

Islam  
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Depending on your point of view, Islam is either the oldest or youngest of the great mono-theistic faiths to arise in the Mid-East. From a Jewish or Christian perspective, Islam is less than 1400 years old. However, Islam does not see it in the same way.

For Muslims, Islam did not begin with Mohammed. Islam simply means “surrender”, and a Moslem is one who surrenders to the will of Allah. Mohammed was one among many prophets of Allah summoning the faithful. He brought the last and most perfect revelation in the Koran but earlier revelations were also valid. Adam was regarded as a prophet of Islam and historically Abraham is regarded as the father of the Arabs and also the first true Muslim.

In the Islamic view of history, Abraham was the founder of both the Jewish and the Arab nations. Through his elder son Ishmael, born of Sara’s slave Hagar, he fathered the Arabs. Through his younger son Isaac he founded the Jewish nation. It was Ishmael who was the designated sacrifice in Islamic tradition and the Kabah in Mecca was the first altar erected to the one true God by Abraham and Ishmael.

This founding story points to an important factor in Islam. Islam views itself as the original true faith, not a new one.

In the course of history, Islam was dispossessed. The phenomenal success of early Islam was seen as the re-emergence of truth, the re-establishment of the faith and of the elder line and tradition. Judaism and Christianity share in this tradition but both had gone astray over the centuries.

Nonetheless, we can safely deal with historical Islam as stemming from the life and work of Mohammed ibn Abdallah (570-632). We are told that Mohammed was an orphan by the age of six and was raised by an uncle. We know little of his life before 610 when he began to receive the revelations that would be collected in the Koran.

We do know that he was born into a society in the throes of major change. Bedouin society was grounded in a nomadic-herder tradition, and was tribal in nature. Primary loyalty was to the tribe and within the tribe to the clan. Tribes were lead by elders, sheiks, who guided the people and dispersed justice within the tribe. Justice in inter-tribal matters was rough and tumble and grounded in revenge. Balance was maintained by visiting punishment on a tribal basis. Should a member of one tribe murder a member of another tribe, the offended tribe would kill a member of the offending tribe. It was not considered important that the actual murderer be apprehended—only that vengeance be delivered on the tribe. A sheik who did not carry out this form of justice did not last long. The fear of retaliation was the principal peace keeper.

The tribe was the support and sustainer of its members. It was regarded as a duty for tribal members to share with one another, support one another and, if necessary, die for one another. In a desert world of very limited resources, the sharing of responsibilities and rewards secured the survival of the tribe, if not of all its members. It was, however, a system which worked well in the circumstances. There was not much to go around and communal living was the best hope for all, even sheiks did not live in an appreciably different style. It was a society that while authoritarian was egalitarian in its poverty.

At the time of Mohammed's birth this system was under tremendous strain in his native Mecca. Cities were largely trading and gathering sites, but Mecca had an additional feature. Religion among the tribes was not very organized, nor does it seem to have permeated society. It did, however, celebrate many deities and provide a context for gatherings and celebrations.

Mecca possessed in the Kabah a large black stone one of the chief focal points of religious celebration. Idols of hundreds of deities surrounded the Kabah and it became the goal of an annual pilgrimage. As guardians of this shrine, the Quraysh tribe drew both wealth and prestige from it. Mohammed's clan, the Hashim, was one of the minor and poorer clans of this tribe.

Mecca also found itself an important stopping point for the camel caravans trading between the Byzantine and Persian Empires. More and more wealth was passing through the town and the Quraysh were in a position to cash in. Or, at least some of them were. Between the income generated from the Kabah and increasing involvement in trade wealth was coming to Mecca. A division began to occur between haves and have-nots. The dependence of all on all began to break down as some people became more able to look after themselves without the tribe. The old sense of being responsible for one another was breaking down. Important individuals began to emerge and resentment began to appear among those left behind. The tribe was no longer all encompassing. Old ideas of responsibility and loyalty were being laid aside by the wealthy and successful. Individualism was starting to emerge, so was selfishness.

It was into this society, shaken to its roots, that Mohammed was born. He must have had a strange sense of being both a "have" as a member of the dominant Quraysh and a "have not" as an orphan member of one of the least significant clans of that tribe. We know little of his childhood or early life.

He was apparently a man of competence and ability. By his early twenties he was in effect the business manager for a wealthy widow Kadijah. She was apparently taken with both his abilities and his person, for when he was 25 and she 40 they married. It appears to have been a happy union. Marriage to Kadijah brought Mohammed position and prestige as well as the financial security to pursue his spiritual yearnings. Kadijah would be an important support to her husband in the trying times ahead and he treated her with reverence and respect. He took no other wives during her lifetime.

Mohammed made a practice of going on spiritual retreats, seeking truth. It was on one of these retreats, in 610, that something extraordinary occurred. It is called in Islam, “The Night of Power”.

Alone in a cave, Mohammed found himself seized by a great power which ordered him to “Recite”. He tried to resist this power but was unable to do so.

