

On the outer edge of the Latin world, in Spain, Sicily, and North Africa, and surrounding Byzantium in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, was the world of Islam. For centuries, Islam was both a threat and the source of new ideas to the Greek East and Latin West. Between the 7th and 12th centuries, Islam became the center of a brilliant civilization and of a great scientific, philosophic, and artistic culture. Although its language was neither Greek nor Latin, Islam absorbed a great deal of Greek culture which it managed to preserve for the Latin West. In general, it can be said that Islam absorbed and added its culture to the heritage of Greece, Rome, Judaism, Christianity, and the Near East.



In the beginning the Muslims were both open and cautious. They borrowed and integrated elements of other cultures into their own. The new religion of Islam, which we will get to in a moment, adopted elements of Christian, Jewish, and pagan religious beliefs and practices. The Muslims tolerated religious minorities within territories they had conquered so long as these minorities recognized Islamic political rule, paid taxes, and did not proselytize among Muslims. Still, the Muslims were careful to protect the purity of their religion, language, and law from any foreign influence. With the passage of time, and with increased conflict with both eastern and western Christians, this protective instinct grew stronger. In the end, Islamic culture did not penetrate the west in the same way that Germanic culture did, but would remain strange as well as threatening to the West.

Fundamental to Islam was its religion -- this, of course, is true for the medieval west as well. However, we know more about early Christianity than we do about early Islam. And the reason is clear. Christianity was produced by a literate culture. Islamic religion, however, was formed largely in an illiterate, nomadic culture.

The home of Islam is the Arabian Peninsula. The Peninsula is predominantly desert and the tribes who inhabited this area were nomadic, that is, they traveled from place to place. Politically, Islam was not a unified territory nor was there any centralized government.

The great unifying agent in Islamic civilization was clearly that of [Muhammad](#) (c.570-632). He was born at Mecca and raised by family of modest means. His father had died in the year of his birth and his mother died when he was 6 years old. At the time of Muhammad's birth, Mecca was one of the most prosperous caravan cities. However, Mecca was still tied to the traditional social and religious life of the Arabian world. In other words, it was governed by the tribal societies of the desert. Membership in the tribe was determined by blood descent. In such an order, the interests of the individual were always subordinate to those of the group or tribe. Each tribe worshipped its own gods in the form of objects from nature (moon, sky, dog, cat, ram) but all Arabs worshipped one object in common: the *Kaaba*, a large black stone enshrined at Mecca. It was the *Kaaba* that made Mecca significant as a place of worship and pilgrimage.

As a youth, Muhammad worked as a merchant's assistant, traveling the major trade routes of the Peninsula. When he was 25, he married the widow of a wealthy merchant and became a man of means. He also became a kind of social activist, critical of Meccan materialism, paganism, and the unjust treatment of the poor and needy.

Muhammad worked hard at his career but like so many "saviors" and prophets, Muhammad was plagued by doubts. His doubt increased to such an extent that he left Meccan society and lived a life of isolation in the desert. In 610, and at the age of 40, he received his first revelation and began to preach. He believed his revelations came directly from God, a God who spoke to him through the angel Gabriel, who recited God's word to him at irregular intervals. These revelations grew into the [Qur'an](#) which his followers compiled between 650 and 651. The basic message Muhammad received was a summons to all Arabs to submit to God's will. Islam means "submission to the will of God."

There was little that was new in Muhammad's message. It had been uttered by a long line of Jewish prophets going back to Noah but now ending with Muhammad, the last of God's chosen prophets. The Qur'an also recognized Jesus Christ as a prophet but did not view him as God's co-eternal and co-equal son. Like Judaism, Islam was a monotheistic and theocratic religion, not a Trinitarian one like Christianity.

The basic beliefs of Muhammad's religion were (1) that God is good and omnipotent, (2) that God will judge all men on the last day and assign them their place in either Heaven or Hell, (3) that men should thank God for making the world as it is, (4) that God expects men to be generous with their wealth, and (5) that Muhammad was a prophet sent by God to teach men and warn them of the last

judgment.

It ought to be clear that many of these beliefs are similar to those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, Muhammad's religion was not a mere copy. Instead, Muhammad's religion grew as a result of the social and economic conditions of Mecca itself. One other difference ought to be noted. Christianity was produced in an urban environment while the faith of Muhammad was fashioned from his life in the desert.

