sacred in the world. Author has a term for this one and that is "earthing". Someone can reach to the absolute truth with real objects. There are lots of statues, temples, shrines, rocks, drawings, images and texts that can be the best examples for this term. These worldly symbols lead to the believers in their quest of reaching the divine.

Christianity and Hinduism have lots of religious icons. Christians had painted Jesus Christ, Mary, and other saints. In Hinduism, everything connected with the Hindu icon has a symbolic meaning - the posture, gestures, ornaments, number of arms, weapons, vehicle, consorts, and associate deities. Yet, in Islam, there are no religious icons.

Muslims really care about the actions of Muslims in this world. Basically, being historic means experiencing divinity in Islam. Thereby, this religion is purely political. One and only aim is to reach justice in society and accomplishing a political action is a kind of religious ceremony that gives inner grace.

That said, to prevent misunderstanding, one has to take internal and external histories into consideration. Trying to understand it without one, will only make you miss the points.

**In the seventh century Arab society, Muhammad rescued the ones in religious crisis with his message.**

Islam's prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in Saudi Arabia in 570. He was a deeply spiritual man. One night in 610, he was meditating in a cave on the mountain when he was

visited by the angel Gabriel who ordered him to recite. Once Jibreel mentioned the name of Allah, Muhammad began to recite words which he came to believe were the words of God. With this, Arab society found the answer to their religious crisis.

Muhammad is from the Quraysh tribe who were the power controller of the trade in the Arabian Peninsula. Thus, they had become remarkably rich. Then, Meccan elite took over the trade and their way of control was not appealing as it is used to be. There was no social justice and no caring for the weak and poor which was seen as a sacred duty.

Also, Arabs had religious discomforts. They believed that Christians and Jews are also worshipping Allah – the God in Arabic –. However, their own prophet had never been sent, unlike the other religions. So, Arabs started to wonder if they are not in God's plans and that's why the wars and blood vengeance are never-ending.

Muhammad thought that he had a solution for these discomforts, but he was reluctant to speak about it publicly, so, only his wife and her Christian cousin knew about it. He eventually convinced to speak and in 612 he preached Islam publicly.

It was simple and easy. The more Quraysh became wealthy the more they became unfair and conceited. Allah wants humans to treat each other with modesty and mercy. Muhammad warned them, if they don't get their act together, Allah would burn them.

In the way of creating the just society, early Muslims followed the ritual of paying zakat – to purify in Arabic –. By recognizing that one's wealth is a gift from Allah and giving away a portion of it to others, a Muslim purifies the rest of his or her wealth from greed and miserliness. Also, they perform salat to purify themselves of pride by prostrating to Allah.

At first, Islam's easiness and caring the justice too much gave an inconsiderable amount of followers. Because there were lots of people that didn't care about his message. In the next chapter, we will see how Mecca's ruling class will react to this new movement and its followers. Spoiler alert: The reaction is no good.

**The Meccan Elite were the biggest opposer of Islam as it started to expand.**

Since Muhammad's followers increased day by day, the Meccan elite noticed Islam. They did not see this group as a big deal and not only they did not recognize Muhammad as a prophet but also called him an imposter.

Then, the tables turned around 616. Meccan elite and Muslims came face to face. Muslims were against the Meccan elite's violent actions and elites were against Muhammad's search of a political position.

Muslims had similarities with Christians and Jews, in the means of monotheism. All of them were turning their faces to Jerusalem while they were praying. Also, the Last Judgment – which is the last day of the world when God will judge everyone who has died and decide whether they will go to Heaven or Hell – had the same meaning for all 3 of the religions.

However, the Meccan Elite were the followers of Paganism. In the Last Judgment, the ones who will be sent to Hell are the greedy and unmerciful ones. Thus, the Meccan Elite got anxious.

Also, Muhammad's claiming about the message came from Allah and having good relations with the Meccan lower class made Meccan elite irritated. Normally, in the Quran, Muhammad described as a warner, and he has no political role. Yet, the elite did not believe this and they thought he was deceiving people not to show his real intentions.

