

The arc of history is long—and the maturation of faith longer still.

Maturing Religions: When Faith No Longer Needs the Sword

A meditation on the 1,400–1,500 year maturation of religions—and whether Islam may now be approaching the moment when faith no longer travels with the sword.

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Uncompressed Thinking

Some transformations in human history unfold so slowly that they become visible only across centuries.

Religions are among the institutions that evolve along such long civilizational arcs. In their early centuries, universal faiths often expand alongside political power, and belief sometimes travels in the shadow of the sword. Yet history suggests that this stage is not permanent.

Christianity required nearly fifteen centuries to move beyond that era. Only after a long and turbulent history of crusades, religious wars, and political entanglement did Christian civilization gradually reach a point at which faith could flourish without relying on coercion or political domination.

Islam today stands at almost exactly the same point in its own historical timeline.

That symmetry raises a profound question: might religions follow long cycles of maturation measured not in decades but in centuries? And if so, could the present moment represent the early stages of such a transformation within the Islamic world?

Opening Reflection

Human history is full of long arcs—slow transformations that become visible only when we step back and look across centuries. Civilizations evolve, political systems mature, and cultural traditions gradually discover forms of stability that earlier generations could scarcely imagine. It would be surprising if religions, among the most powerful institutions created by human societies, did not also move through recognizable stages of development.

One stage appears repeatedly in history: a period during which religious conviction and political power become closely intertwined. During such periods the expansion of belief often travels alongside the expansion of political authority. Faith spreads through teaching and persuasion, but it may also spread within the shadow of political power and, at times, the sword.

Yet history suggests that this stage does not last forever.

Over time, religions seem to acquire a deeper confidence in themselves. The need to expand through coercion gradually fades. Faith begins to spread primarily through culture, institutions, scholarship, and voluntary conviction. A religion reaches a form of maturity when it no longer requires political domination in order to sustain itself.

The question explored in this essay therefore lies somewhere between history and the present moment:

How long does it take for a religion to reach that stage—and could we possibly be witnessing such a transition today?

The discussion that follows examines this question through the historical experiences of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, before returning to the present moment and the possibility that another long arc of religious maturation may now be unfolding.

Abstract

Religions evolve over long stretches of history. In their early centuries, many universal faiths expanded alongside political power, and at times political authority justified expansion in religious terms. Yet historical evidence suggests that this phase is not permanent. Over time, major religious traditions tend to transition away from expansion by coercion toward expansion by persuasion, culture, and voluntary adherence.

Judaism appears to have reached this stage nearly two millennia ago. Christianity required roughly **1,400–1,500 years** to move fully beyond the era in which religious expansion could be associated with the sword. Islam today stands at approximately the same historical age that Christianity had reached when it began that transition.

This striking temporal symmetry raises a provocative possibility: that the Islamic world may now be approaching its own moment of religious maturation. History suggests that such transitions can be costly. The long period during which Christianity disentangled faith from political power was accompanied by wars that claimed millions of lives, and the Islamic world has experienced its own long history of conflicts in which religion and political authority were intertwined. If current upheavals in the Middle East represent the early stages of a similar transformation, the process may be painful but historically significant. The hope—perhaps even the prayer—of the present generation is that the transition will ultimately allow faith to stand on conviction rather than coercion.

