

Why Is Islam Popular?

Wilson: History indicates that Islam spread in its early times through Asia, Africa, and Europe very rapidly. Probably no other religion spread throughout the world as fast as Islam did. There must be some distinguishing features in Islam that caused its rapid growth and made it so phenomenal. I would like to know those factors which contributed to its rapid growth.

Chirri: There are many factors which contributed, and are still contributing, to the spread of Islam. Among them are the following factors:

1. The Holy Qur'an

It is an undeniable fact that the Qur'an is a living book that has influenced millions of people through its beauty and style. The superiority of the Qur'anic discourse was, and still is, challenging. The Qur'an itself called upon its opponents to try to produce a discourse that measures up to it.

The Qur'an repeatedly states that if the opponents will produce at any time a comparable discourse, they will automatically disprove the whole faith of Islam. The Qur'an has remained standing above and beyond any comparison in the whole Arabic literature ever since its revelation in the 7th century. The Holy Qur'an, therefore, has remained since the time of its introduction until now a great source of attraction for the Islamic faith.

2. The Personality of The Prophet of Islam

Muhammad was born under the shining light of history. No cloud has shrouded his birth, his existence or his life among his people. If any other prophet is considered a part of the religious history, Muhammad is a part of both the religious and the world history.

Muhammad was born in Mecca from a well-known father and mother and lived with his people forty years before he was commissioned as a prophet of God. He was observed by the people during his childhood and manhood. He was noticed by all his associates as an example of honesty and integrity. People never found in him a fault. They called him the Truthful, the Trustworthy.

Muhammad did not live as an isolated person. On the contrary, he associated with the people constantly. As a businessman, Muhammad travelled and associated with people from all walks of life, but he was never affected by their low desires or worldly ambitions. He lived in a pagan society, dominated by idol-worshippers, but he never subscribed to their ideas, nor did he join them in their faith. He lived in that world as a world to himself. He was respected by his enemies and admired by his friends, and no prophet in history received as much as Muhammad did of spontaneous obedience from his companions.

3. The Strong Faith of the Early Muslims

Due to the complete honesty and the influence of the appealing personality of Muhammad, the faith of his companions in him was unusually strong. It was based on their first-hand acquaintance with his exemplary life.

We are told that the followers of Moses refused to enter Jerusalem when commanded to do so and told him that he and his Lord should go to fight the enemies. We are told that the multitudes who had gathered around Jesus deserted him when the crisis came. Even his disciples deserted him. His chief disciple denied him three times before dawn on that fateful night. Similar situations happened to most of the prophets. None of them enjoyed a true support from their followers when they encountered a crisis.

The companions of Muhammad, however, were different. When Muhammad was in Mecca, he and the hundreds of his followers were powerless and without any legal protection. All of them stood the test of the crisis, and none of them abandoned the faith or the Prophet. The actions of those Muslims proved their faith in Islam and the Prophet. All of them preached Islam and practiced what they preached, and every genuine Muslim gave his faith a genuine support in word and in deed.

4. The Principles of Islam were a Great Source of Attraction Because they Were, and are, Logical and Clear

Upon serious thought, one can easily accept a religious teaching which declares the following: There is no God but the Almighty Who created the whole universe; none is worthy of worship but He; He is the Lord alone, without partner, associate, or son; He did not beget nor was He begotten, and nothing is like Him; He is the Just, the Merciful, and the Powerful, neither anthropomorphic nor physical; and His power encompasses the whole universe.

Such a simple and uncompromising monotheism is readily acceptable to the human mind which seeks an explanation to the existence of the world. It does not confuse the human mind by stating that God is One and that He, at the same time, is more than one. Nor does it represent God as a human being born out of another human being.

5. The Principles of Islam are Consistent and Cohesive

They do not contradict each other, nor do they contradict any other established truth. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all advocate the justice of God and His fairness. Islam, however, takes this fundamental concept and follows it thoroughly. It builds on it many other religious concepts which follow the concept of justice inseparably. When God is just and fair, He does not impose on any soul to do what is beyond its ability. Islam tells us also that the Most Just does not hold an individual responsible except for what he does by his own choice. He does not hold a person responsible for the sins of his father or forefathers because he had no control over their actions.

