

The fuel behind the rapid spread of islam during

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



The religion of Islam is the second largest belief system in the world with over one billion believers. As of 2009, almost one quarter of the world's population follow after Islam, second only to Christianity. But roughly 15 centuries ago, this was not true at all concerning Islam. The populations that now embrace Islam have roots in a polytheistic society where Islam did not yet exist. Christianity was clearly the dominant religion of that time period and the wide influence of the Byzantine Empire ensured the continued influence of the Church.

Some historians have noted that nothing substantial seemed to stand out culturally or militarily concerning the emerging Muslim population when compared with Europe. Simon Barton of the University of Exeter writes in his book review concerning the work, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In*: " Why did Islam prove so conspicuously successful in galvanizing the energies of its adherents?

Why was it, given that the Muslims achieved no significant breakthrough in military technology that the well-established great powers with which they came into conflict - notably the Byzantine and Persian empires in the east - or the Visigothic kingdom in the west proved unable to halt their advance? " (Sidelko 2009, 466) The fact that the emerging Muslim society didn't appear to have an overwhelming advantage in the years leading up to the seventh century growth explosion of Islam begs the very question that Simon Barton just asked.

In this paper, I will attempt to discuss some of the conditions that help account for the rapid spread of Islam during the 7th century, such as the

political conditions surrounding the Byzantine Empire, conditions surrounding Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and conditions surrounding the introduction of Islam as a religion. From the 6th century leading into the 7th century, the Byzantine Empire became locked in a series of wars with the Persian Empire. These conflicts began around 500 A. D. , and lasted into the first decades of the 7th century. These disputes brought about a great strain upon resources for both empires. Both lands were diminished and did not have enough time to lick their wounds before raids from Muslim groups started becoming more and more frequent. Although the Byzantine Empire seemed to have some form of victory over the Persian Empire, that notion became meaningless when Persian Empire under the rule of the Sasanian dynasty began to fall to the Arabs raiders who were becoming more organized as time progressed.

Eventually, the Persian Empire was completely absorbed-- just as the Oxford Islamic Studies Online article states, " The surprising speed at which the conquests took place can be attributed to the weakness of countries debilitated by long external conflicts (the Sasanian Empire) or by the fragility of internal structure (The Spread of Islam). " The Byzantine Empire lost much of their territory that they had claimed from the Persians. They simply were not ready for a fresh, new challenger after dealing with a century long war.

This is one of the conditions that accounts for the rapid growth of Islam. Many Arabs had become fervent followers of Islam at this point and Muslims had gained established, strong leadership which was directing their growing forces despite Mohammad's death. With the gaining of new territory, the message of Islam would no doubt follow along. Without successes from the

likes of Charles Martel, the Byzantine Empire could have ended up like the Persians.

Again, the Oxford Islamic Studies Online article writes, “ The eighth century saw further expansions eastwards as far as the river Indus and the Sind region and westwards through northern Africa to Spain and France where the over-stretched army was stopped at the battle of Poitiers by Charles Martel”. (The Spread of Islam) The Byzantine Empire was greatly diminished, but still managed, however, to stay intact enough to prevent total assimilation of the Arab conquest. During the time of the 7th century, Christianity was largely split into two main groups-- Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

These two counterparts of Christianity often times were at odds because of discrepancies over where the true source of Church authority actually resided within the Byzantine Empire. As a result, Christian fringe groups in countries such as Egypt or Palestine would be easily labeled as heretics and would find themselves disassociated from the Church. When the Arab conquest claimed these lands, they tended to show more tolerance for non Muslims in exchange for good citizenship within the new Islamic environment. Also, Islam was fresh and hadn't begun to suffer from its own power struggles from within the belief system. As Shenk writes, “ One wonders what parallels to Muslim Spain might be found in the rise of an Islamic presence in the heart of the European Balkans. Bosnia's capital Sarajevo adds the intrigue of its location along the historic fault line between the two major branches of the Christian heritage in the region, Orthodox and Catholic.