Abu al-Hakam was a member of the Quraysh and the elite's "chief". Since he tortured hundreds of Muslims, people started to call him Abu Jahl – "the father of ignorance" – which is mentioned in the Quran.

Abu al-Hakam tried to block the spreading of Islam. He started a boycott in which nobody would speak, trade or marry with Muslims. Because of this boycott, Muslim people had lots of difficulties. They couldn't sell or buy any foods, moreover, they suffered famine in which Muhammad's wife Khadija died. Slaves, who started to believe Islam, were tortured and left for dead.

After Muhammad's biggest supporter and protector – his uncle Abu Talib – died in 619, the elite became more dangerous than before. Because the fact that Muhammad doesn't have a

protector now means that he could be killed and the doer gets away with it. Thereby, something had to be done about it.

After Muhammad escaped from the assassination attempts, he moved to Yathrib – now known as Medina – and gained lots of followers. Then, he signed a pact with the tribes which has great importance in the spread of Islam.

## In the war against Mecca, Muhammad and his followers became the first Islamic community in Medina.

There was fighting in Yathrib (Medina) mainly involving its Arab and Jewish inhabitants for around a hundred years before 620. A delegation from Yathrib invited Muhammad as a neutral outsider to serve as the arbitrator for the entire community.

When Muhammad accept the offer from Yathrib, the Islamic era started. In 622, Muhammad and his followers started to migration from Mecca to Yathrib – known as the Hijrah or “migration” –. It was a revolutionary move. Nobody had attempted to leave their tribe in Arabia before.

Arab communities were typically governed by kinship. In other words, the political ideology of the Arabs centered around tribal affiliations and blood-relational ties. Then, Muslims established the first Islamic community – ummah – in Yathrib.

There were non-believers of Islam, too. More than two religions were believed in this community and nobody was attacking others because of their religion. Because tribes were banned from attacking one other in the new constitution. It was all about respecting each other. Modest and respectful life made Yathrib was known as al-Medina – “the city”– providing the ideal Islamic society.

Later on, a conflict started once again between Muslims and Meccans. The reason was the non-Muslim Medinans’ not being able to support Muslims permanently. Muslims started to steal goods from the tribes around which is an old Arabian practice known as “ghazu”. Since the Meccans were still the richest, Muslims targeted their caravans.

In March 624, Muhammad and his followers raided the largest Meccan caravan. Then, heads of the caravan sent a colossal army against Muslims. Even though Muslims were outnumbered, they defeated the Meccans. It was the first fight between Mecca and Medina.

In 625, Meccans defeated Muhammad and his followers at the Battle of Uhud, but in 627, at the Battle of Trench, they were defeated with 10,000 men against 3,000 Muslims.

Muslims' tactical operations had persuaded a number of Bedouin tribes to join their cause. Due to the surprising victories, they thought that God was on his side and started to believe in Islam.

Muhammad assembled an army of about 10,000 people in Medina and marched on Mecca. The Quraysh surrendered without putting up a fuss at the end of 629. Muhammad destroyed the pagan idols at the Kaaba and dedicated the structure to Allah.

It was an amazing victory that gained lots of followers to Islam. Not attacking other religions provided a sense of peace and ended hundreds of years of violence in the country.

## After Muhammad died, Muslims raided communities outside Arabia and expanded their empire.

After Muhammad united Arabia in one religion, he died in 632. Even though Muslims were together, they dealt with an extremely challenging issue. Muhammad had a divine connection, but his successors had not any divine connection. They were ordinary humans and weren't reliable in terms of ruling as Muhammad.

Upon the death of Muhammad, many Muslims moved from Medina. The ruling class debated on who should be the successor of him to run Muslim affairs. They finally pledge loyalty to Abu Bakr. Thereby, Rashidun Caliphate – Rightly Guided Rulers – Period started.

