All Eyes Turn to Mecca

Rise of Islam – 600 > 800

Misunderstandings

Growing up in America in the late twentieth century, my generation learned little about Muslims. Sure, we heard about some conflicts over oil in the Middle East. We knew about a few athletes who had changed their names (basketball great Lou Alcindor became Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Cassius Clay is better known to the world as Muhammad Ali). And when Disney’s Aladdin came out, we thought maybe those people “over there” once lived in palaces and had a thing for carpets and lamps. But if you’d asked the 18-year-old version of me to tell you the difference between Iraq and Iran or even which countries had the most Muslims in the world (Indonesia #1, India #2), I would have drawn a complete blank.

Then 9/11 hit and no one could ever again claim to not have an opinion about Muslims. And because for the majority of Americans, 9/11 was the first time they were introduced to Muslims, this attack became their immediate, and only, connection. The math seemed simple. Terrorists had attacked America. The terrorists were all Muslim. Muslims therefore must be terrorists. In addition to this flawed little bit of deductive reasoning, Americans also then sucked in stories of how these terrorists believed in this thing called a “jihad” where each of them automatically went to paradise if they died killing infidels. So, again, using some flawed logic, Islam must be a religion of killing. This was what many of us believed. This was what we were being shown, and most of us never ventured to explore the topic any further.

In the decade since, some have attempted to move beyond these initial perceptions and find out more about the fastest growing religion in the world, a religion that claims more than 1.5 billion adherents, a religion that, by the end of the 21st century, will pass Christianity as the most practiced religion on the planet. We’ve learned that to claim all Muslims are terrorists is as asinine as claiming all Christians are members of the KKK. We’ve learned that to claim all Muslims share the views of Osama bin Laden is akin to claiming all Christians shared the views of Adolph Hitler.

But conflict and misunderstanding still plague Christian-Muslim relations, threatening to pull the two cultures apart. Before these severed relations can be repaired, it would help if the world knew the stories of Islam’s early days as well as they know the stories of Jesus Christ as a baby in a manger, walking with his twelve disciples and dying on the cross for the world’s sins.

Islam: The Beginning

To understand Muslims, the starting points are always one man and one place. Muhammad and Mecca. In the sixth century AD, while Europe was settling into the Dark Ages where it would remain for centuries, in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, a new faith sprung from the sands of one of the most desolate places on earth. Today known as Saudi Arabia, this region is one of the most inhospitable ecosystems on Earth.

Life in Arabia

Because of lack of fresh water, intense heat, minimal vegetation and unprotected deserts, the cities that popped up elsewhere in the Near East (along the Nile, in Mesopotamia and throughout the Levant) could never survive in the Arabian Peninsula. The city-states that popped up did so because of their position as bridges between the great cultures of the ancient world. But most people didn’t live in the cities. They lived in the desert. These men and women of the desert became traders. They became nomads. They became the Bedouins. Like the horse peoples of the steppe, the Bedouins led transient lives, constantly moving from one location to the next. Some settled in small trading towns that built up around oases in the desert, some became shepherds of cows or sheep or goats. But the majority of men in the area remained nomads, people of the land, living by a code of kinship under which all disputes were settled and all interactions were defined. A
prominent saying describing these people was: “Me against my brother, my brothers and I against my cousins, then my cousins and I against strangers.” This clan system defined where everyone stood. Unlike the caste system of India where priests and warriors stood at the top, or like Europe where lords demanded allegiance from vassals or even like China where the scholars commanded unquestioned reverence, in the Arabian peninsula of the 6th century, nomadic traders ruled the land and those who settled in towns were seen as soft and inferior.

Muhammad
This was the world Muhammad entered in 570 AD Born in Mecca into the relatively affluent Hashimite clan of the Quraysh tribe, Muhammad was orphaned at the age of six and then raised by his merchant uncle Abu Talib. Riding alongside his uncle, Muhammad travelled throughout the Near East, reaching as far north as Syria. In the 6th century, Mecca was the most prominent trading center in the region. Because of its tolerance of all religions and its forbiddance of violence within a twenty-mile perimeter, Mecca became the prime trading (and pilgrimage) destination. Its most holy site, a cube called the Kaaba (Arabic for “the cube”), housed 360 of the region’s deities behind its 40-foot high stone walls. It also housed the mythical “black stone,” seen by some as a gift from the heavens (seen by others as a meteorite). Aside from these worshipped relics, Mecca also permitted the practice of the two most-practiced monotheistic faiths of the time – Judaism and Christianity. Whether believing in one of the hundreds of pagan gods that watched over individual tribes or believing in Judaism or Christianity, almost all Arabs believed in the god Allah (Arabic for “The God”). Muhammad knew the teachings and the traditions of most of these faiths, both because of his experience trading throughout the region, and also because his family (the Quraysh tribe) was charged with protecting the Kaaba.

