



ISLAM

Islam, the Quran, and the Five Pillars All Without a Flamewar: Crash Course World History #13

Islam, one of the largest belief systems and religious communities in the world, started in a small region with few natural resources. Through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and later a series of successful military campaigns, Islam brought together a group of fragmented tribal communities and then the inhabitants of the two largest empires in the region. It created the Ummah, the community of believers who shared core beliefs such as the Five Pillars, as well as a body of law.



00:01

John Green

Cross and star of David

Young John Green

Hi, there, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History, and today, we're going to talk about Islam, which, like Christianity and Judaism, grew up on the east coast of the Mediterranean, but unlike Christianity and Judaism, it's not terribly well understood in the West. For instance, you probably know what this is and what this is. You probably don't know what that is—Google it.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Why do you think people know so little about Islamic history?

Did you just ask an interesting, non-annoying question, me from the past? I think we don't know much about early Islamic history because we don't learn about it, because we're taught that our history is the story of Christianity in Europe, when in fact, our history is the story of people on the planet, so let's try to learn something today.

CCWH theme music plays

00:51

*Painting depicts the angel
Gabriel*

So in less than 200 years, Islam went from not existing to being the religious and political organizing principle of one of the largest empires in the world. And that story begins in the seventh century CE, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad, a 40-ish guy who made his living as a caravan trader, and told him to begin reciting the word of God. Initially, this freaked Muhammad out—as, you know, it would—but then his wife and a couple of other people encouraged him, and slowly, he came to accept the mantle of prophet.

01:17

Animation of Mesopotamia

*Painting depicts men
standing outside of the
Kaaba*

A few things to know about the world Islam entered. First, Muhammad's society was intensely tribal. He was a member of the Quraysh tribe, living in Mecca, and tribal ties were extremely important. Also, at the time, the Arabian peninsula was, like, this crazy religious melting pot. Like, most tribal Arabs worshipped gods very similar to the Mesopotamian gods you'll remember from episode three. And by the time of Muhammad, cult statues of many of those gods had been collected in his hometown of Mecca, in this temple-like structure called the Kaaba.

But Arabia was also a home to monotheisms like Christianity and Judaism, even a bit of Zoroastrianism. So the message that there was only one God wouldn't have been, like, as surprising to Muhammad as it was, for instance, to Abraham.

*Photo of snowboarder;
photo of a Baptist
protester*

Also, and this will become very important, the northern part of Arabia was sandwiched between the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sassanian Empire, and you'll remember, those guys were always fighting. They were like snowboarders and skiers, or like the Westboro Baptist Church and everyone else.

02:14

Image of the Quran

At its core, Islam is what we call a radical reforming religion—just as Jesus and Moses sought to restore Abrahamic monotheism after what they perceived as straying, so, too, did Muhammad. Muslims believe that God sent Muhammad as the final prophet to bring people back to the one true religion, which involves the worship of, and submission to, a single and all-powerful God. The Quran also acknowledges Abraham and Moses and Jesus, among others, as prophets, but it's very different from the Hebrew and Christian bibles. For one thing it's much less narrative, but also, it's the written record of the revelations Muhammad received—which means it's not written from the point of view of people—it is seen as the actual word of God.

02:52

The Quran is a really broad-ranging text, but it returns again and again to a couple of themes. One is strict monotheism, and the other is the importance of taking care of those less fortunate than you. The Quran says of the good person, “Spends his substance—however much he himself may cherish it—upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, “and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage.” These revelations also radically increased the rights of women and orphans, which is one of the reasons that Muhammad’s tribal leaders weren’t that psyched about them.

To talk more about Islamic faith and practice, let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

03:24

Animation of the Five Pillars of Islam: Shahada, Salat, Sawm, Sakat, Hajj

The Five Pillars of Islam are the basic acts considered obligatory, at least by Sunni Muslims. First is the Shahada, or the profession of faith. “There is no god but God and Muhammad is God’s prophet,” which is sometimes translated as, “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s prophet,” which tries to make Muslims sound other and ignores the fact that the Arabic word for God—whether you are Christian or Jewish or Muslim—is Allah.

Animation of daily prayer

Second, Salat, or ritual prayer five times a day—at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and late evening—which are obligatory unless you haven’t hit puberty, are too sick, or are menstruating. Keep it PG, Thought Bubble.

Animation of a man fasting, struggling more in the summer heat than in the winter

Third, Sawm, the monthlong fast during the month of Ramadan, in which Muslims do not eat or drink or smoke cigarettes during daylight hours. Since Ramadan is a lunar-calendar month, it moves around the seasons, and obviously, it’s most fun during the winter, when the days are shorter, and least fun during the summer, when days are both long and hot.