Abu Bakr, the first caliph, encountered an uprising during his reign (632-634). For the first time, the unity of Islam faced an uprising. Since Muhammad died, some tribes claimed that they were not going to obey the policy of the not attacking other, anymore. Fortunately, Bakr overcame the rebellion in the Wars of Ridda, also known as the Wars of Apostasy.

Abu Bakr's heirs Umar and Uthman tried to find better ways to keep Arabia in unity. In the raids of Quraysh and other tribes, resources had been allocated to the Muslim tribes. However, by raiding their own people, Muslims were violating the idea of not attacking one another. Thus, they decided to raid non-Muslims living outside of Arabia. They succeeded it.

Islamic Empire expanded dramatically under the leadership of Umar and Uthman. Modern-day South East Tunisia, most of Egypt, half of Afghanistan, and South West Pakistan were all brought under the Islamic rule.

Some say: "Islam is the religion of the sword." and recently, by posing new terms, it is called that "Islam is the religion of terrorism and violence.". However, Islam empire wouldn't expand that much, if it were ruled in a different way.

Muslims have a healthy respect for honest, reasoned dissensus within the Islamic tradition. Medieval Muslim jurists developed an Islamic bill of rights meant to ensure state protection of individual life, religion, intellect, property, and personal dignity.

Non-Muslims such as Jews and Christians had specific rights in the Muslim community. Above all, they had the right to practice their religion upon payment of a poll-tax to the Islamic state and were consequently freed from serving in the military.

The Quran after all counsels, "There is no compulsion in religion."

With the help of this policy, the Islam Empire expanded. In fact, lots of Christians were happy about the Muslim rulers, due to the fact that they got fed up being harassed by the Byzantine rulers and the church. Moreover, non-Muslims had the right to move up to the social ladder. Since Muslims were not experienced in ruling an empire, they got help from non-Muslims.

**As opposition to rulers who placed empire before faith, the Shariah – Islam's law – came about.**

The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) and the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) continued the dynasty of The “Rightly Guided Rulers”. The two dynasties strengthen the empire but they had difficulties running the empire and ignored some of the early Islamic values.

Since, ruling this empire required centralized governance and absolute monarchy, they failed about some issues. Thereby, these issues did not fit to the Quran’s equalism ideas and Arab’s long-known failure on the ruling. Moreover, with the absolute monarchy, a ruling class arose which doesn’t fit the Islamic ideals.

Along with the Umayyad ruler Muawiya's (661-680) choosing his son Yazid as his successor, it was certain that Islamic principles were corrupting. Normally, most Muslims agreed that ruler at that moment can’t choose his successor, someone who is the closest to the prophet should be the successor.

In this case, the closest person was Muhammad’s grandson, Husain. To make it right, Husain and his allies went to the Yazid’s place, but Umayyad troops killed them viciously.

Another reason interrupting the Islamic principles was the economic problems. Even though Umar is liked by the Muslims, some of his actions were destructing. Non-Muslims were paying a special poll tax, but when they converted to Islam, which is good for the community, their liability to pay taxes ended. Thus, the empire’s treasure started to drain more than ever.

Fortunately, this issue was tried to be fixed by some autocrats like Hisham I (724-743), but the fixation was not appropriate for Islam principles, either.

Hence, the law of Islam, “Shariah” gained more followers than before. According to some scholars, ruling autocrats not only were not paying attention to Islam for themselves but also were not teaching the fundamentals to the ordinary people. Because, as I mentioned before, they were recent Muslims who had just started to take part in the administration.

Due to the lack of knowledge on Islam, schools were founded to teach the doctrines of Islam to Muslims. This led to the emergence of a new class: – ulama – which can be translated into English as “the learned ones” or we can simply say “scholar class”.

Transmission of knowledge no longer took place exclusively orally, but also through books. So, ulama started to write down the prophetic traditions (hadīths) and by the end of the ninth century, they had specialized in the study of hadīth literature. For instance, Muwatta (The Beaten Path), was the earliest written collection of hadith comprising the subjects of Islamic law, by Malik ibn Anas (711-795).