In his early twenties, with his reputation as an honest, competent merchant starting to spread amongst the clans, Muhammad was hired by Khadijah, the female owner of the most profitable caravan business in all of Mecca. At the age of 40, Khadijah had ignored the advances of many would-be suitors, instead focusing on furthering her father’s business and compassionately offering assistance to the needy in her community. However, in the year 595, impressed by the character of Muhammad, Khadijah proposed marriage, and, although she was fifteen years his elder, they wed and their 25 year marriage played a critical role in the early years of the Islamic faith.

Frustrated by the continual squabbling amongst the tribes and the faltering morality of the world around him, in the year 610, during the feasting month of Ramadan, Muhammad retreated to the nearby mountains and meditated in one of the caves. Muslims believe that one night, while deep in meditation, Muhammad was startled by a voice that demanded, “Proclaim!” Not knowing what to make of this command, confused and bewildered, Muhammad returned to his wife. Although Khadijah believed the message came from the “one and only god,” Muhammad spent the next three years traveling the deserts seeking truth for himself. But the messages from Gabriel, the one true god's messenger, stopped coming.

However, after three years, Gabriel reappeared and from this moment, the words of Allah flowed through Muhammad, who recorded this Message in the Quran. Muhammad shared that faith in Allah was the only path to Paradise. All other pagan gods were lies. Khadijah became the first convert to this new faith, and gradually Muhammad’s family likewise began accepting this message. Many were drawn to this new faith’s promise of Paradise; others embraced the strict behavioral expectations that scorned the gluttonous habits of the rising merchant classes. With these messages of hope and order, coupled with Muhammad’s gifted oratorical skills he had perfected through decades of storytelling while on the caravan routes across Arabia, this new faith of Islam (“submission”) increasingly became a threat to the leaders of Mecca.

In 620, the angel Gabriel again visited Muhammad, but this time he was given a winged creature that he flew to Jerusalem. There, he flew above the holy land, eventually transcending our human world, meeting the other prophets – Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus – and then finally speaking with God. It was at this point that Muhammad truly realized he was God’s messenger.
At first, the Umayyad leaders of Mecca tolerated what they perceived as merely the ramblings of a lone man; but when Muhammad claimed he was a prophet and started degrading the pagan faiths of the vast majority of the Meccan pilgrims, the town elders realized this man and his constant criticism of other faiths were becoming bad for business. The Umayyad family had created a successful little trading hub, but if word started to spread that all faiths were no longer tolerated and protected, traders and religious wanderers might head elsewhere. These elders agreed that one night they would enter Muhammad’s home would stab him, dispersing blame amongst the whole group. Yet, when they entered his home to do the deed, Muhammad had already escaped and was miles up the road, on his way to his new home – Yathrib.

This escape in the night is known as “the Flight of Muhammad,” and it was this journey in 622 where the Kingdom of Islam was born.

Upon arriving in Yathrib, an oasis town fraught with its own conflicts between the rival Jewish clans and pagan merchants, dozens of villagers came to Muhammad (whose message and challenge to the Umayyad leaders had gained him a fair bit of regional notoriety), offering their homes. Muhammad declined, instead choosing his faithful camel, Qaswa, to decide where to settle. After wandering through town, the camel eventually came to rest, and this was where Muhammad decided to build his home and the first mosque to Allah. Yathrib was renamed Medina (“the home of the prophet”). Muhammad then stepped in and settled conflicts between the city’s clans. From here, he gained more converts and began financing and building the army he knew he would one day need to fight his assassins back in Mecca.

Muhammad’s method of gaining money wasn’t exactly noble. His forces stopped all the pagan caravans trying to enter Mecca and relieved them of their wealth. This form of desert piracy was common in the day, and was essential to secure the resources needed to conquer Mecca. Within a few years, Muhammad had gone from being a successful merchant to a prophet, a politician, a trusted judge and a feared military leader. Compare these years to those of the founders of the other dominant faiths of the world, and you can see why historians recognize Muhammad as the most influential man in the history of the civilizations. Can you imagine seeing pacifists Buddha or Jesus heading an army into battle? Blasphemy! Yet for Muhammad, he was never just a religious leader. In his world of tribal conflicts and continual strife, creating a formidable military force was the only way he could ensure the spread of his faith.