Islam tells us also that because God does not hold a person responsible for what his father did, He does not condemn the whole human race for a sin that was committed before the existence of any human generation. Such a condemnation is contradictory to the concept of the justice of God. Instead of burdening mankind with the original sin, Islam tells us that every human being is born pure and free of any sin, and will stay so, until he commits a sin as an adult.

6. The Principles of Islam have a Positive Attitude towards all Aspects of the Human Life

Islam, unlike many other religions, stresses the importance of both the spiritual and material aspects of the human life. God, according to Islam, does not want man to neglect his biological needs, nor is there an intrinsic conflict between our response to these needs and our spiritual development. On the contrary, the two sides are interdependent. They merge in each other and can be united in most of the human activities. A man who lacks the necessary food, warmth, and shelter, can hardly meditate, perform a devotional duty, or do good for other human beings. But when such necessities are satisfied, man can easily direct himself to his Lord.

Therefore, the well-intended work for meeting the bodily needs ought to be a portion of our religious duty. Religion, according to the Islamic teaching, does not aim at suppression of the biological desires; it aims at cultivating them and preventing the individual from becoming excessive and harmful to himself or to society.

7. The Principles of Islam are Universal

The universality of the Islamic teaching can be shown in its non-discriminatory teaching in regard to the human race, and in the recognition of all the previous prophets.

Since the time of its birth, Islam has carried the brand of universality. It addressed itself to the whole human race, discriminating neither among nations nor among ethnic groups. Every human being is a member of a huge family. No individual or nation is God's chosen or favorite creation because of birth,

nationality, or belief in a particular dogma. People are equal in the sight of God, and everyone may have an access to the kingdom of God, if he (she) is righteous.

A truth never contradicts another truth. Therefore, Islam proclaims that there is only one heavenly religion which has been revealed at different times to the prophets whom the Almighty had commissioned to convey His messages to mankind. It is inconceivable that the Almighty would reveal a certain doctrine to one messenger and then reveal to another messenger a doctrine that contradicts the first one. The Almighty has revealed his heavenly principles, commandments and laws at different stages of the human civilization according to the capacity of the human understanding. The subsequent revelation supplements, and never contradicts, the previous ones. Therefore, Islam says that it is a duty for every Muslim to recognize and respect Jesus, Moses, and all true prophets and their true teachings. This is repeatedly recorded in the Holy Qur'an:

“Say: We believe in God and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and to Abraham, ...and that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and that which was given to the prophets from their Lord. We do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.” 2: 136

The Christians who were in contact with the Muslims in the early days of Islam observed the great respect the Muslims had for Jesus. As a result, millions of them embraced Islam, not because they wanted to abandon the teaching of Jesus, but because they wanted to continue their adherence to his true teaching within the coherent teaching of Islam.

Wilson: Does Islam advocate sending missionaries to convert non-Muslims in a manner similar to that which has been practiced in Christianity?

Chirri: Islam, like Christianity, invites people to its principles and calls upon the non-Muslims to join its followers. However, Islam has never organized missions such as those of Christianity. Whenever a non-Muslim shows an interest in learning about Islam, it is the duty of every Muslim to inform him. Such work, however, is far from being organized missions.

The absence of clergy in Islam was one of the reasons for the absence of organized missions parallel to those of Christianity. Another factor is that a great number of Muslims incline to believe that Islam would spread without missionaries. This inclination was a result of many spectacular gains for Islam through no great efforts on the part of the Muslims.

Millions of people in many countries embraced Islam, not through organized missions, but through their contact with some Muslims who impressed them with their integrity and sound principles. Those Muslims imparted the ideas of their faith to the others, not because they were sent by some authorities as missionaries, but because they believed that Islam is every Muslim's business.

I have been in West Africa several times. I found numerous Christian missionaries in that part of the world, but I failed to see any organized Muslim missions. In spite of this, the consensus of the opinions

of the informed circles in this field is that Islam is spreading more rapidly than Christianity in that area.

Wilson: Do you have any information about the number of Christian missionaries throughout the world?