The Caliph of the time requested Imām Mālik to produce a book to be a guide to true Islam. He was asked to write about every issue in different chapters and his work had to exemplify the following principle of the Prophet: “The best issues are those which are balanced.”

So, he compiled Muwaṭṭaʾ, targeting to remove the juristic differences between the scholars. He emphasized that every Muslim had a responsibility to obey Allah and no ecclesiastics business should interfere.

## With the less centralized ruling, Islam stepped into the glory days.

After the eighth century, the empire’s power gradually decreasing. The caliph was at the top of the empire, but generally, it was symbolic. Since the centralization in the ruling was no longer exists, Muslims were worrying about the loss of power. Yet, they were worrying in vain, glory days for Islam was coming.

Owing to the segregated regions, glory days started. Because each region had their own dynasties, rulers and judicial systems. For instance, Samanids ruled Iran (874-999), Fatimids established a North African and Middle Eastern dynasty in 909 and it fell in 1171. Also, al-Andalus, which is a Spanish dynasty, lasted from 912 to 1085.

In these dynasties, people place special emphasis on learning.

In Fatimid Cairo, in which one of the most important Islamic universities in the world Al-Azhar University (975) is located, theology and philosophy studies developed.

Samanid Bukhara, a city in Uzbekistan now, granted Ibn Sina (980-1037) – known as Avicenna in the West – who is a polymath regarded as one of the most significant physicians, astronomers, thinkers and writers of the Islamic Golden Age.

In these new dynasties, the ruling class didn't care about the lives of the inhabitants. Arts and learning were given great importance. Yet, more importance was given to the military and judicial systems. So, the ulama class became the religion guide for the people. For the purpose of teaching Islamic sciences, they built "madrasahs".

In madrasahs, Muslims learned about the works of thinkers like the Persian Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) who is one of the greatest Islamic jurists, theologians, and mystical thinkers. Their ideas were acknowledged by the Muslims and spread across to Islamic world. Books and scholars took the most important role in its spreading.

They helped to unify Islam society in one place again. Increasingly, Muslims were not identified with their empires, but they were identified as a transnational community, "Dar al Islam" – house of Islam –.

## The Islamic world was colonized with the European Golden Age in the eighteenth century.

In the tenth century, Islamic countries lived in the golden age. Muslims developed themselves in art and science. Because of the vast areas, Arabic learned by millions of people.

On the contrary, European countries were not flourishing. After the thirteenth century, Europe reached the Islamic countries' level. In the fifteenth century, they came a long way, and in the seventeenth century, they defeated the Islamic world.

But, how come do they left the Islamic world in the dust? As you know, Europe went through big changes in social life, economics, and politics. Simply put, the Industrial Revolution occurred. Technological developments and food investments were seen. Moreover, they invested so much that, they started to outproduce their resources. Considering, their overtake was expected.

Europeans stopped believing in the past or the heavens above. From now on, the slogan was development. Owing to the increase in educated people, the pursuit of democracy started. People became more secular than before and religious differences became more apparent.

Not only Europe, but also the whole world was changed completely along with the Industrial Revolution. European countries started to colonize non-Europeans, in the need of reaching overseas for the markets, raw materials, and other supplies.

From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (the 1750s) to the 1850s, most of the Muslim countries were colonized by the Europeans. Britain got India in the 1790s by ruining the business in local areas and interfering daily life. France with Napoleon obtained Egypt in 1798. Afterward, most of the non-European countries in the Middle East and Central Asia conquered by Europeans.

## Muslims worried about their religion and modernism for a very long time.

Islamic countries couldn't pull the colonization off. Colonizers interfered their economic, social and cultural life. However, there was something that occupies their mind most. In the Quran, those who obey Allah would be successful and nothing would harm them. Yet, they were being invaded. So, how come these things happen to believers?

First of all, Muslims couldn't sustain their religion. They became westernized when they were being colonized by Europeans. Rulers followed modernization policies. Jamal al-Din (1838–1897) is regarded as one of the pioneers of Islamic modernism. He believed that Islam was compatible with science and reason.