This formidable force finally met the forces of Mecca at the Battle of Badr. With the religious devotion of his followers and his keen military strategy, Muhammad easily defeated the soldiers of Mecca. When his men descended to carve up those who had surrendered, Muhammad stepped in and demonstrated one reason why his faith would continue to grow in subsequent decades. He stopped their swords, claiming our enemies today will each of them be our brothers in faith tomorrow. His practical benevolence and his persuasive message continued to attract adherents and in 630 CE, with over 10,000 armed zealots in support, Muhammad entered Mecca and destroyed the idols of Kaaba, declaring once and for all that only one god – Allah – would be allowed within the city’s borders. Muhammad’s reign over Mecca proved short-lived. He died less than two years later.

But the imposing allure of Islam would not cease with his passing. Within a hundred years of his death, the army of Islam had created an empire stretching further than any yet known to man, stretching from the Indian subcontinent to northern Africa to Western Europe to the borders of Byzantium. What took the Persian and Roman empires centuries to accomplish, the Muslims conquered in decades.

Why so fast? Was it because no other formidable foe stood in their way? Who could stop any organized military in the region? The Byzantines? The Persians? The barbarians of Europe secluded in their fiefdoms? No, no and no. As the Arab raids of nonbeliever caravans continued deeper into foreign lands, they had to start wondering, “Ummm...does anyone ever plan on stopping us?” But as each excursion went unpunished, the
armies grew larger and bolder. Some conquered peoples converted to Islam, simply for the opportunity to partake in the plunder. Other regions actually welcomed the Arabs, as their rule promised more tolerance and cheaper taxes than their previous sovereign. Why would the Egyptians want to serve the Byzantines when they could bow to the Muslims for half the cost? Some historians argue most conversions to Islam came under threat of the sword, but this makes little sense as in the early decades, Arabs maintained a policy of actually discouraging conversion for they only taxed those outside their faith. Another economic incentive was that the Arab merchants became the only trading game in town. Similar to today's world where it behooves any would-be entrepreneur to speak English or Chinese, in the 7th and 8th century, Arabic was the link to commercial expansion. If you wanted to buy the goods coming from the East, you better speak Arabic, and it would definitely help your cause if you believed in Islam. Yet others gravitated to this new faith because of its tenets of order and personal sacrifice. These selfless ideals made so much sense in a fragmented world where violence and disorder ruled the day.

Islam Beliefs

5 Pillars
Societies in disorder need rules. People crave order. Thus Jews have the Ten Commandments. Buddhists believe in the Eightfold Path. And Muslims follow the Five Pillars. The pillars are the non-negotiables of the Islamic faith.

First, all Muslims must praise Allah as the one and only God and trust Muhammad as his final messenger.

Second, they must pray five times a day. Originally these prayers were directed towards Jerusalem, but in 624 Muhammad declared Muslims would return to the roots of their faith, to the days of Abraham, and pray toward the building thought to have been once constructed by Abraham himself – the Kaaba. If ever you travel to a Muslim nation, you will see an arrow pointing to Mecca on the ceilings of all hotels. Most offices and buildings have also designated specific areas for their employees to recite their prayers.

Third, Muslims must make a charitable contribution (2.5% of their income). If a Muslim family doesn't have enough money, they can always pay with good deeds.

Fourth, to remind them of their reliance on Allah and make amends for past transgressions, Muslims must fast from dawn till dusk during the month of Ramadan.

And fifth, at some point in their life, Muslims must make the hajj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Some might believe this final requirement isn’t exactly fair in the 21st century. Requiring a trip to Arabia was one thing when the empire existed exclusively in the Middle East, but now that the religion spans six continents, it’s a lot more difficult to travel across the globe to Mecca. One might think, fewer and fewer are able to make the sacred pilgrimage. But that has not been the case. Every year travel agents and tour companies arrange these pilgrimages for faithful from every corner, with over 2.5 million people annually reaching Mecca.

Aside from these pillars, Muslims also believe they should keep their bodies pure, avoiding alcohol or any other stimulants. They also believe that once you hit adolescence your every action is recorded, to be used on Judgment Day to decide how you will spend your eternity.

