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

Crash Course: World History
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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.

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

John: 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.

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 7th 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.

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 3. And by the time of Muhammad, cult statutes 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 for 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.

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.

At its core, Islam is what we call a radical reforming religion — just like 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 its the written record of the revelations Muhammad received — which means its not written from the point of view of people, it is seen as the actual word of God.

The Quran is a really broad-ranging text, but it returns again and again to a couple 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 was one of the reasons why Mohammad's tribal leaders weren't that psyched about them. To talk more about Islamic faith and practice, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The five pillars of Islam are the basic acts considered obligatory, at least by Sunni Muslims. First is the shahada, or the profession of the 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.

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.

Third, sawm, the month-long 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.

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

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?

Magic! An Open Letter to the 72 Virgins.

Oh, but first let's check what's in the Secret Compartment. Huh, it's Andre the Giant. Did you know that Andre the Giant died a virgin- is a fact that I made up?

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. 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 this 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.

So as Muhammad's following in Mecca grew, the ummah aroused the suspicion of the most powerful tribe, 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.

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 know 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.

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 of the major sects of Islam: Sunni and Shi'a.

And even today, Sunnis Muslims believe Abu Bakr was rightly elected the first caliph and Shi'a 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.

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 at 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 ruling over an ever-expanding Islamic Empire for more than a hundred years.

It's common to hear that in these early years Islam quote "spread by the sword", and that's partly true, unless you are — wait for it — the Mongols. 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 was 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 eventually they got into Spain, where various Muslim dynasties would entrench themselves until being expelled in 1492. But as a 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'ns. 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.

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 "Western Canon" while Europe was ignoring them, and they paved the way for the Renaissance.

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 Islamicized that these days we can't think of the world we now call the Middle East without thinking of it as Islamic. Perhaps the greatest testimony to Islam's power to organize peoples lives and their communities is that, in Egypt, 5 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, and we'll see you next time.

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 they say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.