

# History of Islam



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Around the IV century AD the communal tribal system began to disintegrate within the nomadic tribes of the Bedouin cattle breeders that had been inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula from the Ancient times.

Due to trade routes' growth, the former patriarchal-communal relations were losing to emerging relations based on the division of property and social inequality.

On the one hand in Mecca, which was the transit point of the caravan route from Yemen to Syria, emerged a numerous strata of wealthy merchants, resellers, guides, and similar middlemen. Money-lending bloomed vigorously, inflicting a particularly severe damage on the long-existing social structures of the Arabian society. The people of urban and rural areas rapidly began to get poorer, becoming entirely dependent on big cattle breeders, sheikhs and creditors. Many of the people became slaves; others were forced to work for peanuts in craft workshops or in pastures.

On the other hand, with undermining of tribal isolation and growth of trade relations, different tribes allied, and big unions emerged on the basis of mutually beneficial agreements between the wealthy tribal nobility and the merchants. At that very moment, arose the idea of a political unification of the Arabian nomads, which soon acquired the character of an urgent need.

That had to do with the fact that the great empires of that time – Byzantium and Iran – sought to take control of the trade routes from the Mediterranean countries to India and China which were through territories inhabited by Arabs. It is clear that the Arab elite itself, whose wealth was almost entirely based on middlemen services for trade caravans, was watching the confrontation between the two hegemony with excitement and anxiety.

The long-lasting struggle between Iran and Byzantium ended with the Persians conquering Ethiopia – Byzantium's satellite state that captured Yemen. The Ethiopians were expelled, and after that Iran took severe control over transit trade. In fact it redirected trade routes towards the controlled Persian Gulf. The termination of transit through Yemen had a severe impact on the economy of the Arabian cities connected to it, which were Mecca, Yasrib, Taifa and other cities.

Having lost a significant share of profits, the Arabian rich increased the exploitation of the workers. Now entire tribes fell into debt slavery, middlemen unscrupulously raised interest rates, artisans went bankrupt, entering the poor. By the beginning of the VII<sup>th</sup> century, an acute socio-economic crisis arose in Arabia. The tension between the exploiters (slave owners, merchants, money-lenders, sheikhs) and the exploited (slaves, artisans, rural workers) fueled.

The rich and powerful of the Arab society clearly felt a need for a powerful centralized authority that would not only be able to restrain the pressure from the oppressed groups, but, by uniting the disparate parts of the country, would be able to ensure independence of the union of the Arabian tribes, regain lost trade routes, and also conquer new ones.

But the existing beliefs of the era of the tribal system were impeding unifying, and destroying political unity of various tribes. Islam, with its struggling aim of monotheism and idea of unity of all Muslims, was to become a new ideology of the united Arabian state, corresponding to the interests of the privileged strata of the

Arab society.

## Before Islam

Contrary to the Qur'an and its interpreters, who unanimously have been asserting that the prophet Muhammad, who had the divine revelation, was the founder of the Arab religion, we can say that Islam did not take shape immediately, and Muhammad, no matter how great his real affairs are, was not the founder of Arab monotheism.

Long before the Islamic prophet, monotheistic religions were already widespread in Arabia: in the north of modern Yemen there was a rather aggressive Christian Kingdom of Aksum, and in some cities (oases of the Northern Hijaz, Yasrib, Najran and others) there were numerous diasporas of Jews who settled here back in the era of the Roman conquest.

The direct result of Christianity and Judaism influence on the local nomadic tribes was the appearance in the IV century. AD of the so-called "Rahmanism" (from the ancient Arabian "rhmn" - "merciful"): a vague and very obscure belief in a certain single supreme being. This belief rooted mainly in Yemen, where the cultural influence of Christians and Jews was strong.

As a result of an urgent need for the unification of Arab tribes, right after Rahmanism, Hanifism emerged in the V century Arabia. It was a more systemized belief in one god (Tawheed). Moreover, unlike Rahmanism, Hanifism directly fought against tribal beliefs and tribal gods, calling for the unity of all Arabs around a certain supreme deity, Allah (from the Arabic "al-ilah", "god" with the definite article).

Actually, Muhammad himself was a follower of Hanifism. When Muhammad started preaching, Hanifism already had a solid history, so that the idea of him as the founder of the belief in one god is historically incorrect.

