

The Development of Islam

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To date, there are about 1.5 billion people practicing Islam in the world. Only 18 percent of these people live in the Middle East (Lecture). In America, a study that documented 3.3 million Muslims living in the United States in 2015 predicts that this number will increase to 9.45 million by 2050 (Mohamed). Since we inevitably will be exposed to some form of Islam during our lifetime, it is important to understand its development as well as how Islam fits in with Christianity and Judaism as a post-modern monotheistic religion.

Islam means “submission” (to God), and we can see this devotion in Muslim history (Esposito 186). Muslims believe that they are descendants of Abraham: while Christians and Jews trace their lineage back to Abraham’s second son Isaac, with his wife Sarah, Muslims follow their religious roots to Abraham’s first son, Ismail, who was born to Abraham’s servant, Haagar (Esposito 187). According to the Old Testament, Abraham only had a child with Haagar because he believed Sarah was sterile (Lecture).

In 570, Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born in central Arabia into the ruling tribe of Mecca and was orphaned at an early age. By the time he was thirty, he was a respected and well-liked member of society. He had a very close and extensively documented relationship with his wife, Khadija (Esposito 193). During that time, each small city had its own “divine patron” that was represented in shrines and seen as one of about 360 tribal gods that had influence (Esposito 192). Small communities of Christians and Jews were also present (Esposito 193).

Muslims believe that in 610, Muhammad received a message from God through the angel Gabriel. Muhammad was on Mount Hira to contemplate his life, and now, Muslims refer to this night as the “Night of Power and Excellence” (Esposito 193). Mohammad preached monotheism for the one true God, *Allah*, bashing the polytheistic nature of the community. This presented a problem for all of the people in Mecca who would benefit from the tourists on their pilgrimages

to visit their gods's shrines in the Kaaba. He also denounced the socioeconomic inequalities such as the overabundance of the poor, neglected orphans and widows, as well as the shady business practices such as false contracts and usury. He called for true believers to join him (Esposito 194).

Naturally, many people in power resisted Muhammad's teachings. He was prosecuted for ten years, until he and his followers moved (called the *hijra*) to Yathrib, which was renamed Medina, which means "'city' of the prophet," in 622. He was called to be a judge and soon became a political and religious leader, and the Muslim community began to grow (Esposito 194).

Muhammad retook Mecca, taught that Islam was personal, and developed the old rituals into the new standard. He continued to receive word from God that was later collected into the Quran; it discusses the five pillars (Faith, Prayer, Charity, Fasting, and Pilgrimage to Mecca). He cleansed the Kaaba to be a place of worship for only Allah (Esposito 195). Muhammad attempted to ally himself with the Jews and Christians, who he believed would accept Islam as the perfection and completion of their religion, as he believed. Almost everyone in Mecca converted but the three Jewish groups. He then decided to change the direction of the 5-times-daily prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca (Esposito 196).

He established many of the proper beliefs that Muslims hold today: "There is one true God, Allah, which is the same as the God of the Jews and Christians," "Allah has always and will always exist," "Allah has ultimate knowledge and created and controls everything," as well as characterization of the judgment after death and the notion of Heaven and Hell (Lecture). He continued to receive God's message for more than two decades, until died in 632, after leading the pilgrimage to Mecca and delivering his farewell sermon. Before he died, Muhammad either intentionally or unintentionally failed to name a successor (Esposito 197). This possibly mindless act led to crises, dissent, and civil wars (Esposito 201).

After Muhammad died, the question in everyone's minds was who was going to replace him. Muhammad's senior followers were known as the Companions to the Prophet, and they assured the Muslim community (known as the *ummah*) that even though Muhammad died, Allah did not. They named Abu Bakr as the *caliph*, which means successor or deputy. Abu Bakr took the position of the political and military head of the *ummah*. This began the stage in Muslim history known as the Caliphate (532-1258), which is divided into three sections: the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632-661), the Umayyad dynasty (661-750), and the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) (Esposito 201-2).

When Abu Bakr had been appointed, there was a major opposition from a minority. This minority wanted the line of succession to stay in the family of Muhammad and fall to the first eligible man. Their candidate was Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law (Lecture). The violent disagreement led to the splitting of the community into two groups: the Sunni majority who backed Abu Bakr, and the Shia minority who backed Ali (Esposito 203).

One of the greatest times for change and progression was during the Abbasid dynasty. In 750 at the beginning of the Abbasid dynasty there was still a heterogeneous mixture of population. There were many different cultures present in the same place. Naturally, the dynasty wanted Islamic unity to bring people together on a common ground. They started to develop a strong sense of the Muslim community, *ummah*, which all Muslims are a part of. Eventually, since the dynasty was legislating both spiritual and political life, it became a monarchy. With the change in identity and national feeling, the political structure also changed: the caliph would oversee the entire dynasty while local sultanates were recognized as regional rulers (Lecture). Obviously, today there are Muslims spread out over the globe; they aren't unified politically or spiritually, since there are clearly groups of Muslims that practice differently. However, this change did help

Islam at this time by being established more definitively as the religion of a solid empire.

Another great change of the time was the influence of a the Islamic philosopher, Al-Ghazali. The Abbasid dynasty was temporally centered in the Middle Ages, otherwise known as the Dark Ages. While most other regions at the time were living in the dark, it was a golden age for Islam: Muslims were the world leaders of science, philosophy, and theology. New inventions started coming out of the area such as number systems and new ways of thought. Al-Ghazali began translating Greek philosophy and science into Arabic. Many of the original Greek sources are lost, so most of our understanding of the Greek philosophy comes from these translations. Then, Arabic theologians began to introduce western theologians to Greek thought. This is important because certain language begins to change: in all three monotheistic traditions, the word *eternal*, which had never before been used to describe God, starts being used. A couple hundred years allowed the Greek ideas to sink into society and Islam. Eventually, these ideas started to be seen as complementing the religion (Lecture).