Animation of many people making the pilgrimage to Mecca

Fourth is Zakat, or almsgiving, in which non-poor Muslims are required to give a percentage of their income to the poor.

04:32

John Green moves into the gilded chair; “magic!” refers to the appearing of the gilded chair and fireplace

And lastly, Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims must try to fulfill at least once in their lives, provided they are healthy and have enough money.

And there’s also more to understanding Islam than just knowing the Quran. Like Judaism with its Talmud, and Christianity with its “Lives of Saints” and writings of Church fathers, Islam has supplementary sacred texts, chief among which is the Hadith, a collection of sayings and stories about the Prophet. Thanks, Thought Bubble—oh, it’s time for the Open Letter? (music playing) Magic! An Open Letter to the 72 Virgins. Oh, but first, let’s check what’s in the Secret Compartment. Oh, it’s Andre the Giant. Did you know that Andre the Giant died a virgin? Is a fact that I made up?

05:06

Text bubble: The Isnad, or the chain of narrators, is the official list of sources that goes along with each hadith.

Dear 72 Virgins, hey, there, it’s me, John Green. Did you know that not all Hadiths were created equal? Some sayings of the Prophet are really well-sourced, like, for instance, a good friend or a relative heard the Prophet say something, and then it ended up as a Hadith. But some Hadiths are terribly sourced, like, not to be irreverent, but some of it is, like, middle school gossip, like, Rachel told Rebekah that her sister’s brother’s friend kissed Justin Bieber on the face. And the vast majority of Muslims don’t treat terribly sourced Hadiths as scripture.

The shorter and more reliable the list of narrators, the more accepted is the hadith.

05:48

Text bubble: The name Islam means “submission”.

A Muslim is “one who submits”.

The Arabic word Ummah means community or nation. It generally refers to the whole of the Muslim world.

And the idea that you go to heaven and get 72 virgins is not in the Quran, it's in a terribly sourced Hadith. So it is my great regret to inform you, 72 Virgins, that in the eyes of almost all Muslims, you do not exist. Best wishes, John Green.

One more thing about Islam. Like Christianity and Judaism, it has a body of law. You might have heard of it—it's called Sharia. Although we tend to think of Sharia as a single set of laws that all Muslims follow, that's ridiculous. There are numerous competing ideas about Sharia, just as there are within any legal tradition. So people who embraced this worldview were called Muslims because they submitted to the will of God, and they became part of the ummah, or community of believers. This would be a good moment for an Uma Thurman joke, but sadly, she is no longer famous. I'm sorry if you're watching this, Uma Thurman. Being part of the ummah trumped all other ties, including tribal ties, which got Muhammad into some trouble and brings us, at last, back to history.

06:26

Photograph of thousands of people making the pilgrimage to Mecca

So as Muhammad's following in Mecca grew, the ummah aroused the suspicion of the most powerful tribe in Mecca, the Quraysh. And it didn't matter that Muhammad himself was born into the Quraysh tribe, because he wouldn't shut up about how there was only one God, which was really bad news to the Quraysh tribe, because they managed the pilgrimage trade in Mecca, and if all those gods were false, it would be a disaster economically. Although, come to think of it, in the end the Meccan pilgrimage business turned out just fine.

06:53

Painting depicts an Islamic army coming upon Mecca

So the Quraysh forced Muhammad and his followers out of Mecca in 622 CE, and they headed to Yathrib, also known as Medina. This journey, also known as the Hijra, is so important that it marks year 0 in the Islamic calendar. In Medina, Muhammad severed the religion's ties to Judaism, turning the focus of prayer away from Jerusalem to Mecca. Also in Medina, the Islamic community started to look a lot more like a small empire than like a church. Like, Jesus never had a country to run. But Muhammad did almost from the beginning. And in addition to being an important prophet, he was a good general, and in 630, the Islamic community took back Mecca. They destroyed all those idols in the Kaaba, and soon, Islam was as powerful a political force in the region as it was a religious one. And it's because the political and religious coexisted from the beginning that there's no separate tradition of civic and religious law, like there is in Christianity and Judaism.

07:41

Text bubble: Abu Bakr converted to Islam before he became Muhammad's father in law. His daughter Aisha married Muhammad after the death of the prophet's first wife.

