

Early Islam and Judaism

A PRESENTATION BY THEO PAVLIDIS

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Where Islam and Judaism agree with each other while differing from Christianity

- * Dietary Laws: **Kosher/Treif** and **Halal/Haram**
- * Circumcision
- * No Monks or Nuns (Celibacy is discouraged)
- * No Saints
- * One God (as opposed to Trinity in Christianity)

Why so similar? The answer lies in the origin and history of Islam.

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Sources

Edward **Gibbon**, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1778]

Bernard **Lewis**, *The Middle East, A brief History of the last 2000 years* [1995]

Richard **Wright**, *The Evolution of God* [2009]

Javeed **Akhter**, *The Seven Phases of Prophet Muhammad's Life* in islamcity.org [2021]

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State of the Arab Peninsula

- “The Arabian tribes are equally addicted to theft and merchandise; the caravans that traverse the desert are ransomed or pillaged” according to Pliny, as quoted by Gibbon.
- “Social conditions were quite harsh. For example, because the emphasis in a family was to have sons, newborn girls sometimes would be buried alive” [Wright].

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The Prophet Muhammad

- Muhammad was the son of a tribal leader and in 613, when he was about 40 years old, he reported that he received a revelation from God and started preaching.
- He preached monotheism and submission (*Islam*) to the only God (*Allah*) and he also "breathed among the faithful a spirit of charity and friendship; recommended the practice of social virtues; and checked ... the thirst of revenge, and the oppression of widows and orphans" [Gibbon].
- His preaching contributed to social improvements in the Arabian peninsula [Wright].

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The Hijra or Hejira

- In 622 Muhammad was invited to Medina (then known as Yathrib) to act as mediator in local disputes. He accepted that role and with many of his followers migrated from Mecca. This event, the *Hijra*, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.
- There were several Jewish tribes in Medina (as well as several Arab tribes) and Muhammad made a special effort to impress the Jews.
- The result of Muhammad's mediation was a document, known as the *Constitution of Medina*, that provided rules for the resolution of disputes between the local tribes.

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The Constitution of Medina

The "Covenant (Constitution) of Madinah" that lays out the rules of living in a pluralistic society is a document that needs to be studied carefully and implemented to the fullest extent in today's inescapably multi-religious and multi-cultural world.

Quote from Akhter's article in islamcity.org

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Jewish-Muslim Alliance

- There is a view that Muhammad did not intend to create a new religion. If he would be recognized by the Jews as a prophet, he would campaign for Judaism to replace the pagan Arab beliefs. But the Jews (of Medina) did not agree.
- What is certain is that in the beginning of Islam there was an alliance with Jews and that "the conquest of Jerusalem (in 638) was the work ... of a Jewish-Muslim alliance" [Wright]. According to Wright the break between the two religions occurred after that conquest.

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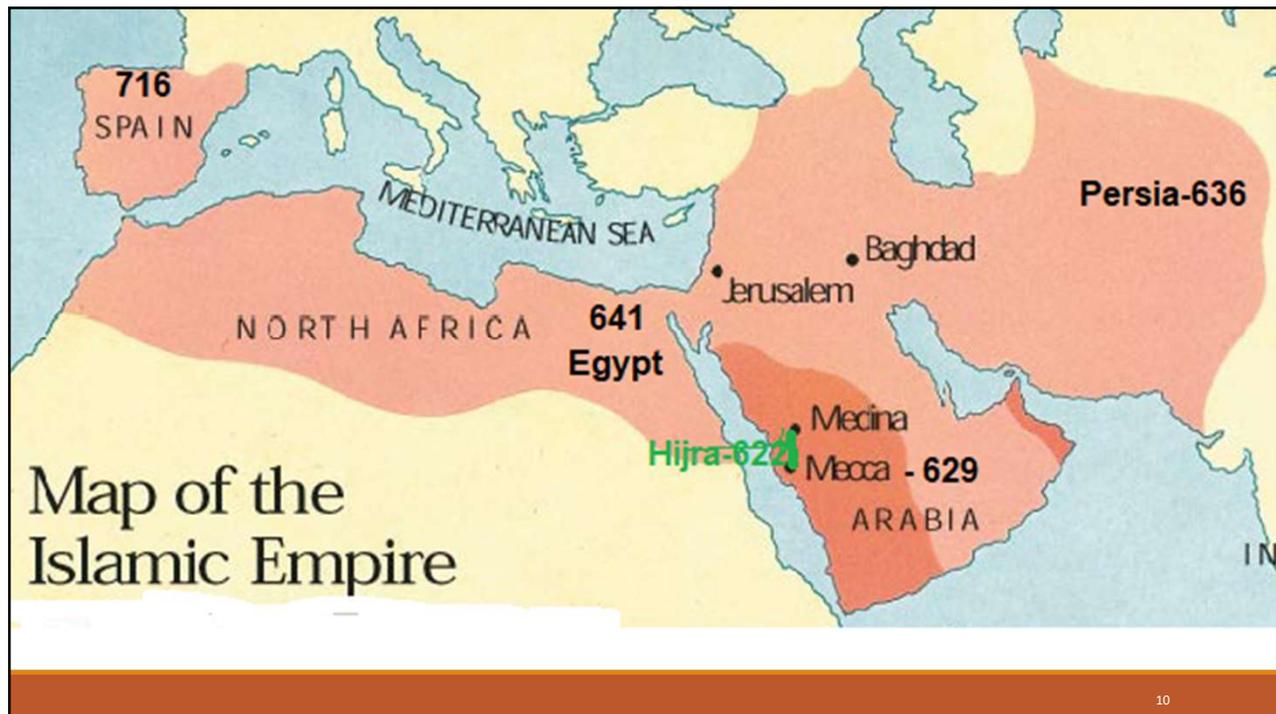
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The success of Islam

- In December of 629 Muhammad led a small army that conquered Mecca and that was the end of paganism in the Arabian peninsula. He died in 632 and he was succeeded by Abu Bakr, as the first **caliph** (the word means *successor* or *deputy*).
- Islam was now ready to spread beyond the Arab Peninsula and it did so, conquering Syria, Persia, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain.