## Muhammad

Historical science does not have reliable information about life and activities of Muhammad. Comparing the data from various, clearly biased sources, cleansing them of meretricious mythology, we can generally describe the course of Muhammad life, who most likely existed.

We can conclude that we are talking about a person originated from a not-so-rich family of a small Meccan merchant from an influential tribe of Quraysh, who, at the age of about 40, suddenly left the family business, established in the faith, declaring himself a prophet.

In the first 12 years of his public activities, Muhammad did not achieve particularly impressive successes: the Meccan poor, for the most part, shied away from the prophet, and the Quraysh nobility was afraid that introduction of the new belief would undermine its dominant political and economic position.

Not being successful in Mecca, as well as being openly oppressed by the Meccan authorities, Muhammad, leading his supporters, moved to Yathrib in 622 (Madinat an-Nabī, "the city of the prophet," or in short, Medina), i.e. performed "Hegira" (Arabic: "migration"), from which the Muslim reckoning begins.

In Medina he gained more success. First of all it had to do with the fact that the population of the provincial Medina was openly hostile towards the persecutors of Muslims i.e. the Meccan political elite that sought to establish its dominance over neighboring tribes and cities as well. And second of all, the prophet managed to find mutual understanding in his hatred for Mecca among his many relatives on mother's side (the mother of Muhammad Amin came from Medina). In addition, other Hanifa preachers with their students joined him earlier on his way from Mecca. Besides, some social demagoguery of the prophet, like damnation of middlemen charging a huge percentage and thereby making the workers broke, or condemning the arrogance of the rich - all that attracted the masses of the most disadvantaged residents of the city and its environs to Muslims.

Thus, in Medina, a large, social-religious, movement opposed to Mecca appeared, which was led by Muhammad. Soon, the overwhelming majority of inhabitants of the city, as well as of the surrounding nomadic tribes, joined the Muslim community, seeing in the "uniting faith" of the prophet an appeal for the necessary peace for Arabian folks, that at that moment were caught up in countless and endless religious tribal conflicts.

Literally one year later, having had dominant influence over the region, Muhammad, without putting it off, with "war against paganism" slogans, began a long-lasting struggle with the Meccan political elite. The relentless attacks on trade caravans, which not only provided the Muslim community and its army with goods, but also increase of the authority of Muhammad himself were coupled with the expanding religious propaganda among the Meccan poor, which caused recoil from the hostile elite of the Quraish. However, internal disagreements and remarkable leadership talent of Muhammad led to the fact that, the Meccans failed to win over Medina, despite its clear superiority in wealth and power (fighting against the Muslim community, the Qurayshs even used numerous Ethiopian slaves).

Finally, in the situation of strategic equilibrium, Muhammad and the political elite of Mecca reached a compromise by concluding The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in 628. However, a year later the treaty was violated by the Qurayshi, after that Muhammad, having gotten an army of 10 thousand people from the neighboring tribes together, occupied Mecca almost without a fight. But the Meccan tribal elite, which was doing harm to the Muslim community for so long, was not destroyed: limiting itself to the removal of tribal idols from the Kaaba and having the inhabitants to make the pledge, Muhammad left his native Mecca, leaving here two of his deputies, who had got into good terms with the Qurayshi rich.

Actually, this is the story of the triumphal success of Muhammad's preachings, who died only two years after the "conquest" of Mecca, having managed to unite almost the entire Arabian Peninsula under a single centralized authority.

There are good reasons to believe that Muhammad was not the only one who strived for unification Arabs. The long need for the unification of the Arab tribes, as well as the explicit protest of numerous masses against outdated laws of the patriarchal tribal system, caused a rather serious and warlike "prophetic" movement. Sunnah, the body of traditional Islamic law based on details of the life of a prophet, mentions at least four "false prophets" —hanifs which engaged in similar activities, i.e. the spreading the idea of a single cult of Allah among the Arabian tribes in the name of creating a centralized state.

One of "false prophets" was Musaylimah (Maslamah), the political leader of the Hanifa tribe, who settled in al-Yamamah - the agricultural center of the Arabian Peninsula. Having declared himself the prophet of one God Rahman, Musaylimah, at first tried to negotiate with Muhammad on consociation in Arabia, but when he was turned down, he began a long and consistent struggle against the Muslim community. Advocating for equality, Musaylimah gained popularity among the

majority of the exploited population of al-Yamamah, and with their help he replaced the long-standing tribal leader Sumama ibn Usala, who had converted to Islam at that time. Perhaps the confrontation with the tribal nobility and the rich, who were inclined to the teachings of Muhammad, which guaranteed remaining of their political and economic power, was the main reason for weakening of Musaylimah's camp, which was soon defeated by troops of the successor of the prophet, Caliph Abu Bakr.