He was overcome and the first utterance of what would become the Koran poured forth from him. “Recite in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created—created man out of a germ-cell.” “Recite for thy Sustainer is the most bountiful one who has taught man the use of the pen—taught him what he did not know!”

Mohammed was profoundly shaken by this event. He did not know if this was a true revelation from Allah or if he had been possessed by a genie. There was among the Arabs a tradition of kahins, persons pursued by genies who poured forth prophecy and poetry. These individuals were not highly thought of as the genie was often inimical to humans and Mohammed was suicidal at the thought he might be a kahin. Kadijah and one of her Christian cousins comforted and re-assured him that his was a true revelation and that he had been chosen to bring revelation to the Arabs in their own tongue. For the rest of his life, Mohammed would receive these revelations which would eventually be gathered into the Koran, the Recitation.

Mohammed would fill a need for the Arab people. Surrounded by Christians and Jews, the Arabs had long felt that they lacked a revelation of their own. God had not yet spoken to them. Mohammed was the vehicle through which the Arabs received their revelations.

He must have been a man of extraordinary talents and charisma. In the twenty-two years of life left to him, he created and refined a religious revelation, united a people through faith and military expertise, created a political entity and planted the seed of empire. He inspired extreme devotion to his person, but never claimed divine status. He would have been repelled by such a thought and regarded as the Christian’s great sin their deification of Jesus, a man he honored as a prophet.

The story of the rest of his life goes from small scale success to great tribulation, to great success. At first, he was accepted in Mecca as another holy man pursuing his message. Yet, in time, the Meccan establishment turned on him. This occurred after three years or so when he revealed the extreme monotheism of his revelation. He no longer proclaimed Allah as simply the focus of his and the umma’s (community’s) devotion, but as the one and only God, the same God who guided Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. He began to call for the abandonment of the worship of all other deities and the closing of their shrines.

For the Meccan leaders, this was an assault on faith and finance. When Mohammed called for the destruction of the idols at the Kabah, he had gone too far. The Quraysh took this threat seriously. Mohammed and his followers became targets of threats and

over a period of three months in 620 they fled from Mecca to the city of Medina. This event, the hegira, became the starting point for the Islamic calendar.

The period in Medina was formative for Islam. Mohammed had been invited to Medina because the tribes were in extreme conflict and wanted Mohammed to act as judge. In time, he emerged as the spiritual, political and military leader of the Medinans. He established a charter setting out the rights and responsibilities of each citizen and the relation of the Jewish community to the Muslim umma. It was during this period that Mohammed decreed that Muslims would pray facing Mecca and the Kabah, not, as they had until that point, facing Jerusalem. It was a proclamation that Islam was an independent force and marked Mohammed's disenchantment with the Jews who had failed to embrace his leadership.

Using his base in Medina, Mohammed was soon at war with Mecca. he proved a successful military leader, establishing a truce with Mecca, allowing for Muslims to perform the pilgrimage to the Kabah.

By 630 Mohammed had established his control over not only Mecca but the whole Hijaz area of the Arabian peninsula. The Meccans accepted Islam and were spared the plunder and terror that usually followed military defeat. Mohammed cleansed the Kabah but continued the practice of pilgrimage to what he proclaimed to be the first shrine of Allah. Mecca lost none of its prestige or profitability.

Two years later, when Mohammed died, he was the undisputed leader of all of the Arabian peninsula. In Islam, he had given the Arabs a new focus to replace the tribe. All Muslims belonged to the umma and bore responsibility for one another. In time, the umma would expand beyond Arabs to become a community superceding tribes and nations.

The message Mohammed brought was a fairly straight-forward one. It began with the notion of the ultimate reality of the divinity, a divinity possessing 99 names, but beyond all names, commonly known as Allah, "The God". Allah had been venerated by the Arabs for centuries as a divine presence, a secret divinity alive and beyond other deities. In reading about the early Arabic concept, I was struck by its similarity to some ancient Egyptian theological ideas.

For Mohammed, though, Allah became the all-encompassing divinity, the ultimate source and end of all things. True religion consisted of surrendering ones will be that of Allah. True freedom is found in the acceptance of Allah, with this comes also the reassurance of eternal acceptance by Allah. The God Mohammed revealed had many attributes, strong among these was mercy. Allah would forgive almost any sin if the believer truly repented. Although Allah is just, he is also merciful. All one has to do is return to the straight path of Islam. Of course, this involves more than mere acceptance of Allah. Allah's way demands responsibility from the believer. The Muslim is responsible for enacting God's will on earth.

Islam puts less emphasis on right beliefs beyond the central tenants than does Christianity. In the Islam version, Adam is responsible for his own sin, disobedience, and is forgiven. Humanity as a whole is not estranged from Allah. Even Shaytan, if believed, will be forgiven in the end. Acceptance of Allah's will leads to right living.

