

Understanding Islam and its challenge

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What factors explain the birth, initial success, continuation and current revival in Islam?

We will not try to explain the 'why' of this question) but rather the 'how'. In other words, what are the historical reasons for the expansion of Islam? The 'why' belongs to the unsearchable wisdom of God whose sovereignty rules the world. Any effort to discern this wisdom remains speculative until the day of God's final revelation at the end of human history.

We can distinguish three categories of reasons which help us to understand Islam's past and present conquests. These are reasons of a general nature and should be applied to particular situations only if we take into account the specific circumstances of each case.

HISTORICAL REASONS RELATED TO THE BIRTH OF ISLAM

Firstly, there were internal reasons.

Polytheism was the religion of most Arabs at the beginning of the seventh century. Besides the supreme Deity they also recognized a host of other divinities which they worshipped in the temple at Mecca. Their polytheism was characterised by a strong belief in fate, spirits, and curses, and was mixed with a great deal of superstition. Occasionally human sacrifices were offered to certain gods. Polytheism did not allow the development of religious unity among the Arabs, whose life was governed according to tribal patterns.

Judaism had exercised a certain influence over the Arabs for a long time. The reputation of the kingdom of Israel under Solomon had reached southern Arabia (see 1 Kings 10:1-13). Some Arabs had adopted the Jewish religion (Acts 2:11). Three Jewish Arab tribes dominated the city of Yathrib -later to become Medina - where there were also two polytheistic tribes. But Judaism in Arabia was much more the reflection of tradition than of Torah (Scripture).

Christianity was scarcely present in central Arabia, and was very poorly represented at that. In the north west there were some Chassanide Christians of the Monophysite creed; in the north east) some Lakhmide Christians of the Nestorian creed. The beliefs and practices of these Christians were far removed from the true gospel.

Thus Judaism and Christianity gave the image of two rival religions, themselves divided into numerous sects, foreign to the Arabs (the Bible was not translated into Arabic) and associated with political powers threatening to the Arab peoples. The Arabs needed not only religious unity appropriate to their situation) but also political unity to face the two powerful empires of the period.

Secondly, there were external reasons.

The Byzantine empire was a Christian empire. It was opposed to the Monophysite Arab Christians on religious grounds but tolerated them as a buffer state between the empire and the polytheistic Arab tribes.

The Sassanide empire was Zoroastrian. It too protected the Nestorian Arab Christians and served as a buffer zone.

The two empires had exhausted their resources in endless struggles between themselves, which left a political vacuum on the eve of the birth of Islam.

In this situation, Islam offered Arabs a national religion, revealed in Arabic to an Arab prophet. It drew the Arabs together as one nation whose oneness was based on the oneness of God and whose law was founded on the law of God.

FUNDAMENTAL REASONS

Islam as a natural religion

Islam is a religion which is within man's grasp both intellectually and practically.

Intellectually, Islamic faith consists in believing in God, His angels, His Books, His Apostles, the Last Day and Predestination.

Practically, Islamic works) also called the pillars of Islam, are the confession of faith (in God and in Mohammed as His Prophet), prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, and holy war (jihad). Man likes to have a religion which is within the range of his capacities and which gives him a feeling of pleasing God and doing God's will.

Islam as an eschatological and universal religion

Far from denying the historical validity of Judaism and Christianity, Islam claims to be the final end of the religion of Abraham, which was prior to both of them, and to be their confirmation, completion, and fulfilment. The Qur'an declares that Mohammed was predicted by the Tawrat (law of Moses) and the Injil (gospel), and that he was the seal of the prophets, meaning both that he certified the validity of the prophetic message and that he closed the line of prophets.

According to Islam) Jesus was not crucified but rather raised up to heaven, and will come back at the End Time to establish a reign of peace on earth. The Jews will then recognize him as the Messiah, and the Christians will realise that he is only a man. He will then die a natural death which will announce the imminence of final judgment and the general resurrection.

This eschatological vision of Islam makes it a universal religion to which all men must adhere if they do not wish to incur the wrath of God.