So then, when Muhammad died in 632 CE, there wasn't a religious vacuum left behind. Muhammad was the final prophet, the revelation of the Quran would continue to guide the ummah throughout their lives. But the community did need a political leader, a caliph. And the first caliph was Abu Bakr, Muhammad's father-in-law, who was not without his opponents. Many people wanted Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, to lead the community, and although he did become the fourth caliph, that initial disagreement—to radically oversimplify, because we only have ten minutes—began the divide between the two major sects of Islam—Sunni and Shia.

08:15*Map shows the expansion
of the Islamic Empire*

And even today, Sunni Muslims believe Abu Bakr was rightly elected the first caliph, and Shia Muslims believe it should've been Ali. To Sunnis, the first four caliphs—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali—are known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and many of the conservative movements in the Islamic world today are all about trying to restore the Islamic world to those glory days, which—like most glory days—were not unambiguously glorious.

Abu Bakr stabilized the community after Muhammad's death, and began the process of recording the Quran in writing, and started the military campaigns against the Byzantine and Sassanian empires that, within 116 years, would allow the Islamic Empire to go from this... ..to this.

08:55

His successor Umar was both an uncommonly good general and a brilliant administrator, but, like so many other great men, he proved terrible at avoiding assassination. Which led to the caliphate of Uthman, who standardized the Quran and continued both his predecessor's tradition of conquest and his predecessor's tradition of getting assassinated. Then Ali finally got his turn as caliph, but his ascension was very controversial, and it ultimately led to a civil war. Which eventually led to the emergence of Uthman's tribe, the Umayyads, as the dynasty that would rule over an ever-expanding Islamic Empire for more than a hundred years.

09:26*Video of Mongols riding
on horseback, dragging
bodies behind them*

It's common to hear that in these early years, Islam "spread by the sword," and that's partly true, unless you are—wait for it—the Mongols. (music playing)

Actually, as usual, the truth is more complicated. Many people, including the Mongols, but also including lots of people in Central and East Asia, embraced Islam without any military campaigns. And in fact, the Quran says that religion must not be an act of compulsion. But this much is true—the early Islamic Empire was really good at winning wars. And situated as they were between two very wealthy empires—the Byzantines and the Sassanians—there was plenty to fight for.

The first to fall were the Sassanians, the last non-Muslim successor to the Persian Empire. They were relatively easy pickings, because they'd been fighting the Byzantines for, like, 300 years, and they were super-tired. Also, they had recently been struck by plague. Plague, man, I'm telling you, it's like the red tortoise shell of history. But, in those early days, they did pry away some valuable territory, like Egypt and the Holy Land, and then eventually, they got into Spain, where various Muslim dynasties would entrench themselves until being expelled in 1492.

10:30

But as good as they were at making war, it's still tempting to chalk up the Arabs' success to, you know, the will of God. And certainly, a lot of the people they conquered felt that way. Wars in this part of the world didn't just pit people against each other, they also pitted their gods against each other. So while the Islamic Empire didn't require its subjects to convert to Islam, their stunning successes certainly convinced a lot of people that this monotheism thing was legit. Once again, John Green proving super-hip to the slang of today's young 'uns. Also, you paid lower taxes if you converted, and just as taxes on cigarettes lead to people not wanting to smoke, taxes on worshipping your idols lead to people not wanting to worship them anymore.

11:09

Text bubble: During Abbasid rule in the 8th and 9th centuries, many of the classical Greek works were translated to Arabic in Baghdad. Europe would become reacquainted with these works after the crusades

So in a period of time that was, historically speaking, both remarkably recent and remarkably short, a small group of people from an area of the world with no natural resources managed to create one of the great empires of the world and also one of its great religions. And that very fact may be why people of Western European descent remain largely ignorant about this period. Not only were the Muslims great conquerors, they spawned an explosion of trade and learning that lasted hundreds of years. They saved many of the classic texts that form the basis of the so-called Western Canon while Europe was ignoring them, and they paved the way for the Renaissance.

11:42

While it's important to remember that much of the world between Spain and the Indus River wasn't Arabized, most of it was so thoroughly Islamized that these days, we can't think of the world we now call the Middle East without thinking of it as Islamic. Like, perhaps the greatest testimony to Islam's power to organize people's lives and their communities is that, in Egypt, five times a day, millions of people turn away from the Pyramids and toward Mecca. Egypt, birthplace to one of the longest continuous cultures the world has ever known, is now the largest Arab country in the world. Next week, we'll talk about the Dark Ages. Spoiler alert—they were darkest in the evening. Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time.

12:19*Credits roll*

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's Phrase of the Week was "They Might Be Giants." If you want to guess this week's Phrase of the Week or suggest future ones, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that our team of historians will endeavor to answer. Thank you so much for watching, and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.