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Why did Islam Spread so Far so Fast?

- One of the reasons has to do with the oppressive policies of the Christian Roman Empire. Not only did it have a state religion, but also a state-imposed orthodoxy. “Heretics” were subject to severe punishments.
- Because Arab rulers did not require their subjects to be Muslims, “heretics” (such as the Monophysite Christians of Egypt) welcome Arab rule. Under Roman rule they were persecuted. Under Muslim Arab rule they were free to practice their version of Christianity.

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The Start of the Arab Golden Age

- The lands conquered by the Muslims experienced an intellectual (and economic) flourish that parallels the flourish of the Hellenistic period that had been put to an end by imperial Christianity two centuries earlier.
- These years are referred to as the *Arab Golden Age*.
- Jews were active participants in that flourish.

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Preserving the Ancient Knowledge

- The Arabs collected any manuscript of Greek learning that they could find and translated it into Arabic. (Many of the translators were Jews.)
- These translations became very valuable later because they were the only available record of many ancient Greek writings.

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Scientific Advances

- There was significant progress in Mathematics. The English words *Algebra* and *Algorithm* bear witness to that progress since they are derived from Arabic.
- There were also advances in Astronomy and Medicine. A Latin translation of the Arabic work *The Canon of Medicine* was used as a standard medical textbook through the 18th century in Europe

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Arab (and Jewish) Spain

- The Arabs conquered the Iberian Peninsula and moved, past the Pyrenees, into France, but they were defeated by Frankish forces in the Battle of Poitiers (732).
- Arab rule of Spain lasted until the 1400's. During that period there was a large and prosperous Jewish community in the country. It traced its origins to the Jews exiled from Israel by the Roman Emperor Titus (~ 80 CE).
- The famous Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) was a member of that community.

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The End of Arab Spain

- Eventually, the Arab kingdoms fell to Christian armies and by 1492 Christian control was complete.
- Muslims and Jews were forced to convert into Christianity or were expelled from the country.
- Most of the Spanish Jews (Sephardim) settled in the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

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The Quran and the Hadith - 1

- The main source of Islam is the **Quran**, a direct dictation from God (Allah) to the Prophet Muhammad.
- There are also other sources, including the **Hadith**, supposedly a record of the words and actions of the prophet. However, the Hadith were not written down immediately after Muhammad's death but many generations later.

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The Quran and the Hadith - 2

- Many modern Muslims believe that most Hadiths are fabrications created in the 8th and 9th century CE, and which are falsely attributed to Muhammad.
- “Middle Eastern rulers invented the *Hadith* to rule.”
- Christian Parallel: The *Holy Tradition*, rejected by the Protestants. (About 1500 years after Jesus.)
- Time for Islamic Protestantism? (1500 years since the founding of Islam.)

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A Bit about Christian Heresies

- Christianity has been subjected to fragmentation from ancient times, starting with *Arianism*.
- In the original declaration of faith, Christ (the Son) was referred to as being of the **same** substance as God (the Father): ΟΜΟΟΥΣΙΟΣ in Greek. Arius (circa 250-336), an Alexandrian cleric, claimed that Christ was only of **similar** substance as God: ΟΜΟΙΟΥΣΙΟΣ in Greek.
- Arianism created a tumult in the Christian Church that is hard to understand, given the near identity of the two rival terms (especially in Greek). What was the real reason?

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Roman Catholics versus Eastern Orthodox

- We may gain some insight by looking at the ostensible and real causes of a more recent split (1054). The Western position is that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father and the Son (*Filioque*) while the Eastern position is that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father only.
- Of course, the real reason for the split is that the Pope of Rome wanted to be independent of the imperial power of Constantinople.

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Heresies of the 5th Century

- **Nestorianism:** the Virgin Mary should be called “Christ-bearer” (Χριστοτοκος) rather than “God-bearer” (Θεοτοκος) to acknowledge the dual (human and divine) nature of Christ.
- **Monophysicism (Μονοφυσισμος):** Jesus had only one nature (divine), a view that was the exact opposite of Nestorianism. It is was particularly popular in Alexandria, Egypt. (Where Monophysites welcome the Arab rule.)

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Church Schisms and the Roman Empire

- Church Schisms become politically important only when the state interferes. Unfortunately, this was the case with the Roman Empire. (Although it had lost Rome, it still used that name.)
- The last sentence of the imperial decree making a version of Christianity the only legitimate imperial religion is remarkable: “Besides the Condemnation of Divine justice, they (the heretics) must expect *to suffer the severe penalties which our authority, guided by heavenly wisdom, shall think proper to inflict upon them.*”

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Results of the Policies

- The imposition of a strict orthodoxy ended the Hellenistic era and ushered the Dark Ages.
- “You should not read any book other than the Bible. If the book agrees with the Bible, you are wasting your time. If it does not, then it has been inspired by the devil and you are a sinner.”

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Concluding Remarks

- Do not blame the religion of Islam for the current problems of the Middle East.
- For several centuries, the states under Muslim rule were more liberal and more advanced than the Christian states of Europe.
- The *Renaissance* (Western Europe) brought a reversal of that situation. Christian states advanced, and in addition, most Muslim states fell farther back (Effect of the Hadith?).

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