Another false prophet who sought to unite Arabia under their political leadership was Sajah, a woman prophetess who became the political leader of large Banin Tamim tribe that controlled over areas not only in Arabia, but also a part of present Iraq. It is interesting that in addition to attacking Muslim regions, Sajah's troops raided Musaylimah, who was forced to pay off his enemies a part of the al-Yamama harvest. However, as in the case with the first "false prophet", internal strife undermined the power of the opposed Islamic tribal union, which was also defeated by the caliphate after the death of Muhammad.

The third contender for the role of the only "prophet of Allah" was Tulayha (Talha), the military commander of the Banu Asad ibn Khuzaymah tribe, who managed to unite a tribal alliance in the name of the "fight against pagans" of Syria and Iraq. Not recognizing Muhammad's leading political role, Tulayha started fierce anti-Islamic propaganda, entering the war with the young Islamic state, that again defeated him in 632.

Finally, the fourth "nabi" (prophet), speaking for one God, was Al-Aswad Al-Ansi, the military leader of Al-'Ansi tribe, who established his dominance over the whole territory of Yemen just when Muhammad led the victorious war against Mecca. Having killed the local ruler who converted to Islam and having expelled the officials appointed by Muhammad, Al-'Ansi came into a military-ideological confrontation with Islam, and several days before the death of Muhammad himself it ended with the troops of the "false prophet" being defeated by the Muslim troops reinforced by Persian mercenaries.

Thus, by the middle of the VII century. as a result of an intense tribal struggle, Islam, spread on the Arabian Peninsula, as it fully met the requirements of developing Arab society at that moment. It resulted in the unification of once scattered tribes under the aegis of one Islamic state, the so-called Righteous Caliphate. The Caliphate, having achieved final empowerment of the central political authority, and having created a unified army and a unified financial system, in 633 already started, an aggressive campaign with the slogans of "spreading the true faith in Iraq, that was one of the richest provinces of the Sasanian empire. Thus, on the one hand, the Caliphate weakened the remaining anti-Islamic tribal opposition, giving it the opportunity to improve its economic situation by robbery, and on the other hand, conquering new lands, taxing the population of these lands, objectively strengthened the centralized Arab state, concentrating riches that were used for new conquests in the hands of the caliphs, viziers, emirs, naibs, and other feudal nobility. Thus, already 100 years after the emergence of the Caliphate, its borders extended from the foothills of Armenia to Spain.

## **The class system of Islam**

As a religion, Islam, just like Christianity, was a syncretic cult, which initially incorporated a number of ideas, rituals and rites that were in the Arab tribal society. So, the five-times-a-day prayer with obligatory washing (typical, by the way, for a much more ancient Zoroastrianism), fasting, sacred months (al-ashkhour al-khurum), circumcision (sunnat), food and household taboos (haram) - all that was part of the

pre-Islamic Arab tradition, naturally implemented in the new monotheistic cult. The cult gained ideas from the familiar to Hanifs Judeo-Christian, and local, specifically, Meccan mythology.

Thus, the Kaaba black stone was a place subject of worship of nomadic Arabs long before the birth of Muhammad. By the time he began his prophetic activities, Mecca had already turned into a major trade and economic center of Arabia, where fairs regularly brought huge profits to the top of the Meccan during the sacred months. Ideologically, this economic activity was expressed in the transformation of Mecca into a kind of pan-Arab religious complex, where numerous idols and totems of Arabian tribes were located, in honor of which, in fact, bazaars were arranged. Not only this pagan tradition was violated in Islam, it also gained more importance by declaring the black stone (one of many similar tribal fetishes, most likely symbolizing the supreme Meccan god Huabal) sacred, and that the Kaaba (a cubic structure built over this stone) must be visited by righteous Muslims. Exactly the same situation was with the ritual of passage between the two hills located next to the Kaaba - Safa and Marva. Being an explicitly and unambiguously pagan tradition of the pre-Islamic Meccan cult, it has been preserved in Islam, becoming a mandatory practice during Hajj.