Islam as a State religion

Just as Mohammed was both a religious prophet and a political leader, Islam is both an individual and a collective religion. Qur'anic Law is a Law both religious and political. It governs the relations of men amongst themselves on the one hand, and their relations with God on the other. Islam is the law both of

the Muslim congregation and of the political state, for there is no separation between the congregation and the State.

Islam is considered to be a religion which keeps a happy medium between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism is too earthly, and scarcely speaks of heaven; its penal law is too severe, with capital punishment prescribed in many cases; and its moral law too permissive: polygamy without any restrictions. Christianity on the other hand is too heavenly-minded and does not concern itself enough with man's life on this earth; its penal law is too lax) with forgiveness prescribed for every transgression; its moral law too strict: no polygamy at all and no divorce. Islam is conceived of as a balanced religion which concerns itself with both earthly and heavenly matters, prescribes capital punishment only in the most serious cases, and brings out the requirements of the Law all the while taking account of human weakness. Consequently Islam is capable of establishing a just and fair society among men here and now. It is Islam's religious superiority over the other two religions which gives it political effectiveness. This is why Islam relies on both religious and secular arms, which gives it extra strength compared to other religions. Furthermore, aside from Christians and Jews who have a protected status, in the Muslim State there is no place for non-Muslim citizens. The special status of Christians and Jews guarantees them certain rights, but also makes them liable to various constraints, which has led to some Christians and Jews becoming Muslims.

CONTEMPORARY REASONS

Political reasons

Many Muslims see in Islam a model of civilization which should take the place of the two models of civilization which have failed.

The Western model, associated with Christianity, has given rise to materialism, moral decadence, loss of human dignity. It is furthermore responsible for the tragedy of the Palestinian people and the occupation of Jerusalem (which is the third holy city of Islam after Mecca and Medina) by its long-standing and culpable support of the Israeli state.

The Communist model, associated with atheism, has led to political dictatorship, economic stagnation, and religious repression in all of the States which have adopted it.

The failure of these two systems makes Islam appear to the Muslim community and nations as a viable alternative to realise a society of justice, progress, and faith, based on the Law of God and built upon the respective traditions of the various Muslim nations.

Miscellaneous reasons

Materialism and rationalism in Western civilization have led some Westerners of a more spiritual orientation to turn to the spiritual current in Islam, called Sufism, to satisfy their spiritual thirst.

Long-standing neglect of Muslim thought in the West leads some scholars to explore the Muslim heritage for its intellectual interest. Christian scholars feel that the convergence of Christianity and Islam on certain issues is a further reason to be interested in Islamic theology.

The economic wealth of certain petroleum-producing Muslim states allows them

to open Islamic cultural centres, schools, mosques, missions and so on in many countries.

All of these reasons contribute to the current Islamic revival which confronts us today and which must challenge us as Christians who want to live and share our faith in our own context. Here are some questions we should be asking ourselves:

We have seen that Christianity at the eve of Islam's birth, just as today) was considered to be associated with foreign powers, divided into many mutually opposed groups, and without roots among the Arab people. How can we incarnate our faith in our own culture, without confusing it with any national or foreign political power?

Islam criticizes Christianity for being too concerned with heaven and not enough with life on this earth. How can we demonstrate the impact of the gospel on our life here and now, without losing sight of our hope of the ultimate coming of God's kingdom?

~at do we think of Mohammed, the Qur'an and Islam in general? If we eliminate the two simplistic extremist positions, that is, either fully accepting Mohammed as a prophet or totally rejecting him as a false prophet, then is there a more accurate and sensitive judgment which allows us to take account of both Qur'anic and biblical evidence?

Islam claims to be: (a) a natural religion (b) an eschatological religion (c) a State religion. How can we use our discernment and our critical faculties in light of these claims?

- (a) Is a religion "to the measure of man", who is a sinful creature, a "good" religion? Isn't such a religion in danger of making God over in the image of man? (As Voltaire said, "God made man in His own image; and then man paid him back".)
- (b) Does careful examination of Christianity and Islam back up or disprove the claim that Islam confirms, recapitulates, and fulfils Christianity? Are there biblical texts that announce the coming of Mohammed? What are the signs of a true prophet?
- (c) Isn't there a potential twofold danger of establishing both an authoritarian system and social discrimination? If man's problem is first of all spiritual, how can a political system solve it?