The Koran is the sacred word of Allah revealed to Mohammed. It has existed, depending on one's Islamic sect, from very early in, or from the very beginning of time. The authentic Koran is an heaven with Allah. It is not, however, Allah's unique revelation. Allah reveals himself in nature, through history as well as in Scripture. Allah has also sent messengers throughout history. The Torah and the New Testament contain the remains of a true revelation, but have become contaminated with human additions. The Jews added the concept of themselves as chosen and the Christians sinned in associating Jesus with God. In Islam, there is only one unforgivable sin, that of denigrating Allah by associating someone or thing with him. The Koran corrects these errors, and as revealed in Arabic to Mohammed is perfect. Nothing may be added to it or taken away. In addition to its religious implications, the Koran served as a basis for the development of literary Arabic and thus as a unifier for the Arabs and later for the Islamic world. Arabic served a similar role in Islam as Latin did for the Christian west.

The essence of Islam as taught by Mohammed is contained in the so-called five pillars.

1. The shahada—witness or testimony. “There is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet”. That is the basic faith of Islam.
2. Prayer, all Muslims are called upon to pray five times a day and to do so facing in the direction of Mecca.
3. Alms giving—all Muslims have a religious duty to give zakat. In Muslim ruled countries, this is often a tax. Zakat is regarded as a religious obligation, not charity and reflects the Islamic view that all members of the umma are responsible for one another.
4. The Ramadan fast. Once each year all Muslims are required to fast during the daylight hours. This reminds believers of the suffering and needs of others.
5. The Hadj—any Muslim who can afford it is expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lives. This bestows great prestige on the pilgrim and re-enforces the equality of all Muslims as each pilgrim dresses in ritual white clothes, indistinguishable from one another. It also re-enacts much of the mythos of Islam and affirms the community of all believers.

This was all Mohammed required of his followers. Such a simple message proved immensely adaptable and traveled very well.

After Mohammed's death, new sources of authority emerged. Sharia, Islamic law came to play an increasing role. The primary source of Islamic law is of course the Koran. The moral dictates contained in the sacred text are the starting point. New law is reassessed from the Koran by finding a passage that can be considered analogous to the situation under consideration.

Another source of authority was the life of the Prophet, the Sunna or example. The record of his deeds and beliefs were preserved firstly in the Koran, but also in the hadith, reports of traditions. Islam developed a detailed methodology for verification of a hadith. First, the lineage of the tradition was traced. Could it be shown to have passed through

reputable reporters back to the Prophet? Did it contradict the Koran or already well-established tradition? It was an attempt to apply the process of reason to religious traditions.

Ijtihad, the application of reasoning to the law in Koranic texts was important in early Islam and would later become controversial. Another source of authority was communal consensus or ijma. Derived from a Prophetic saying, “My community will never agree on an error.” This authority came into play once Mohammed’s leadership was gone.

Islam lost its unity early and over, of all things, a question of the succession. Mohammed was followed by four caliphs (successors) all companions of the Prophet. After that, Mohammed’s cousin and son-in-law became Caliph. There were those who maintained that Ali was the rightly designated heir of Mohammed and that the succession should remain in the Alid family. When it did not, the partisans (Shii) of Ali broke from the main (Sunni) body of believers. The Shii developed a concept of the Imamate seeing in the descendants of Ali divinely sanctioned leaders of the community—in all things. For the Sunni, the Caliph succeeded to the political and military leadership of the community but not the religious authority of the Prophet. The Sunni placed ultimate religious authority in the Yma of the community. The Shii in the Imam. Different divisions arose among the Shii as do the identity of the true Imam. This division remains the fundamental Islamic division to this day.

Many other divisions would arise over the centuries. Islam is no more monolithic than is Christianity. It is fascinating that Islam faced many of the same issues as Christianity. How do you reconcile an all-knowing, all-powerful God with the concept of human responsibility? Can a totally transcendent God be known? Is God transcendent or immanent? What is the role of evil? Is Allah the creator of evil? All questions very familiar from the study of Christianity.

Perhaps the largest of these issues is the knowledge of God. Traditional Islam as taught by Mohammed teaches we can know Allah only through his activities. That only Allah is capable of knowing the essence of Allah. We study the Koran, nature, indeed everything for the signs of Allah’s activity.

Yet, just as in Christianity, there were those who maintained that the believer could achieve mystic awareness of, even union with Allah. This belief spawned the Sufi movement in both Shii and Sunni Islam. Sufis emphasized worldly renunciation and meditation along with ascetic practices such as whirling to achieve what we call alternate states of consciousness.

Sufiism remains a lively component of the Islamic mosaic today.

Islam developed as a religious response to a society in the throes of change. Islam addressed a question which we face within our own denomination today. How do we balance individual needs with communal rights? Islam shares with Unitarian Universalism an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual, in Islam, before God,

for us, to one another. The Muslim surrenders to God, but that surrender entails responsibility to God's community. We do not profess a surrender, yet we embrace the idea of responsibility. Where we differ, and it is a marked difference, is that for Islam only Allah is truly real. Allah is above all things, beyond our knowledge, sensed only by his actions. Islam respects the human, but only as Allah's creature. For us, I would like to believe that human worth is its own value, not derivative.