Thus, the reforms of Muhammad, which approved of the profitable Kaaba cult by referring to the activities of biblical Adam, Abraham, and Ismail, who supposedly came up with the idea of the Meccan black stone worship, helped to further strengthen the economic, political and ideological power of the native prophet of the Quraysh tribe in Arab society. We indicate in this connection that all so-called righteous caliphs, as well as the kind of caliphs of the Umayyads who replaced them, came from the Quraysh tribe.

From class system point of view, Islam, like Christianity, had a positive role in the transition from the tribal system with elements of slavery to feudalism. Having destroyed the previous tribal borders and cultural and economic inequality, Islam first proclaimed the equality of all Arabs, and then, with the beginning of the expansion of the united Islamic state, the equality of all Muslims in general.

However, unlike in Christianity, where at the early stages of its development some anti-property views of the slaves and the poor were expressed, in Islam people stood guard over the interests of private property owners and never allowed emerging of even primitive egalitarian-communist ideas, typical of various Christian sects and movements in different eras (Agonistici, Anabaptists, Hussites, etc.). Muhammad's sermon does not contain any revolutionary ideas, calls for the division of property or for emancipation of the slaves. Sermons condemning the charging of interest (ribs) or arrogance of the rich are nothing more than social demagogy, designed to attract the broke workers of the Arabian Peninsula to Islam.

In general, the religion of Muhammad did not pose any real danger to property of the Bedouin tribal elite, which, in the new Islamic centralized state, completed its transformation into a feudal class.

Thus, we can conclude that Islam, one of the subtypes of Hanif sermon, was the ideology of the empowering class of Arab feudal lords, that having established dominance as a result of a bloody fights, imposed its will on society through a special system of legal law Sharia, the source of which is the Koran and the Sunnah, as well as Ijma, the combined outlooks of legal scholars (fakihs) the feudal lords.

Sharia, which took its final shape in the 11th-12th centuries, fully and unconditionally expresses the interests of big owners. Having legitimized personal and property inequality, "sanctified" the right of private property, putting a woman on the same level as a luxury item and a domestic slave, and also directly sanctioning patriarchal slavery, Sharia provided severe punishment for attempting

to violate the holy foundations of private property. A striking example is the famous chopping off of a hand of thieves, carried out regardless of what made the person steal.

At the same time, there is a system of legal trickery in Sharia (“hila”, plural “hiyal”), which allows “legally” avoid Sharia prohibitions and precepts, “without insulting Allah”, which was used by the Qadi (Sharia judges), Fakihs and Alims (authoritative theologians) to protect the interests of the owners from whom they received money. Already from the VIII century. Hiyal was actively used by the propertied strata of Islamic society for a variety of purposes: avoiding payment of zakat (we talk about it below), perjury, obtaining a pre-emptive right to acquire land and real estate, debauchery (through the so-called “temporary marriage” – nikah mut’a ), usurious and speculative transactions and so on. Today, the most pronounced use of hiyal can be seen in work of the so-called “Islamic banks”, existing contrary to the Muhammad’s prohibition of money-lending and interest charging.

Zakat, which is mandatory for every Muslim, is an annual tax (initially in kind, and then money) on any type of income and property, paid in favor of needy co-religionists – the poor, widows, orphans, debtors and other categories of the poor. Concentrated in the hands of the clergy, Zakat served as a powerful tool to maintain the moral and material prestige of the Islamic cult in society through charity.

Sadaqah, unlike Zakat, is voluntary charity where money is given by a Muslim in order to earn mercy of Allah.

Both of these rituals were aimed at partially reducing social tension between the rich and the poor, creating an illusion of unity of interests between robbers and robbed people, and destroying all revolutionary sentiments by referring to the “justice” of the Islamic religion, which makes the rich share what Allah gave them ( i.e. wealth) with the poor.

## Conclusion

Emerged in the times of destruction of the patriarchal clan system of the Arabs, Islam was by no means a result of preaching of Muhammad exclusively. Change in Arabs’ lives, who quickly turned from a group of semi-nomadic tribes into creators of a great empire, led to corresponding changes in the ideology. Conquest of new lands by a young Islamic state, that were not prepared for complex forms of state administration, acquaintance with the culture and traditions of peoples at a higher stage of development, need for ideological control over the multicultural population of the caliphate, that was wary of the strange traditions of the Arabs that appeared on the basis of semi-nomadic desert living, formation powerful trading capital – all this could not but lead to a gradual “enrichment” of the Islamic cult, philosophy and law with new ideas.