Jihad & Burka
However, since 9/11, the two traits of Islam that have come under greatest scrutiny are the notions of jihad and burka worn by Muslim women. People wonder if jihad condones, if not encourages, the murder of non-Muslims, and people likewise wonder about the gender equality of a society that prevents women from showing their faces. The term jihad means “struggle” and it has a ton of interpretations. It can mean the struggle to maintain your faith in a secular world, or the struggle to remain pure or the struggle against enemies. So yes, for some, a jihad could be a life or death struggle against the evil West culminating in the justification for mass murder, but for 99.34% of Muslims, they have a slightly different definition. As for the
burka covering worn by women, the Quran does state that women should “extend their headcoverings...to not display their beauty except to their husbands [or other members of their family].” Yet, wearing conservative clothing was quite common to women of the Arabian peninsula long before the Quran, and, when you consider the long robes worn by Bedouin men, maybe the origin of the tradition of covering up says more about the harsh climate than it does about religious practice.

**Divisions & Conflict**
Across this harsh climate, the Arabic Muslim Empire spread relatively unstopped throughout the 7th century. By 635, just three years after Muhammad’s death, Damascus fell to the Muslims, and one year later it was Jerusalem’s turn. But the kingdom of Islam – Dar al Islam – would eventually be slowed, and in some cases defeated, and the first threat came from within.

One of the gaps in the Western understanding of Islam is the faulty belief that Muslims are a unified people, each condoning the actions of others. In reality, Islam is a severed faith. Like the Great Schism that separated the Church into Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and the later Protestant Reformation that threw Europe into centuries of religious conflict, the Muslims are too a divided people. Though many sects exist, the main division is between two groups – the Shiite and the Sunni – and their conflict stretches all the way back to the death of Muhammad. At that time, nobody knew who would take over his mantle as supreme caliph. It’s hard to replace a prophet.

Although Muhammad married eleven women, when he died in 632, no clear successor existed. The most logical choice, Muhammad’s cousin Ali was still too young. To make matters worse, the Umayyad family (remember that group of men that once tried to have Muhammad assassinated) claimed they were the most likely heirs. For two years after Muhammad’s death, his trusted advisor Abu Bakr stepped in, but when Abu Bakr died, the ascension of power issue resurfaced. When Ali came of age, he ruled as caliph during a five-year civil war over the throne, but he was assassinated while prostrate in prayer. His assassination signaled that a peaceful reconciliation would never be possible, and for the next 1500 years, these two sides have competed to be the accepted spiritual leaders of Islam. On one side were the Shi’a who believed only the descendants of Muhammad could be caliph, and on the other side were the Sunni who believed the most qualified candidate should be chosen. Basically it was Ali and his followers versus the Umayyad and their followers (just remember Shi’a has an “a” for Ali, and Sunni has a “u” for Umayyad). To this day the conflict continues with 85% of the world siding with the Sunni faith and about 13% being Shi’a. In 661, the Umayyad Sunnis took power from Ali, founding the Umayyad Caliphate. In a prudent move to prevent an inevitable reciprocal assassination attempt, Umayyad leaders relocated the capital of Islam to Damascus.

The Umayyad family ruled for centuries out of Damascus until another rival to the throne emerged – the Abbasid family. Disgusted by the opulence of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus (and wanting a little more of the riches for themselves), the Abbasid family created a rival army. After their army defeated the Umayyad forces, the Abbasid family returned the center of Islam to the site of where civilization began, along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates River, to Mesopotamia, to Baghdad.

Needing to assure themselves a peaceful reign, the Abbasids invited the Umayyad family to a “reconciliatory” dinner. But, instead of exchanging handshakes and singing campfire bonding songs, the royal guards wrapped the Umayyad family in carpets and then proceeded to spear the heck out of them. Only one Umayyad survived, Abdar Rahman I, the grandson of the former caliph. He fled across Africa and started a western Islamic capital in the region today called Spain, ruling what would become the most glorious city in all of Europe – Cordoba.
Islamic Golden Age
But it was back in Baghdad where the Islamic Empire reached its Golden Age. Yep, you read that correctly. The Golden Age of Baghdad. With the images that have come out of Baghdad due to the recent Iraqi War, many might have trouble envisioning Baghdad as a center of anything more than a violent hole of chaos. But again, you must put away your 21st century goggles and realize that for 200 years under the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad was the center of the world.