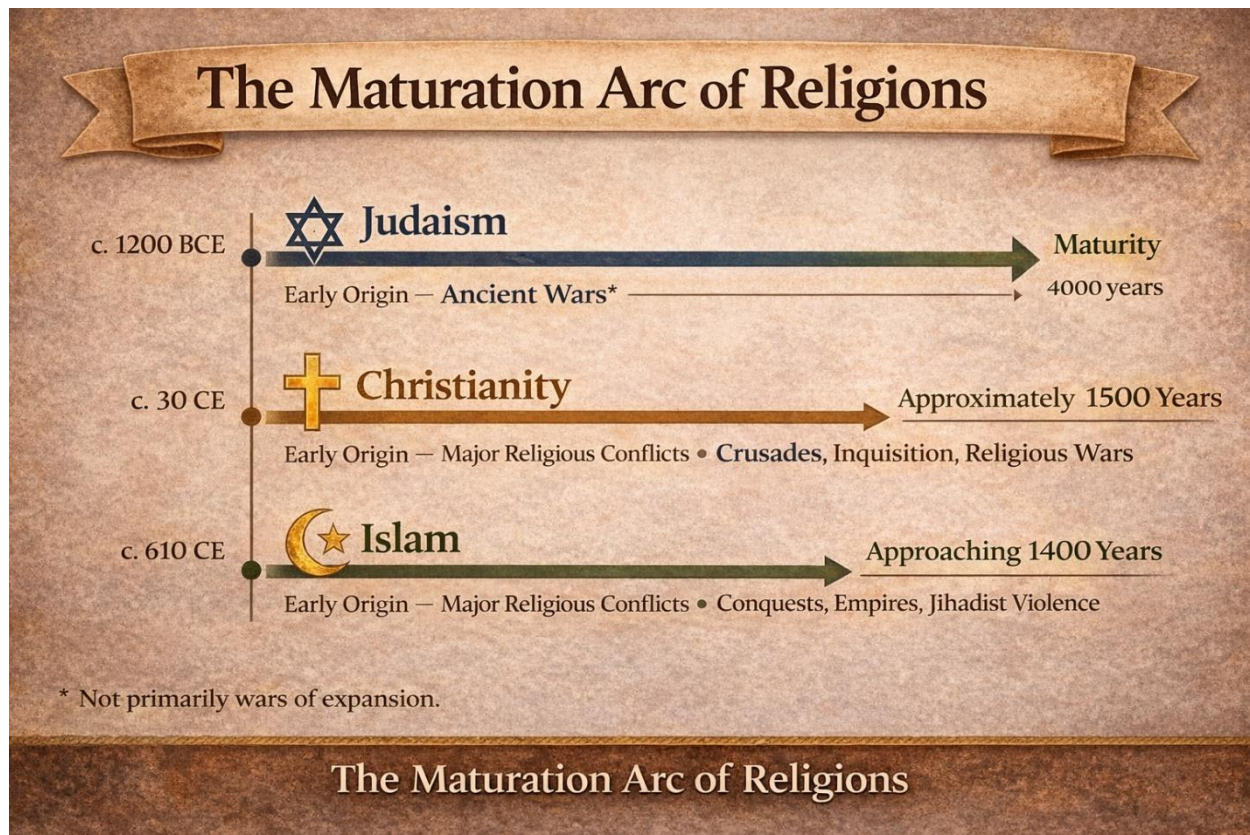
Table 1. The Long Maturation Arc of the Three Abrahamic Religions

Approximate historical timelines and estimated deaths in major religious conflicts associated with expansionary phases of each civilization.

Religion	Origin	Expansionary / Conflict Phase	Approximate Duration	Estimated Deaths in Major Religious Conflicts*	Maturity Phase
Judaism	~1200–1000 BCE	Early biblical wars (not conversion-driven)	Several centuries	Not reliably quantifiable	After 70 CE Judaism evolves into a non-expansionary religious civilization
Christianity	~30 CE	Crusades, medieval conversions, wars of religion	~1,400–1,500 years	~8–22 million (core conflicts), possibly ~15–29 million including frontier wars	After 17th century expansion primarily through missions and voluntary conversion
Islam	~610 CE	Early conquests, imperial wars, sectarian conflicts, modern militant movements	~1,400 years	~6–13 million in major identifiable conflicts (minimum defensible estimate)	Possible transition unfolding in modern era

Estimates reflect major conflicts for which casualty ranges appear in historical scholarship. Precise totals remain uncertain because medieval and early historical records are incomplete.