Rapid, and by yardstick of history flash-like development of Arab society from a semi-nomadic state to feudal, and then to empire that influenced vast areas, led in the IX-XII centuries to the equally rapid development of Muslim culture, which incorporated achievements of the peoples in the caliphate. Based on the experience of past generations of adherents of a different faith, the Caliphate scientists made a significant contribution to the development of astronomy, optics, chemistry, mineralogy, medicine, agronomy, botany, and mathematics. At a time when medieval Europe was still stagnating in religious ignorance and intellectual nonsense, the Arabs were already familiar with the best works of ancient scientific and fiction literature (safekeeping of which we owe them much), which was mercilessly destroyed by the Christian church.

Such a liberal attitude of Islamic society towards alien influence, resulting from the expansion of trade and economic relations, led to the emergence of a particular stratum of Muslim intelligentsia, the "Adibs," for whom the narrow framework of the Muslim worldview was not enough. And it is not surprising that already in the early stages these comprehensively developed personalities started doubting about the truth of Islamic teachings. In this sense, the Muslim medieval culture - unlike the culture of the Christian West - is very rich in examples of outright atheism and freethinking.

In the X-XI centuries already among the Muslim scholars and intellectuals appear first "mulhids" - people who do not believe in any god - some of them, for example, Omar Khayyam (1048-1123) or Abu-al-'Ala 'al-Ma'rri (973-1057) who openly ridiculed Muslim rituals, faith in the hereafter and resurrection, revealed the unreasonableness and injustice of the sacred social order, accused the ruling elite of using religion to keep people in obedience.

But there were even more such atheists and religious skeptics who, by virtue of established religious and ideological norms, could not openly express their thoughts. They resorted to a special technique - "tawil" - a symbolic-allegorical interpretation of the sacred texts in an anti-religious meaning. One of the first famous "mulhids" who adopted the tawil principle was Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī (922-1023), who was considered the most dangerous atheist because of the ability to hide his "subversive" views behind the outer shell of complete loyalty to the principles of Islam.

Then the principle of Tawil became widespread among philosophers, poets and even theologians of the Arab Middle Ages. In the latter case, we have in mind the philosophical and religious movement of Mu'tazila who fully denied Islamic fatalism, recognized freedom of human will and negatively regarded attempts to justify injustice and social evil based on divine providence. Moreover, often these arguments expressed open theomachy. For example, Abu 'Isa al-Warraḡ (889-994), the author of the book Refutation of Three Religions, or Ibn al-Rawandi (855-910), the founder of the concept of "three deceivers" "(Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad), which had been influencing Arab religious skeptics for a long time.

Thus, abrupt development of Arab society associated with the triumph of Islam, led at the same time to emerging of openly anti-religious sentiments within the young Muslim "intelligentsia", who objectively expressed the interests of, firstly, commercial capital, constrained in its development by ridiculous religious prohibitions, and secondly, the non-Arab part of the feudal class, forced to obey the Caliph as the heir to the prophet Muhammad himself.

It's typical that this broad atheistic movement that was generated by the national and social peculiarities of the Caliphate and included dozens of philosophers, poets, scientists and theologians, took place at a time when the "enlightened" Christian Europe literally was drowning in darkness of religious obscurantism, that did not allow even the slightest doubt in the truth of Christian dogmas.

Contrary to stereotypes prevailing in the West, the Muslim East was not a wild land inhabited by bearded fanatics; on the contrary, during the X-XII centuries it was the international Caliphate that was the center of cultural and economic development of mankind, which, having reached its limits, led first to undermining the Caliphs' authority due to economically growing regional separatism, and then to the final collapse of the weakened Caliphate under the attacks of the Mongols in the XIII century.

After these events, Islam begins to lose its progressive features. The golden age of free-thinking of the Muslim Middle Ages was replaced by the reactionary obscurantism of decaying feudalism. However, the philosophical ideas of Eastern

atheists were not in vain: through Sicily and Toledo, the works of Arabic-Muslim “mulchids” translated into Latin appeared in the universities of Western European countries, where they were the basis for the formation of a new type of antifeudal and anti-religious worldview, the worldview of the emerging European bourgeoisie.

According to Engels’ “Dialectics of Nature”, it was the cheerful free-thinking of the Arabs that laid foundation for the materialism of the eighteenth century.

Original article