If you were a scholar, an inventor or a thinker living anytime between the 9th and 12th century, you wanted to be in Baghdad. Whether a Jew or a Christian, a Frank or a Mandarin, a member of the merchant class or a religious traveller, you were welcome in Baghdad. The Abbasid leaders realized quite quickly the scope of knowledge found across their commercial realm. Their trading of goods and faith connected the world's first truly global empire. Once they saw all that their kingdom generated, they desired to bring all of this learning into one place. It was useless having the world’s knowledge remaining unheard and unread in the desolate corners of their empire. Messengers brought back from the furthest corner every piece of learning ever produced. Each of these master works was then translated at the House of Wisdom into Arabic and permanently recorded. The Arab scholars perfected the great paper making strategies of the Chinese, publishing more books than ever before. While a cultured monastery in Europe might have had three to five volumes on parchment, and the Mandarins in China might have recorded the sum of all Eastern knowledge, on the streets of Baghdad you could find dozens of bookshops selling thousands of bound books outlining everything from Aristotle’s theories to the witticisms of Confucius. If not for these Muslims, the Classical learning of Greece and Rome would have been lost to the dust pile for all eternity, and the genius of the Middle Kingdom would have never made it west to Europe.

Arabic Achievements & Advancements
During this Islamic Golden Age, not only were ideas brought to one place and then translated for other regions to later discover, Baghdad fostered a culture of science and inquiry, advancing human knowledge to a whole new level. These Muslim scholars tossed out hundreds of advancements that are still prominent parts of our lives today.

They brought us the science of ophthalmology. Muslim doctors loved the human eye. They loved the physiology of it and they loved to dissect it. They produced theories as to how we actually see (images are actually flipped upside down and then interpreted by the optic nerve), and they even found ways to dig into the eyeball and remove cataracts.

They showed us that science and religion can work together in harmony. Yep, it was these first Muslim scholars who found no problem believing in one god while also questioning the secular and natural worlds.

They furthered our knowledge of astronomy. Muslim scientists looked to the skies and proposed theories for moon cycles, the rotation of the Earth on an axis, and also the theory that we revolve around the sun.

They established the notion of Medical Peer Review. Sometimes on the TV shows House, Grey's Anatomy, E.R. or even Scrubs, the doctors all come together and have to explain why they inadvertently killed someone. The Muslims were the first to employ this type of review. They could even sue doctors for malpractice.

They dabbled in Algebra, Trigonometry, Calculus, Geometry and the Arabic number system. Though they picked up most of these ideas from the Gupta Indians, if they’d never accumulated and advanced these theorems, Europeans might be still making tally marks in the dirt or counting with that annoying MCMLXXIII method the Romans found so useful. But alas, we have the Arabic numeral system 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 to make counting just a bit easier.

They perfected Arabesque Art. Because Muhammad and his followers outlawed the heretical depiction of humans or animals on religious buildings, a new type of art flourished using calligraphy and intricate geometric
shapes. No, they didn’t put together a pentagon, a triangle and a circle and call it art, but instead they manipulated the most complex patterns to decorate ceilings, walls and columns (think kaleidoscope). It’s hard to explain. Just do a Google search for Arabesque art. You’ll be impressed. Trust me.

And then they brought us household stuff that just makes life a lot more fun. They dabbled in chemistry, bringing us such lovely items as shampoo, bar soap, toothpaste and even that little brown cup of morning glory — coffee.

These monumental inventions (yes, I’m including soap) eventually fell into the hands of the Europeans in the twelfth century, helping inspire the region out of its Dark Ages. But before we get ahead of ourselves and start praising these Muslims as the most wonderful beings ever assembled, you must also realize they introduced the wholesale slave trade of Africans up and down the east coast of the continent, they gradually reduced the rights of women, they destroyed many local customs with their wars of conquest and they also fought in some of the most brutal military campaigns ever.

Yet, their ascent to the pantheon of world’s greatest empires wasn’t without roadblocks. When they attempted to conquer all of Western Europe, they were put down by Charles “the Hammer” Martel who united all the tribes of the French countryside. Their future was forever taken off course when they mounted a two hundred year campaign to capture and maintain the holy land (Jerusalem) for Muslims. These wars marked the beginning of a millennium of conflict between Christians, Jews and Muslims that continues to mark the Levant (Middle East) as the most unstable region in the world today. These wars were known as the Crusades.

But that is for another chapter.