Jamal al-Din had a deep impact on the Islamic world. His project of Islamic modernism was based on the idea of finding a *modus vivendi* between traditional Islamic culture and the philosophical and scientific challenges of the modern West.

Jamal al-Din's call for the independence of individual Muslim nations was a key factor in the development of "Islamic nationalism," and influenced such Muslim figures as Muhammad Iqbal, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Abu'l Kalam Azad in the Indian subcontinent.

In the twentieth-century, modernization policies still were being seen. For instance, Atatürk (1881-1938) from Turkey, Muhammad Reza Shah (1919-1980) from Iran, and Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) from Iraq ruled their countries without Islam's principles.

Separation of religion and politics was not familiar to the Muslims. Moreover, this policy was condemned to fail.

According to Jamal al-Din not only Europeans ruined Muslims' traditions, but also forced them to follow Western traditions as if their own. He thinks that Muslims could choose to create modernity in their own religion if they had wanted. Since their principles are secular, democratic and national, imitating them was in vain.

These principles were mismatching with Islam's ideals. For instance, democracy. There's no democracy in Islam. They chose the successor system. When the ruler dies, the ruler's closest relative comes to the throne. Remember the Hasan's rebellion, against Yazid? He was killed mercilessly in the seek of his right to be the ruler.

How about nationalism? We know that Muslims feel like they are part of the big community – Islamic ummah –, rather than they think of themselves from different nations. Besides, millions of Muslims live in the countries which were colonized by the Europeans. Therefore, they would have difficulties to identify themselves from those nations.

**Not only Islam is a fundamentalist community, but also modern society is.**

Mostly, fundamentalism is seen as unique to Islamic societies. Muslim fundamentalists are described as the obsessive antagonists of non-Muslims. But in reality, every religion is a part of fundamentalism, surprisingly.

By disillusioning modern communities, they come to exist anywhere. The important factor here is the urge when a believer feels that his/her values under attack. Hence, fundamentalism is not only unique to Islam.

Fundamentalism as a movement arose in the United States, starting among conservative Presbyterian theologians in the late 19th century. It soon spread to conservatives among the Baptists and others around 1910 to 1920. The movement's purpose was to reaffirm key theological tenets and defend them against the challenges of liberal theology and criticism.

They repeatedly wish that they could go back to the “golden age”. However, their actions don't tell the same thing in means of conservatism.

For instance, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who was an Egyptian author, educator, Islamic theorist, and a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, was interested in Western society. Then, he was sent to prison and his ideas changed. He argued that modernists and Muslims couldn't get along well in the same community.

Pre-Islamic times was coined as “jahiliyyah” – ignorance – period by Muslims, thinking that Muhammad's message gave them a literacy, an awareness. Qutb claimed that all modernists are ignorant, and all ignorants even Muslims should be attacked. His followers obeyed to him and attacked Muslim leaders they thought as ignorant.

Qutbists, assassinated the most important contemporary enemy of the Muslims, the apostate “Pharaoh”, a clear reference to the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat (1918-1981).

Also, The Taliban in Afghanistan ignored Islamic principles, especially by being affected by Qutb. They are a movement of religious students (Talib) from the Pashtun areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan who were educated in traditional Islamic schools in Pakistan.

They did human trafficking, oppressing women, torturing other ethnics, massacring innocent people, and lots of inaccurate things that are incompatible with the principles of Islam. Absurdly, their wish was to going back to the time when Prophet was the leader and everything was safe and sound.

## Islam: A Short History by Karen Armstrong Book Review

Islam is purely political no matter what they say. Other religions' believers struggle for the next world, but Muslims try to build a just society in this world. So, they tread in Muhammad's footsteps. However, their purpose to create a just society couldn't last to the modern age. When they were colonized by Europeans, they couldn't figure out why God didn't protect them. From that time, they tried to identify their religion under the thumb of modernism as chauvinist, secular and rife with colonialism.

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