

The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East

Timur Kuran

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Economically, the Middle East has lagged behind the West for centuries, and, as author Timur Kuran contends, that may be less attributable to the ravages of colonialism or scarcity of natural resources than to cultural conditions grown partially out of laws derived from the Quran. As corporations, designed to have lives of their own, were developing in the West, the Islamic Middle East clung to the more vulnerable economic model of partnerships, a form that failed to shield investors and which could deform or destruct with the death of a single partner. “Well into the nineteenth century,” Kuran asserts, “the private sectors of the Middle East were composed of atomistic enterprises that did not outlive their founders.”

Islamic-imposed laws of inheritance, while fairer to survivors (including wives and daughters) than the more arbitrary laws common to the West, also worked against the reliable accumulation and long-range use of capital. Upper-class Muslim men, often with multiple wives, were especially subject to having their fortunes atomized after their deaths. Christian law did not specify how inheritances should be handled, nor did it condemn modifications of that process as “sacrilegious.”

In the West, laws developed to further corporations and commerce rather than to further a faith. One consequence of this financially pragmatic attitude was the formation of a business press to disseminate useful market information. No such service pertained in the Middle East. Western universities became self-governing and created curricula adapted to the times, while their Middle Eastern equivalent—the *madrasas*—tended to be less intellectually flexible.

The lack of stock markets, standardized bookkeeping, or courts capable of adjudicating sophisticated business disputes further compounded the Middle East’s economic inertia. Add the Islamic prohibitions against charging interest on capital and it becomes even more apparent why businesses stultified. The fact that Islamic law treats apostasy as a capital offense has discouraged adaptability in business practices. According to figures Kuran quotes in support of his argument, the Middle Eastern share of the world’s gross domestic products dropped from 10.3% in 1000 to 2.2% in 1700. During that same period, the Western European share rose from 9.1% to 21.9%.

Kuran is professor of economics and political science and the Gorter Family Professor of Islamic Studies at Duke University. His book is not an attack on Islam but a dispassionate analysis of its effects in one sector of human activity. While his arguments (and the data behind them) tend to become repetitive, he does provide a useful perspective in understanding the perpetually turbulent relationship between the Middle East and the West.

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