Chirri: The number of Christian missionaries throughout the world (according to the Detroit News of Sunday, April 2, 1961) is 212,250. This figure includes 170,000 Catholic missionaries and 42,250 Protestant. This huge army of missionaries is supported by thousands of religious organizations who are spending billions of dollars every year on these missions. Compared to this, the Muslims have some information centers whose number throughout the world does not reach one thousand. These centers do not enjoy any of the financial support which the Christian missionaries receive, nor do they aim at converting others. Their work is only to inform, within their limitation, those who seek information about Islam.

Wilson: Some people attribute the spread of Islam to its leniency. They think that Islam is less demanding of its followers than other religions such as Christianity. What is your comment?

Chirri: I think that this opinion is not sound. Islam demands from its followers more than many other religions do. It demands from the Muslims to pray five times a day: before sunrise, at noon, in the afternoon, at sunset, and in the evening.

It requires Muslims to fast thirty consecutive days every year during the month of Ramadan. A fasting person is required to refrain from eating, taking any liquid, and smoking from dawn to sunset. Islam requires every physically and financially capable adult to make a pilgrimage to Mecca and all the holy places in it and its vicinity, where men are to renounce all luxuries and materials including sewn clothes for a considerable time.

Islam also requires every Muslim to give a portion of his wealth every year to charity. It prohibits liquor and pork. None of these things are easy, and none of them show a leniency on the part of Islam. Nor is there any leniency in its demanding from its followers to treat others in a brotherly manner, protecting their reputation and refraining from saying anything that may expose them, even those who do them harm.

Wilson: Some critics say that Islam promises the good Muslims a paradise in which they will enjoy everything they may desire. These critics think that Islam out-promises Christianity, and therefore, it is attracting people through its promises.

Chirri: A promise is attractive only if it comes from a reliable source. If a reputable company offers an individual a well-paying job, he is likely to accept the position. On the other hand, if the same individual is offered a position by an unreliable or a bankrupt firm, he is expected to refuse the offer because he will not have any confidence in the firm's financial reliability.

Similarly, I do not think that a convert would be willing to perform so many duties and renounce so many

desirable things for the sake of promises if he does not have the confidence in Islam. No promise is attractive if it is made by an unreliable source. Attractiveness of a promise is a result of confidence. Faith in Islam, therefore, precedes the attractiveness of its promise, not vice versa.

Wilson: History shows that the early Muslims were militant and warriors. Many armed conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims took place in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and many other places. Some critics think that Islam was spread by force, and not by preaching and discussion.

Chirri: Force may conquer the body, but it cannot conquer the spirit. You may subdue an individual or community by the use of force, but you cannot make them believe that you are right. The Algerians were dominated by colonial France for about a hundred years, but that did not make them love their rulers. As soon as they had the opportunity, they rose in arms against their masters and broke their yoke.

It is illogical to believe that Islam had spread itself by force. Muhammad, as one person, could not force thousands or hundreds to embrace his faith. History testifies that Muhammad lived thirteen years in Mecca after he proclaimed his faith, under a constant threat from his opponents who were the overwhelming majority of the Meccans. Anyone that desired to join Islam was denounced, threatened, and persecuted by the Meccans; and, in spite of this, the number of Muslims steadily increased. Can we conceive that Muhammad under these circumstances could convert people by force when he himself was a subject of persecution?

At a later stage, the Muslims had become powerful enough to fight their opponents; and history shows that they did fight for Islam. But this does not mean that Islam had converted people by force. There are now over 100 million Muslims in Indonesia and scores of millions in West Africa. All these millions were converted through peaceful contacts with Muslims who came to these areas as merchants or educators.

There is, however, no reason to deny that Muslims were militant. The Muslims actually were good defenders of their freedom. We know that no ideology would spread or live in an unfree society. Freedom of belief, practice, and speech, are necessary for the growth of any ideology. In the absence of a constitutional protection of freedom, it would be the duty of the people of the ideology to secure their freedom on their own. If this does not justify the military might of the early Muslims, there will be no way to justify the military might of any modern nation that rises in arms to defend its freedom when it is threatened by its adversaries.

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