As more ideas move around and time goes by, as in any tradition, people start to question. This is the reason that today we can see distinct groups within Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Islamic law, *sharia*, is the “straight path to God” and is what many reformist groups begin to question. For years Islamic Law had been “the product of human understanding,” which is known as *fiqh*. However, sharia is composed of this human understanding as well as “God’s divinely revealed law,” which is what reformers attempt to separate from human interpretation (Esposito 242). The issue of interpretation (as always) still remains a serious issue that separates Islamic groups from others today.

We can see why the turning points of the development of Islam led to the post-modern society of Muslims we see today.

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God through the Holidays

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The word *God* is ubiquitous in our society. From the occasional exclamation, to seeing posters advertising for religious groups, to hearing or saying prayers, *God* is always there. However, people in different traditions often use the word very differently. These differences can be especially seen among the three major monotheistic religions through commonly practiced holiday traditions. We will look at the common practitioner's understanding of God through Ramadan, Ash Wednesday, and Channukka.

Ramadan is the last month of the 12-month Islamic (lunar) calendar, which falls 11 days short of the solar 12-month calendar widely used today. This means that Ramadan falls on different (solar) days every year and, in time, passes through all four of the seasons. Since fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars, it is a "holy month of fasting, introspection, and prayer" in Islam ("Ramadan").

Fasting during Ramadan occurs from sunrise to sunset. Everyone who is physically able is required to abstain from "eating, drinking, smoking and sexual activity, as well as unkind or impure thoughts and words, and immoral behavior." The goal is to be self-reflective and to have empathy for those who are less fortunate. At the end of Ramadan, there is a Feast of Fast-Breaking celebration known as Eid al-Fitr that lasts three days. In fact, Hillary Clinton hosted the first Eid-al-Fitr dinner at the white house as the first Lady in 1996 ("Ramadan").

From a theological background, Muslims believe that in 610, Muhammad started receiving God's messages through the angel Gabriel, and these revelations were collected directly into a book, the Quran. They also believe that there is one true God, Allah, that transcends everything and on whom everything depends (Lecture). Muslims can reach salvation by following God's commandments ("Ramadan").

Ramadan is celebrated as the month that Muhammad first received God's message ("Ra-

madan”). This shows how Muslims understand God because in participating in Ramadan traditions, they are directly demonstrating their faith by following one of pillars of Islam, and hence following God’s Commandments. The fasting can be seen as a symbol of the Muslim’s dedication to and covenant with Allah. It can also be seen as a symbol of empathy towards the less fortunate. The act brings them closer to each other and to Allah.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, every year. Lent is the six-week period before Easter, so Ash Wednesday seems to be connected to a tradition that does have links back to Biblical times, but Ash Wednesday only dates back to the 11th Century. Lent is a period of time that some Christians observe by repenting sins and praying before Easter. The book of Daniel relates ashes and fasting, which itself is related to penance, so ashes are then related to penance. It was with this association that the 11th century Christians developed Ash Wednesday into what it is today (Ross).

It wasn’t until a few decades ago, however, that Ash Wednesday became a majorly celebrated tradition in America. The biggest element of Ash Wednesday is wearing an ash cross on your forehead. Many think this tradition stuck because it is an easy way to introduce the rest of your life to your faith: it is a good conversation starter. It was the long-time-needed way to connect the inner, spiritual side of Christianity to the body and the outside world. The ashes are made from the palms that were carried the previous year to signify the palms that the Gospels say covered Jesus’ path into Jerusalem. They are sometimes mixed with oil and then applied in the shape of a cross, another connection to Jesus (Ross).

This symbol encompasses so much for those who practice. The ashes symbolize penance and serve as a helper in faith: as a reminder and as a way to convey it to others. They also are connected to Jesus in more than one way. The ashes are in the shape of the cross, which itself symbolizes Jesus as well as repenting sins, and is made from a material that is associated with

Jesus. This shows how Christians understand God as a trinity. They are directly worshipping Jesus as God. There is also a two-fold connection to history: connection to the biblical palms and connection to the previous year are seen. This helps to reinforce the faith in the past by connecting year to year, which is important since faith is a center point of Christianity.

Chanukkah is one of the least important of the Jewish holidays; it has only been elevated to the prevalent position that it has today because of the desire for inclusion of Jewish traditions in the winter holidays. In the Jewish tradition, one cannot celebrate a military battle as a religious holiday, so historically, Chanukkah was celebrated modestly in memory of the miracle that occurred during the revolt by the Maccabees against the Seleucid dynasty instead of the battle victory.

However, Chanukkah is a great example of how Jews understand God. Faith is not stressed in Judaism as is it in Christianity and Islam; instead, in Judaism, continuous wrestling with God is important. The Jewish tradition emphasizes its flexibility. Every generation reads the religious texts differently and makes them its own (Lecture). This is exactly what Chanukkah has done, creating a place for itself in” common consideration. The chanukiah has progressed as a symbol for the sympathy that God has for the underdog. This is an important motif in the Jewish tradition and shows itself here.

Jews can use this to understand their connection to God. God needs to be wrestled with, and the religion can evolve as it helps people do what they believe God wants them to do. The chanukia can remind them about how God decided to help the slaves leave Egypt and continued to keep them as his chosen ones for generations. Chanukkah also brings people together, which is increasingly important to many people.

Through this examination of Ramadan, Ash Wednesday, and Chanukkah, we can see how the understanding of God is different in each of the three prominent monotheistic religions.

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