The long historical trajectory summarized in Table 1 can also be visualized conceptually as a civilizational arc, illustrated in Figure 1 below. These figures should not be understood as precise totals but as broad historical estimates that illustrate the scale of human loss that has accompanied the long and difficult process by which religions gradually disentangle themselves from political power.



Judaism: Early Religious Maturity

Among the world's major religious traditions, Judaism occupies a distinctive position in this discussion. While the Hebrew Bible records wars fought by ancient Israel, these conflicts were not fought with the purpose of converting other peoples to Judaism. The religion that emerged from the biblical tradition was never organized as an expansionary missionary faith.

Conversion to Judaism has always existed, but historically it was neither aggressively pursued nor considered a central religious mission. Judaism developed instead as a covenantal community bound together by shared law, shared memory, and shared ethical tradition.

The decisive transformation occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. With the loss of political sovereignty and the dispersal of Jewish communities across the Mediterranean and beyond, Judaism was forced to reinvent itself. The result was Rabbinic Judaism—a remarkable civilizational adaptation that sustained religious identity without reliance on territory, armies, or political authority.

For nearly two thousand years Jewish communities maintained their religious tradition through scholarship, education, legal discourse, and communal institutions. In doing so, Judaism became a powerful example of a religion capable of surviving and flourishing without any expectation that faith should expand through political or military power.

In this sense Judaism may be understood as having reached religious maturity remarkably early. It discovered a durable form of spiritual and cultural continuity independent of the sword.

Christianity: A Fifteen-Century Transition

Christianity followed a much longer and more turbulent path.

In its earliest centuries Christianity spread entirely through persuasion. The first Christians possessed no political authority and no armies. Their message traveled along trade routes and within communities through preaching, example, and personal conversion.

The situation changed dramatically in the fourth century, when Christianity became intertwined with the institutions of imperial power. Once linked to political authority, Christianity gradually entered a long historical phase in which religious expansion and political expansion became mutually reinforcing.

During the medieval period, crusades and campaigns aimed at converting pagan populations in Northern Europe reflected this fusion of faith and political power. The spread of Christianity across large regions of Europe often occurred alongside the expansion of kingdoms and empires.

Yet this phase did not last indefinitely.

By the early fifteenth century, crusading expansion in Northern Europe had effectively collapsed. Military campaigns aimed at converting pagan populations disappeared from the European landscape. The subsequent religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—culminating in the catastrophic devastation of the Thirty Years' War—demonstrated the destructive consequences of attempting to impose religious uniformity through political force.

The tragic losses of human life can be understood as part of the historical price paid during Christianity's long transition toward a model in which faith no longer depended on political enforcement.

Gradually, European societies abandoned the idea that faith could or should be enforced by war.

From that point onward Christianity continued to expand across the globe, but primarily through missions, education, cultural exchange, and voluntary conversion rather than through crusading warfare.

The transformation had taken time—roughly **1,400 to 1,500 years** from the birth of Christianity to the disappearance of religious warfare in Christian civilization as illustrated in Figure 1.

Christianity had reached maturity: a stage in which faith no longer depended on the sword.

Human Losses During the Christian Maturation Period

Historical estimates suggest that the major wars fought under explicitly Christian religious banners—from the Crusades through the wars of religion culminating in the Thirty Years' War—resulted in roughly **8 to 22 million deaths**. Broader interpretations that include frontier conflicts such as the Reconquista raise the possible total to approximately **15 to 29 million deaths** across Christianity's roughly **1,400–1,500 year maturation period**.

Human Losses During the Islamic Maturation Period

Islam has existed for roughly **1,400 years**, during which religious identity has at times intersected with political expansion and conflict. When historians examine major identifiable conflicts—from early conquests through later sectarian struggles and modern militant movements—the combined death toll is commonly estimated to fall in the range of approximately **6 to 13 million deaths** across fourteen centuries, though precise totals remain uncertain.

As in the earlier Christian experience, these conflicts illustrate the difficult historical period during which religious identity and political power remain closely intertwined.