For Muhammad, there were also five obligations which were essential to his faith: (1) the profession of faith – there is no God but Allah and Muhammad was the last prophet, (2) prayers had to be uttered five times daily, (3) the giving of alms, or charity, (4) fasting, and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca. These laws are recorded in the Qur'an, a book which contains all of the revelations of Muhammad.

Muhammad believed that God had chosen him to be the last prophet. Abraham and Moses were prophets. So too was Jesus Christ. But Muhammad believed that Jesus was not the son of God. The Jews and Christians, according to Muhammad, had strayed from the true faith, a faith which Muhammad believed he had had revealed to him by the angel Gabriel. It was his task to convert them and bring them back to the true word.

Despite the faith of his flock, Muhammad met with disappointment as he preached his religion at Mecca. Jews and Christians failed to convert. His faith was totally rejected by the authorities at Mecca. It should be obvious that the merchants at Mecca would have objected to Muhammad's belief – actually a profession of faith – that men should be generous with their wealth. The authorities tried to quiet Muhammad and so he left for the northern city of Medina in the year 622. The journey to Medina – the *hegira* (the "breaking of former ties") – became the true foundation of the Islamic faith. The *hegira* also marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

At Medina, Muhammad created an Islamic community. Besides the profession of faith, Muhammad also specified that at his community there would be strict rules governing diet; wine, gambling and usury were prohibited; he set up his own legal system; and prohibited infanticide. After settling in Medina, his followers began to attack the caravans on their way to and from Mecca. By 624 his army was powerful enough to conquer Mecca and make it the center of the new religion.

Muhammad died in 632 and his death presented his followers with a series of profound problems. He never claimed to be of divine origin yet his loyal followers saw no reason to separate religious and political authority. Submitting to the will of Allah was no different than submitting to the will of Muhammad. Unfortunately, Muhammad never named a successor. Who would lead the faithful? Soon after his death, some of his followers selected [Abu Bakr](#), a wealthy merchant and Muhammad's father-in-law as caliph, or temporal leader.

In the early 7th century, Muhammad and successive caliphs, took up the Arabic custom of making raids against their enemies. The Qur'an called these raids the *jihad* ("striving in the way of the Lord"). The *jihad* was not carried out as a means to convert others for the simple reason that acts of conversion to the Islamic faith were voluntary. The Byzantines and Persians were the first to feel the pressure of Arab raids. At [Yarmuk](#) in 636, the Muslims defeated the Byzantine army. Syria fell in 640. A decade later, the Muslims had conquered the entire Persian empire. [Egypt](#), North Africa and [Spain](#) (with its center at Córdoba) were all conquered and under Muslim rule by the 720s. In 732, a Muslim army was defeated at the [Battle of Tours](#), and Muslim expansion in Europe came to an abrupt halt.

One of the main problems confronting the Islamic world was the choice of caliph. When Muhammad's son-in-law was assassinated, Muawiyah, a general, became caliph. Muawiyah made the caliphate hereditary in his own family, thus creating the [Umayyad](#) dynasty. One of the first things Muawiyah did was to move the capital of the Muslim world from Medina to Damascus in Syria. However, internal dissension over the caliphate created a split in Islam between the Shiites, or those who accepted only the descendants of Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, as the true rulers, and the Sunnites, who claimed the descendants of the Umayyads were the true rulers. This split exists to this day.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, under the [Abbasid](#) caliphs, Islamic civilization entered a golden age. Arabic, Byzantine, Persian and Indian cultural traditions were integrated. And while in Europe, learning seemed to be at its lowest point, the Muslims created what I suppose could be called a "high civilization." Thanks to Muslim scholars, ancient Greek learning, acquired from their contact with Byzantine scholars, was kept alive and was eventually transferred to the West in the 12th century and after. But not only did Muslim scholars preserve the heritage of Greek [science and philosophy](#), they added to it by writing commentaries and glosses, thus adding to what eventually became the western intellectual tradition. Throughout the Qur'an one can find a strong emphasis on the value of knowledge in the Islamic faith. The Qur'an encourages Muslims to learn and acquire knowledge, stemming from, but not limited to, the Muslim emphasis on knowing the unity of God. Because Muslims believe that Allah is all-knowing, they also believe that the human world's quest for knowledge leads to further knowing of Allah.