In any number of centuries since the arrival of Slavic peoples in migrations dating from the sixth and seventh centuries (C. E.), recruitment efforts based both in Rome and in Constantinople (Istanbul today) were zealous to secure the allegiance of the newly arriving tribes for their respective church orbits. " (Shenk et al 2006) This tolerance is described as a sort of legacy that some regions of the Muslim world have left behind. Many oppressed throughout history after the seventh century could flee to certain parts of the Muslim world for refuge.

Muslims believed in one true God, and they determined that the rule of the land and Islam should be the same-- one people, one government, and one religion without any distinctions. This characteristic, along with Muslims early tolerance of fringe Christian groups seems to have given Islam a subtle, but unique advantage over the appeal that Orthodoxy and Catholicism had towards other Christians. As a result of this, Islam was better able to retain more territories and perhaps even convert more people over to their faith.

These conditions also help account for the rapid spread of Islam during the 7th century. Paul Sidelko s remarks in his review of Hugh Kennedy's book, " Whether it was demographic decline and internal political divisions that sapped the morale of many of Islam's rivals, or themotivation, leadership and mobility that characterized the Muslim military machine, Kennedy wisely concludes that in the final analysis timing was everything. If Muhammad had been born a generation earlier, it is unlikely that he or his successors would have achieved what they did. (Sidelko 2009, 466)

One cannot know for certain what would have happened if Muhammad started spreading Islam a generation earlier. But, I would tend to agree with Sidelko (and Kennedy's) notion that if Muhammad had lived to spread Islam in 300 A. D. rather than in 500 A. D. , Islam may not have spread so well. Also, nothing really stood out about early Muslim culture or technology during the times leading up to their conquest. " The main reason the early presence of Muslims is difficult to find in the archaeological record is not because we don't know where or how to look for it; it is because it isn't there.

Outside of Arabia, Muslims have been a minority of immigrants at first and have tended to assimilate to the local material culture. Local converts to Islam have tended to keep their own material culture. " (Morony 2006, 437) Early Muslims simply didn't stand out even with the archaeological record. To me, this suggests that Byzantine Empire would have been stronger, and far more equipped to handle a growing adversary who was still a minority if Islam's rise happened earlier in history. The Persian Empire may not have yielded so readily, perhaps keeping Islam contained even further.

And the conditions in Arab society may not have been quite so receptive to Muhammad's new religion. Muhammad faced opposition for many years before he was successful at gaining any traction for his Islamic teachings among the Arab people. One hundred years earlier may have been even more difficult to do-- especially since the Arabs were polytheistic well before Muhammad started to spread Islam. There is also something to be said about how fervent the Muslims became about Islam once it finally started to become popular after Muhammad's death.

The Arabs took with them a fresh faith with a fresh sense of fervency that was not equally matched the war torn Byzantine and Persian Empires. " For the first five centuries or so since the earliest, and most traumatic, encounter between Christendom and Islam in the second quarter of the seventh century, Christian attitudes to Islam had been compounded of ignorance, misperception, hostility and fear. " (Fletcher et al 2003). Such hostility and fear may not have been aroused by a younger, stronger Byzantine Empire.

So then, the mere timing of the introduction of Islam seems to account for why this faith spread so rapidly during the 7th century. When one considers how the present is interwoven with the past, it is amazing to consider how the teachings of one man could spread so quickly across the world hundreds of years ago, and yet still maintain a quarter of the world's population as followers in present times. It is amazing to think that Islam perhaps wouldn't be prevalent at all if Muhammad or his successors were born too early or too late for the Muslim message to catch on due to unforeseen cultural influences.

What if Muhammad had been born elsewhere? And to think-- what if somehow the Byzantine Empire had found a way to better manage their constant fighting with Persia, or if the Catholic Church had exercised more tolerance like the Muslims first did after acquiring new lands that had a noticeable Christian population? A change in these factors could have certainly changed the course of history. But as things are, these conditions

of the past are the reasons why Islam spread so rapidly centuries again, and is still one of the largest religions in the world today.