Islam: Standing at the Same Historical Age

Islam emerged in the early seventh century, meaning that roughly 1,400 years have now passed since its birth.

This historical fact places Islam today at nearly the same point in its civilizational timeline that Christianity had reached when it began moving beyond its own era of religious warfare and politically supported religious expansion.

The symmetry is striking.

Christianity required roughly **1,400–1,500 years** to reach the point where religious expansion through military conflict ceased to be a defining feature of its civilization. Islam today stands almost exactly at the same historical age.

This observation does not imply that religious development follows a mechanical clock. History is never that simple. Yet the pattern raises a fascinating possibility: that religions may require very long periods—measured not in decades but in centuries—to disentangle faith from the political structures that once helped carry it across continents.

If that interpretation holds, the Islamic world today may be approaching a historical threshold similar to the one Christianity crossed several centuries ago.

The hypothesis explored in this essay can be visualized as a long civilizational arc, illustrated below.

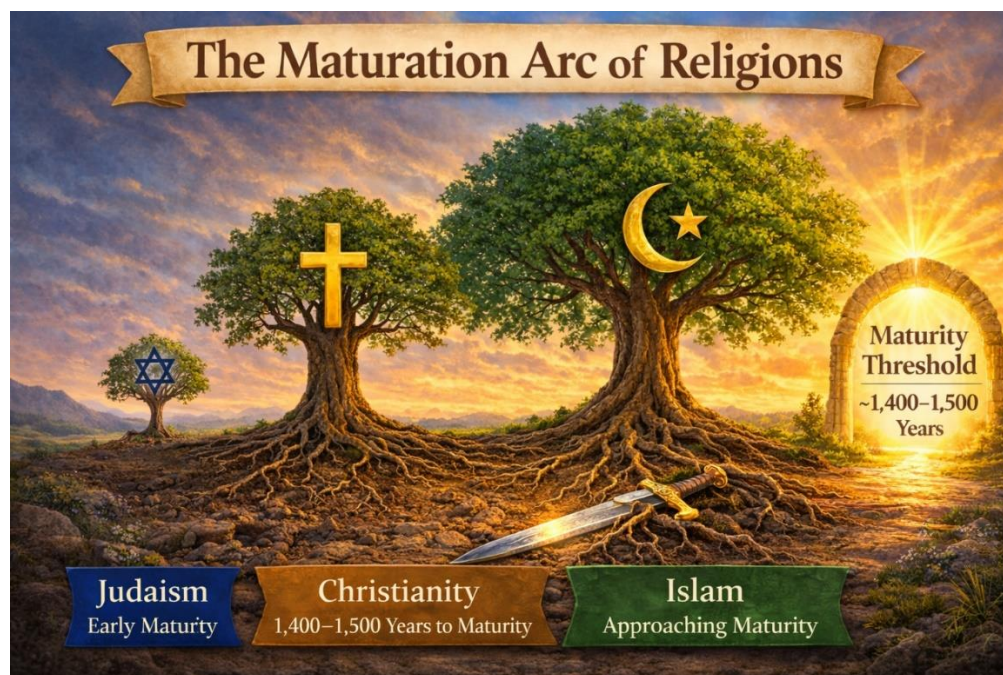


Figure 1. The Maturation Arc of Religions

A conceptual illustration of the historical trajectory proposed in this essay. Judaism reached a non-expansive form of religious maturity early in its development. Christianity required roughly 1,400–

1,500 years to move beyond the era in which faith was closely tied to political expansion and religious warfare. Islam today stands at approximately the same historical age that Christianity had reached at the beginning of that transition, raising the possibility that the Islamic world may now be approaching a similar stage of religious maturity.

An Emerging Alignment in the Islamic World

One of the most striking developments of the present moment is the changing political landscape within the Islamic world itself.

For decades the dominant geopolitical narrative portrayed the region as divided primarily along traditional political and national lines. Yet a different pattern has gradually become visible. Increasingly, many Muslim-majority countries appear to be moving away from the model of militant political Islam that defined parts of the late twentieth century.

Across the Middle East and beyond, governments that once competed for ideological leadership are now cooperating more openly on questions of regional stability, economic development, and modernization. Diplomatic relations that once seemed impossible are being established. Economic partnerships and technological cooperation are expanding across former political divides.

Against this background, the Islamic Republic of Iran increasingly appears as an outlier rather than a center of ideological gravity. Since the revolution of 1979, Iran's leadership has promoted a model in which religious authority and militant political expansion remain tightly intertwined. Yet much of the broader Muslim world now seems to be moving in a different direction.

Recent diplomatic developments illustrate this shift. The normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, the growing cooperation among Gulf countries, and the increasing emphasis on economic modernization across the region all reflect a broader strategic reorientation. While political rivalries remain, many governments in the Muslim world appear increasingly focused on stability, development, and integration into the global economy rather than on revolutionary religious confrontation.

This does not mean that ideological tensions have disappeared. Nor does it mean that the region's political future is settled. But the growing distance between Iran's revolutionary model and the trajectory of many other Muslim societies may represent an important signal: that the long historical process through which religions gradually separate spiritual authority from political militancy could already be underway within the Islamic world itself.

If this interpretation proves correct, then the geopolitical shifts visible today may represent more than a rearrangement of alliances; they may signal that the long historical process through which religions gradually separate spiritual authority from political coercion is once again advancing.

A Sense of Relief

For observers of these events, the emotional landscape is complicated. The suffering that accompanies political upheaval is real, and every loss of human life is tragic. The historical record reminds us that earlier civilizational transitions were also accompanied by immense human losses before a more stable relationship between faith and political power eventually emerged.

Yet alongside the concern and uncertainty there exists another feeling—one that is difficult to articulate but impossible to ignore.

It is the sense that humanity may be witnessing the early stages of an important historical turning point.

If Islam is indeed approaching the same stage of religious maturity that Christianity reached after roughly **1,400–1,500 years**, then the long arc of religious history may be bending toward a world in which the great faiths of humanity coexist without reliance on political domination.

That possibility inspires a quiet sense of relief.

Perhaps the feeling requires a new word. “Hopefully” seems insufficient.

One might say “**prayfully**.”

A hope expressed not merely as an expectation, but as a prayer that the painful transitions of the present will ultimately lead to a future in which faith stands on conviction rather than coercion.

Final Reflection

History rarely reveals its meaning while events are still unfolding. Only later do people recognize that they were living through the beginning of a transformation.

If the pattern suggested in this essay proves meaningful—if religions indeed require something on the order of **1,400–1,500 years** to move beyond the stage in which faith travels alongside political power—then the present moment may represent the early stages of such a transition within the Islamic world.

No one can know with certainty. Civilizational change unfolds slowly, unevenly, and often through periods of turbulence that appear confusing while they are happening.

Yet looking at the present moment—the debates within Islamic societies, the generational changes across the Middle East, and the visible tensions surrounding political systems that fuse religion and state authority—it is difficult to avoid the sense that history may once again be moving.

If that movement ultimately leads toward a future in which faith stands confidently on persuasion rather than coercion, the transformation would represent not the decline of religion but its maturation.

For those who watch these events unfold, the feeling that emerges is not triumph, but relief.

Relief that the long evolution of religious civilization may be continuing its gradual movement toward a stage in which the great faiths of humanity coexist without the shadow of the sword.

The historical estimates discussed earlier in this essay remind us that the path toward religious maturity has often been long and costly. Yet history also suggests that such transformations, once completed, can reshape civilizations for centuries.

Perhaps the best word for that feeling is one I found myself inventing while thinking about these questions: *prayfully*.

A hope expressed not merely as an expectation, but as a quiet prayer that the painful transitions of the present will ultimately lead to a future in which faith stands on conviction rather than coercion.

Perhaps the dawn of a new stage in the long maturation of faith.

